

FROM CURE-ALLS TO CALCIUM TABLETS: A COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC
ANALYSIS OF ADVERTISEMENTS FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY PATENT
MEDICINES AND CONTEMPORARY DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores American advertising with a focus on health and medicine. Today, ads are integrated into the fabric of everyday life, subtly (or not-so-subtly) communicating to and about American culture. While advertising may not necessarily create society's values, advertisements certainly convey existing values, tastes, and beliefs; therefore, the way that advertisers communicate messages regarding health arguably shapes consumers' conceptions of disease and well-being. This thesis uses semiotic analysis as conceptualized by Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure, viewing communication as language systems constructed from visual, verbal, material, and immaterial elements. While comparing signs in advertising for 19th and early 20th century patent medicines and contemporary dietary supplements, this analysis explores each historical context including the history of American medicine, American advertising, and changing regulations. It explores the messages within the ads, the signs used to convey those messages, and the broader myths (cultural ideas) that those signs construct. These myths connect health and well-being to power, nature, and the idea of "the good life" in American culture as it has evolved over the past 150 years. While examining these signs within history, significant differences emerged, but also enduring truths that demonstrate how human nature is surprisingly familiar through the decades.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Advertising has existed for as long as people have had goods and services to offer, taking new forms as communication and production technologies have changed over thousands of years (Campbell et al., 2015). From shop signs in ancient Babylon, to colonial pamphlets, to internet and mobile ads today, advertisers and marketers have poured considerable time and effort into crafting messages that really speak to potential consumers (Campbell et al., 2015). The increased proliferation of advertising from the mid-19th century through the 20th century built the field into a standalone industry (Pope, 1983; Wu, 2016), and today in the United States, ads have completely integrated into the fabric of everyday life, becoming both the economic fuel of mass media and communication media in their own right (Campbell et al., 2015; Wu, 2016).

Advertisements provide a window into the values of the societies in which they are created, at the particular time they are created (Marchand, 1985). As the 19th-century industrial boom increased the number and variety of goods produced, businesses changed their model from production alone to providing services intended to improve consumers' lives and standard of living (Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Wu, 2016). Throughout the 19th century, thanks to increased production and market saturation, the U.S. saw a revolution in advertising techniques (Pope, 1983; Seldin, 1963; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962).

Patent medicines—defined as non-prescribed, proprietary and/or trademarked medicinal remedies administered by the patient and not a doctor (Parascandola, 1999; Young, 1962)—fueled advertising innovation throughout the 19th century (Anderson, 2000; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Their connection to advertising makes patent medicine advertisements a subject ripe for study, as such ads are the foundation for advertising

concepts still in use today (Anderson, 2000; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). As post-industrial revolution American society grew more consumer-oriented into the 20th century, advertisers began to use appeals evoking positive moods such as using idealized slice-of-life scenes (*tableaux*) or showing glamorous or affluent people using the product; such techniques were used to both differentiate products (so a brand could stand apart from its competitors) and persuade consumers to feel good about them, transferring those positive feelings to a product or brand (Marchand, 1985; Schudson, 1984; Seldin, 1963).

As advertisers have long been part of the process of shaping consumers' values and beliefs (Marchand, 1985), the ways that advertisers present health (and products intended to improve health) arguably serve as building blocks for and evidence of consumers' conceptions of disease and well-being. The origins of modern advertising techniques began with health—specifically, patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Atwater, 1975; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Today's closest equivalent are dietary supplements, defined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as products “taken by mouth that contains a ‘dietary ingredient’ intended to supplement the diet” (Questions and Answers on Dietary Supplements, 2016). A “dietary ingredient” can include “vitamins, minerals, herbs or other botanicals, amino acids, and substances such as enzymes, organ tissues, glandulars, and metabolites” as well as “extracts or concentrates” in “tablets, capsules, softgels, gelcaps, liquids, or powders” (Questions and Answers on Dietary Supplements, 2016).

Today's dietary supplement industry invites exploration into how the messages of the 19th century have evolved with changing beliefs and values around health and well-being. This thesis seeks to compare advertising of the patent medicine industry from the

19th and early 20th centuries to dietary supplement advertising today, exploring the different ways that advertisers in both eras convey messages about health, effectiveness, and well-being, each affected by their unique historical contexts. Positioning dietary supplement ads as the contemporary parallel to patent medicine ads, this thesis uses semiotic theory to analyze signs in print ads from both eras, identifying broader themes to compare and contrast. This will shed light on American culture in both eras, exploring the ways that American attitudes and beliefs have and have not changed.

Why compare modern ads for dietary supplements to ads for patent medicines? Patent medicines and dietary supplements have significant similarities: both are intended to promote and are seen as promoting health, both are usually self-prescribed (and administered) and both are seen as alternatives to mainstream medicine (Carson, 1961; Conrad and Leiter, 2008; DeLorme et al., 2012; Parascandola, 1999; Shaffer, 2016; Young, 1962). Decades before the formation of the FDA and the establishment safety standards, patent medicines thrived without government oversight (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Similarly, even though the FDA regulates medicines today, dietary supplements are in a special category and their producers do not need to prove safety or efficacy before they go to market (DeLorme et al., 2012). Ads for dietary supplements also appear in magazines (Ethan et al., 2016), just as those for patent medicines once did (Carson, 1961; Young, 1962), creating parity between printed patent medicine ads and 21st-century print ads.

Patent Medicines

While patent medicines had previously been used for hundreds of years in Britain, in the U.S. their use began in colonial times as Americans continued importing medicines

from overseas (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). European patent medicine use grew in the U.S. in the mid 1700s, aided by print advertisements—New York’s first published medical pamphlet (printed by Peter Zenger of Zenger trial fame) was created to promote *Dr. Bateman’s Pectoral Drops*, a patent medicine (Carson, 1961, p. 10–11). However, access to medical professionals was limited, available physicians could be costly and ill-trained, and the Revolutionary War interrupted the import of British patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Hechtlinger, 1970; Young, 1962). Colonists began making their own remedies based on traditions of European folk medicine and home remedies (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Carson, 1961; Hechtlinger, 1970; Parascandola, 1999; Young, 1962). During this period (and into the 19th century) understandings of disease causation were still in their early stages, limiting effective medical intervention with patients and health practitioners adopting widely varied approaches (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). Tesh (1988) describes four major theories of disease causation in the 19th century: contagion theory, miasma theory, personal behavior theory, and supernatural theory; these shaped medical treatments and likely influenced the messages used in health advertising. In colonial America, medicines available included prepared patent medicines from Europe alongside homemade syrups and salves, preparations from Native American folk healers, and medicines made by local apothecaries or other trusted authorities (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). While there was a burgeoning distinction between *regular* (mainstream) and *irregular* (alternative) medicine, the line between them was indistinct as American pharmacy and medicine were not fully-organized professions—formal credentials often were not required to practice medicine, and formal training was rare

(Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). This blurring of regular and irregular medicine continued throughout the 19th century even as medical and pharmacy schools expanded, with herbal and folk remedies, patent medicine, regular medicine, various medical sects like *Thompsonianism*, *hydropathy*, *homeopathy*, and *eclectism*, practices for personal hygiene, faith healing, osteopathy, and chiropractic were all accepted as viable options for medical care (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991). Even through the 1870s and 80s, as physicians were gaining an increasingly professional status, the disciplines of regular and irregular physicians increasingly merged (Cassedy, 1991). It is in this liminal space between professional and folk medicine that the patent medicine industry thrived.

The classic era of the patent medicine industry lasted from roughly 1860-1920, fueled by the industrial revolution and advances in industries like news media and (Marcellus, 2008; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003; Young, 1962). Though called “patent” medicines (or nostrums) they were typically trademarked instead to keep formulas secret (Carson, 1961; Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Early American *medicine shows* (with traveling salesmen entertaining crowds) had paved the way, shifting the promotional approach from meeting demand to creating demand for medicines (Anderson, 2000). Common schooling also increased literacy, so more Americans could read ads and packaging (Carson, 1961; Young, 1962). Many Americans also became familiar with patent medicines during the Civil War (Marcellus, 2008; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003; Reed, 1987). With soldiers’ limited access to medical help on the road and in the battlefield, proprietors marketed their medicines’ effectiveness at treating dysentery and other conditions, from ague to weakness (Anderson, 2000; Burt, 2013; Hechtlinger, 1970;

Young, 1962). After the war, soldiers recommended nostrums to civilians and continued using them themselves (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). The blurred line between folk and “professional” medicine, relaxed laws for patents and copyright, increasingly available advertising, population growth, and widespread disease may all have bolstered patent medicine usage (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). A laissez-faire attitude about medical qualifications and the ease of launching a patent medicine into the market may also have contributed, (Young, 1962) but attitudes about health and disease likely aided the industry’s success.

In 19th-century America, physicians often lacked prestige, as they commonly received poor training and had limited knowledge; some performed so badly or had such bad reputations that their patients turned to patent medicines, while self-help was important in areas with little access to formal medical care (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). Multiple beliefs about health, medicine, and disease converged, compounded by scientific and technological advances (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962).

As in any era, doctors in the patent medicine era were working to understand health and disease (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). In colonial America disease could be seen as supernatural, with mystical cures based on informally passed-down knowledge (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). By the 19th century ideas about disease systems were often built on ancient ideas such as the four humors (a theory of the Greek physician Galen), but potential causes could also include loss of body heat, and an extreme of either tension or relaxation (Anderson, 2000; Young, 1962). This conception of disease focused on keeping four *humors* (substances)

in balance: phlegm, blood, cholera/yellow bile, and melancholy/black bile, and other medical theories of the patent medicine era were similarly based on *temperaments* (Hechtlinger, 1970, p. 20–21; Young, 1962). The “doctrine of signatures”—a belief that all ailments had remedies provided for in nature—was significant, which may have bolstered the acceptance and use of folk medicines and “Indian cures” (Carson, 1961; Whorton, 2002; Young, 1962, p. 6). Out of Tesh’s (1988) four competing 19th-century theories of disease causation, the rise of patent medicines is compatible with personal behavior theory, which posited that individuals were responsible for their own health and counted the anti-doctor (mainstream doctors) herbalist Samuel Thompson as an adherent (Tesh, 1988). Another influential 18th and 19th century idea also held that bad taste was a sign of an effective medicine (Anderson, 2000; Estes, 1988; Young, 1962). In the late 1700s and early 1800s Benjamin Rush further established the theory that harshness equaled effectiveness as he promoted *heroic medicine* with heavy bleeding, purging, and blistering as treatments; this approach became standard for regular physicians into the 19th century (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). By the 1830s, medical knowledge had not advanced much beyond the colonial era, and therapies may have become more harmful as doctors increasingly adopted aggressive treatments (Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962).

While early 19th-century America had an ethos of self-reliance, other popular figures in medicine like Samuel Thompson also influenced the rise of patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Estes, 1988; Young, 1962). A general low opinion of the medical profession permeated American culture, and during the heroic medicine era some Americans were increasingly apprehensive, rejecting the harsh conventional

treatments in favor of patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003; Young, 1962). Thus, “therapeutic nihilism,” a more cautious approach, emerged (Young, 1962, p. 158). Industrialization and urbanization also affected Americans’ health, potentially fueling patent medicine use (Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). In the 19th century, many diseases were untreatable, and patent medicines could entice by promising relief bolstered by testimonials or elaborate explanations (Cassedy, 1991; Estes, 1988; Parascandola, 1999). Visible action was valued, and medicines like *purges* (laxatives) that changed bodily excretions were seen as effective (Estes, 1988; Young, 1962). Calomel was a popular emetic used through the 19th and into the 20th centuries even though it was a form of mercury (Anderson, 2000; Young, 1962). Through the early 20th century and into the 1960s marketed remedies for “tired blood” (anemia) still included Geritol®, tonics, cold cures, laxatives, virility aids, liver pills, and cancer “cures” (Cassedy, 1991; Cook, 1958; Geritol® Liquid; Young, 1962).

Alcohol may also have contributed to patent medicines’ popularity (Carson, 1961; Young, 1962). Often bartenders dispensed medicines (especially bitters) like liquors, and by the 1880s alcoholic beverages sold as drinks required proprietors to buy a liquor license but medicinal bitters did not (Estes, 1988; Young, 1962). As the temperance movement raised the price of alcoholic beverages, patent medicine makers decried the evils of alcohol while using it to preserve their medicines—though others claimed their medicines contained no alcohol, many did in high amounts (Estes, 1988; Young, 1962).

Through the 18th and 19th centuries the line between traditional medicine and patent medicine remained blurred, with wide variation in health professionals’ training and knowledge; some doctors continued to endorse patent medicines, even making their

own formulations, all while medical journals continued to run patent medicine ads (Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). But, by the late 19th century the “professionalization of pharmacy” emerged (Cassedy, 1991; Estes, 1988, p. 3) bringing advances in chemistry and pharmaceuticals. As the 1800s came to a close the popularity of both physicians (mainstream and alternative) and patent medicines had increased (Conrad and Leiter, 2008, p. 827). Many Americans were first exposed to germ theory (the idea that germs cause disease) by advertisements for patent medicine, and ads capitalized on significant medical discoveries; even before germ theory (advanced by Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur in the 1870s) was well-known, Americans could purchase medicines supposed to kill germs and boost the immune system (Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962). However, while some patent medicine proprietors claimed to have developed new medical concepts, in general they followed the trends in American hospital/medical therapeutic treatment principles, sticking to the idea of balancing patients physiologically, a general belief that bodily weakness causes disease, and that multiple ills could all be caused by one underlying cause (Estes, 1988). This helps to explain the wide variety of messages and purported treatments contained in patent medicine ads.

Patent medicines appeared in advertisements from their earliest use in the U.S., beginning in colonial newspapers and fliers (Anderson, 2000; Burt, 2013; Carson, 1961; Wu, 2016). By the 1830s and 40s, the penny press provided cheap advertising to reach a mass audience, and just before the Civil War ads made up about half of the advertising in periodicals (Anderson, 2000; Burt, 2013; Marcellus, 2008; Young, 1962). The war revolutionized both advertising and journalism as newspaper circulation grew, paper prices fell, the Sunday edition came into being, and magazine advertising intensified

(Anderson, 2000; Young, 1962). With new railroad networks and cheaper postage distribution channels also grew in sophistication (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961; Young, 1962). By the 1870s, a quarter of all advertising was for direct-to-consumer patent medicines (Conrad and Leiter, 2008), demonstrating patent medicines' importance in American culture.

Brand names grew common by the mid-19th century, as advertisements differentiated between brands and products (Atwater, 1975; Burt, 2013). Similar remedies now flooded the market, so nostrum advertisers continued to grow more sophisticated and aggressive in their approaches (Anderson, 2000; Hechtlinger, 1970; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Patent medicine manufacturers were pioneers of vehicles used to deliver advertising, using newspapers, magazines, journals, almanacs, calendars, cook and coloring books, joke books, song-books, paperbacks, trade cards, and even suggestive pamphlets—with outdoor advertising on buildings, roadside signs, carriages, posters, sandwich boards, and traveling medicine shows (Anderson, 2000; Parascandola, 1999; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Common advertising techniques of patent medicine ads included testimonials (real or fictional), invented diseases, exotic-sounding names, promotion of purportedly costly and rare ingredients, claims of charity, and statistics (again, real or fictional); medicine makers claimed to treat vague and common symptoms like weakness, headaches, nervousness, or melancholy, capitalizing on fears (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961; Hechtlinger, 1970; Young, 1962). Offering entertainment was another common way to market medicines, as with joke and song books, and cardboard activities (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961). Proprietors also created media imitating mainstream medicine, publishing articles in medical periodicals, printing formulas using

complicated-sounding language, dispensing advice, and using language and images that mimicked scientific literature (Carson, 1961; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962).

Advances in graphic art and lithography spawned a 19th-century “card craze” as Americans collected and traded brightly-colored cards advertising patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961, p. 106). Patent medicine makers proved how powerful brand-names could be, giving their products a personality with branding (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961; Wu, 2016). Fueled by the lack of advertising legislation and the revolution in graphic arts, “[e]ven illogical or far-fetched pictures or scenes were used with products” (p. 54) in 19th-century America (Hechtlinger, 1970). The dynamics of advertising during the patent medicine era arguably gave birth to the striking and fanciful imagery present in many of the advertisements sampled in this analysis.

The patent medicine industry flourished from the end of the Civil War until 1906, when the passage of the 1906 Food and Drug Act—precipitated by investigative reporting on the patent medicine industry (Valuck et al., 1992)—imposed stricter labeling and purity standards that stifled the trade (Estes, 1988; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003; Young, 1962). The industry’s decline began by the early 1900s as the public was increasingly aware of fraud in advertising, as well as high alcohol content, dangerous ingredients (such as arsenic, opiates, cocaine, or other narcotics), and ineffective ingredients (Burt, 2013; Estes, 1988; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003). Narcotics in patent medicines were so common that drug addiction was called “the [a]rmy disease” (referring to Civil War soldiers’ use) (Carson, 1961, p. 30). Use could result in alcoholism, and even medicines that claimed to have no alcohol often did (Burt, 2013; Estes, 1988; Young, 1962). The temperance movement also dampened trade; in 1905 the Commission

of Internal Revenue ruled that medicines containing high amounts of alcohol were liquors and their manufacture would require a license and a federal fee (Conrad and Leiter, 2008; Young, 1962).

By the 1880s, Progressive-Era reformers and muckraking journalists were investigating the patent medicine industry, reducing public confidence in their safety and effectiveness (Burt, 2013; Young, 1962). *Muckrakers*, concerned with exposing dangers, steadily attacked nostrum-makers in American media (Hilts, 2003; Valuck et al., 1992). In the late 19th century, advances in chemistry enabled testing for harmful substances like alcohol, morphine, and acetanilide (Young, 1962). While newspapers formerly preferred not to breach contracts and lose ad revenue by refusing to publish patent medicine ads, the press became bolder by featuring exposés, and in 1904 the *Ladies' Home Journal* launched a campaign against patent medicines (Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Undercover journalist Mark Sullivan found that proprietors would sell letters they had received from customers to other proprietors, and that Lydia Pinkham (whose company implied that she was answering customer questions) was long dead (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Sullivan's work appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Collier's National Weekly*, making way for "The Great American Fraud" by Samuel Hopkins Adams in *Collier's National Weekly* in October, 1905 (Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Adams sought people from testimonials, had medicines tested, consulted with editors of pharmaceutical journals, interviewed proprietors, and was critical of the patent medicine industry (Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). He found Peruna to be 28% alcohol, and the antiseptic Liquozone to be 99% water (Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). Muckraking journalists continued to find evidence against patent

medicines, attempting to put their safety and effectiveness in doubt in the eyes of the American public (Anderson, 2000; Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962).

Legislators reintroduced the Pure Food and Drug bill in 1905, and in February 1906 it passed the Senate (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Upton Sinclair's piece *The Jungle* had also created public outrage about oversight into the ingredients and production conditions of consumables, spurring government action; the bill became law in June of 1906 (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Hilts, 2003; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). This law stipulated that medicines had to declare if they contained alcohol, chloral hydrate, marijuana, opiates, acetanilide, and other dangerous drugs such as chloroform, listing the amount; any other ingredients named had to be present with a listed amount (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Medicines also could not contain any ingredients claimed to be absent, the manufacturing location had to be accurately named, and there could be no false or misleading statements (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). After over 100 people died from taking a patent medicine (*Elixir of Sufanilmide*) made with diethylene glycol (antifreeze), the Food, Drug and Cosmetic act of 1938 passed (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Cook, 1958; Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). This required drug labels to include usage instructions; new pharmaceuticals could not be marketed without FDA tests and approval, and proprietors could not include drugs that had been deemed safe only with prescription use (Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). The FDA's power expanded, and manufacturers had to prove pharmaceuticals were safe before marketing them (Cook, 1958). But, up through the 1960s proprietors in violation did not face harsh punishments, and the legacy of patent medicines continued into the television age (Cook, 1958; Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). As patent and mainstream medicine diverged due to regulation, the roots of alternative

medicine planted by the patent medicine industry continued to grow throughout the 20th century, eventually becoming the dietary supplement industry familiar to many Americans today.

Dietary Supplements

Herbal medicines have been in use throughout Asia and Europe for thousands of years (Hilts, 2003; Schaffer et al., 2016). Today, herbal medicines and the broader category of dietary supplements are widely consumed in the U.S., with increased use since the 1990s (DeLorme et al., 2012). Americans buy and take supplements for many different reasons, be they psychological, physical, social, or economic, and estimates report that over 50% of adults in the U.S. take some kind of dietary supplement (Avery et al., 2017; DeLorme et al., 2012; Schaffer et al., 2016). Consumers may take them for “peace of mind” (p. 550), believing they offer increased protection from health problems—some also take them as an alternative to prescription drugs that are too expensive to afford. (DeLorme et al., 2012). General interest in herbal supplements for health improvement has increased thanks to a growing emphasis on wellness care, personal health management, and an aging population desiring to remain active (Schaffer et al., 2016). The dietary supplement market today has grown diverse (DeLorme et al., p. 550) and while medical professionals may recommend supplements, most are self-prescribed (DeLorme et al., 2012), not unlike alternative, self-prescribed 19th century patent medicines. Yet, recent meta-analyses have indicated that dietary supplements are ineffective for either preventing or treating diseases; they may have little to no benefit for those without a specific nutritional deficiency (Avery et al., 2017). There is also real potential for toxicity as consumers choose their own dose, often without a physician’s

oversight (Avery et al., 2017). With the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, or DSHEA, research on complementary or alternative treatments increased, raising public awareness and interest in complementary and alternative medicine (Hilts, 2003; Schaffer et al., 2016). Attitude changes have also contributed to their success, with growing acceptance of alternative and complementary medicines contributing to rising sales (Cayleff, 2016; DeLorme et al., 2012). This growing interest has also led to mainstream doctors conducting research into their use in mainstream medicine (Cassedy, 1991; Cayleff, 2016).

The market has grown competitive, with thousands of new products available every year (DeLorme et al., 2012). Because of the DSHEA, dietary supplements now include diet supplements and herbal/botanical supplements as well as vitamins and minerals like calcium and vitamin C (DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003). According to the U.S. government, dietary supplements are not categorized as either a food or a drug, but are in a “liminal regulatory category” (DeLorme et al., p. 548). The NIH’s NCCIH (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health) defines complementary medicine as “non-mainstream” approaches used along with conventional medicine or as a replacement for conventional medicine (Schaffer et al., 2016, p. 42).

For dietary supplements in the U.S., oversight is split between the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which regulates advertising for supplements, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which oversees claims made on dietary supplement labels (including print, broadcast, and internet ads) as well as manufacturing and safety (Avery et al., 2017; DeLorme et al., 2012). Dietary supplement regulation changed significantly with the DSHEA (Ashar et al., 2008; Hilts, 2003). However, though no longer considered

foods, manufacturers today can still sell dietary supplements without having to prove safety, efficacy, or a standard of quality (Ashar et al., 2008; DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003). Unlike pharmaceuticals, dietary supplements do not need FDA approval to be manufactured and distributed, and it is assumed that they're safe until the FDA finds otherwise—the FDA must prove that a product is unsafe to remove it from the market (Ashar et al., 2008; DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003). The FTC oversees all advertising with basic rules for all consumer products, including dietary supplements: advertisements must be truthful, cannot mislead, and must be substantiated (Ashar et al., 2008; Avery et al., 2017). In 1998 the FTC released a guide suggesting how laws should be applied to dietary supplement ads; for a claim to be substantiated, it must be reasonable and based on “competent and reliable scientific evidence” (DeLorme et al., 2012, p. 554). While the FTC oversees and guides advertising, it does not approve ads for publication (Ashar et al., 2008; DeLorme et al., 2012). Like their patent medicine counterparts, today's advertisers police their own advertising practices, though they can be penalized for a published ad after the fact.

The DSHEA stipulated that supplement makers cannot use any *disease claims* in advertising their products, such as claiming their product treats insomnia, headache, etc.; this is because supplements are not required to prove their effectiveness before going to market (Avery et al., 2017; DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003). However, they can include a *health claim*, a “statement about a relationship between an ingredient and a reduced risk of a health condition,” a *nutrient content claim*, described as a “description of the relative amount of a substance in a product,” or a *structure/function claim* describing “how a product may affect organs or bodily systems.” (DeLorme et al., 2012,

p. 556). Advertisers can make structure/function claims if they notify the FDA within 30 days of taking the product to market, have documentation that can substantiate the statement, and use the prescribed FDA disclaimer on the label (DeLorme et al., 2012). By 2008, U.S. law required the disclaimer “this statement has not been evaluated by the FDA. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease” on any claim of structure or function on a dietary supplement label (Ashar et al., 2008).

Advertising for dietary supplements relies on self-regulation, and ad spending increased after the 1990 NLEA (Nutritional Labeling and Education Act) and DSHEA (DeLorme et al., 2012). An increased volume and variety of dietary supplement ads followed, but FTC advertising standards are stricter than the FDA’s for labels (DeLorme et al., 2012).

While the advertising techniques of the patent medicine era served as a foundation for modern advertising practices (Young, 1962), further changes in the early 20th century gave birth to modern advertising principles and the ad-driven consumer culture that still dominates in the U.S. (Marchand, 1985). The 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries have all seen rapid technological changes—this is likely also reflected in the messages and values promoted in the ads of each period, similar to the way Marchand (1985) describes early modern advertising (during the 1920s–40s).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to connect American patent medicine ads to contemporary American dietary supplement ads, comparing and contrasting the two groups to discover similarities and differences between attitudes and beliefs within American culture and how signs express them. Analysis of the visual and textual cues will provide insight into concepts of health, disease, and “the good life” within American

culture during each time, exploring how the ads' visual and textual elements compare while taking into account advertising techniques, cultural values, and regulations in both time periods. Using semiotic analysis to examine the signs in advertisements—as well as the broader context around their creation and publication—provides insight into the values, fears, motivations, and beliefs of American society across time (Marchand, 1985). Keeping cultural and historical context in mind, this thesis will examine signs in American advertisements for both patent medicines and dietary supplements, seeking to uncover broader themes for a comparison between both time periods and industries.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature reviewed for this thesis falls into four categories: work related to advertising in general, work related to medicine in general, work related to patent medicines specifically, and work related to the contemporary dietary supplements specifically. Each category of research provides insight—advertising theory and history, social history, qualitative, and quantitative analysis of the patent medicine era and patent medicine advertisements, and analysis of ad content, consumer response, and consumer understanding of modern dietary supplement ads. Existing literature on American dietary supplement advertising suggested that there is room for more research to be done; moreover, I was unable to find much research connecting patent medicine era advertising to the advertising of today (aside from the 2008 Conrad and Leiter study). While scholars note similarities in advertising techniques and messaging, there was a lack of deeper analysis of thematic similarities and differences between patent medicine ads and modern health-related advertising, inviting further study and presenting an opportunity for my own analysis.

Advertising

A review of scholarly advertising literature revealed evolving understandings of both the mechanics of advertising (how the human brain processes external stimuli—including advertisements—that influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) and the cultural aspects of advertising (how advertising has shaped and been shaped by changing American culture and commerce).

Wood (2012) asserts that the role of emotion is central to advertising, as “[e]motions shape our behavior and our responses to everyday situations” (p. 32). Poels

& Dewitte (2006) assert that advertisers are increasingly recognizing the emotions' importance, and that emotions have long been a consideration in advertising research. They recount how until the 2000s a cognition-first view dominated until neuroscientists' work revealed emotions' role as a precursor to cognition, "essential for rational and thinking behavior" (p. 18). Micu and Plummer (2010) assert that emerging evidence shows that emotion is not only a potential moderator for cognition and behavior, it actually occurs first in the process, before thoughts are generated.

Researchers have also examined how brains process information. Steele et al., (2014) found that emotions influence thought as well as how thoroughly people process and remember advertising content. Shen and Morris (2016) determined that emotions are also key for communicating positive brand messages; the positive emotions that ads inspire can transfer to brands. Smith and Marci (2016) agree, theorizing that advertisers hope that calling upon past emotional responses will draw consumers to brands and make them loyal. This body of research demonstrates a connection between emotional response and cognition, attitudes, and behaviors, explaining why advertisers are motivated to use signs that evoke powerful emotions (such as the ads sampled for this thesis). It holds that emotion is both influential and instrumental in advertising, inviting exploration of the ways that advertisers in the patent medicine era and today evoke emotional responses.

Marchand's (1985) *Advertising the American Dream* discusses American advertising's transition to modernity. According to him, ads reflect a society's existing values and shape broader culture as benchmarks for modernity, progress, and prosperity, as advertisers try to entice consumers to their definition of the ideal life. He argues that as markets and standards of living rose advertisers promoted modernity as aspirational,

intensifying in the 1920s and continuing through the century. He sees this as fueling advertising's style shift to more personal, less economic tones and speaking to consumers as individuals. Marchand notes that advertisers started selling product benefits instead of products and identifies a rise in emotional appeals, when emotions became the main tool of consumer influence. He posits that by putting the American dream into pictures, modern advertisers helped define what it meant to have good taste, and to enjoy life—but he questions if they defined the “good life” or took the idea from society and amplified it. He argues that ads can be studied for cultural values, but they may be a fuzzy reflection as a period's “advertising elite” distorts reality (p. 84).

For Marchand, traits of modern advertising included an increasing use of color and photography, the dominance of visuals over text, and testimonials, tableaux, and parables—persuasion through subtlety rather than confrontation. In his view these changes tied into advances in technology (especially printing and cameras) and economic prosperity. He adds that just as folk tales tend to fall into established categories, visual imagery follows established formulas and are closely tied to aspirational thinking. Here viewers have an “available vocabulary of familiar images” to interpret ads (p. 235), which advertisers use to establish standard American dreams and desires.

Marchand proposes that Americans consuming modern ads used them to navigate life's increasing complexity, with early modern ads (through the 1920s and 402) creating a visual vocabulary of urban modernity. As consumers looked for guidance from ads, advertisers seized the idea of “added values” (p. 348)—benefits beyond the actual function of the product. Marchand describes the shift to a more therapeutic role, with ads guiding consumers through society's changes.

Pope (1983) discusses advertising from an economic and business perspective, covering its rise and expansion over the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He asserts that changes before the 1920s in business structure, values, and work laid the foundation for advertising contemporary at the time (the early 80s). Pope argues that modern advertising (at the time) owes its characteristics to advertising's formative roots, including 19th and early 20th century economic conditions (especially "big business" [p. 19]), and "industrialization, urbanization, and the revolutions in transportation and communications" (p. 31). Pope examines the economic factors that fostered early advertising growth while discussing what makes certain industries and products riper for advertising. He argues that business needs have always driven advertising, with the demand for an ad industry shaping other industries. Pope also discusses advertising ethics and the changes in ad messages over time, arguing that the reward (such as status or emotional reward) for using a particular brand became more important to consumers than product function. He discusses pitfalls of ad analysis, cautioning that meaning doesn't depend on the advertiser alone, but depends on those interpreting it. He argues that it was market forces that shaped the evolution of modern advertising messages, and that market segmentation finally became the defining factor in advertising. Pope concludes that "advertising absorbs shifting values and behavior" (p. 285), not creating values but demonstrating what already exists—this includes values and aesthetic tastes. He notes a shift to user-centric advertising as well as an emphasis on gaining social conformity in the older ads, and an emphasis on standing out in the contemporary ones. Pope's vision of the future of advertising as tied to changes in production, media, and economic trends (especially wealth inequality).

Schudson (1984) analyses advertising as an institution, taking the view that ads are not purely informational or overwhelmingly deceptive and manipulative. He explores how influential ads are in “shaping American values and patterns of life” (p. 11), asking if they really cause consumer culture. Schudson looks at the business of advertising, the historical context that gave birth to the industry, and examines advertising as a “system of symbols” (p. 13). He argues that advertising is largely directed at products that are successful and consumers who are already interested, and so has limited power to actually sell. In discussing how advertising interacts with consumer culture, he asserts that needs are “socially coded” (p. 131), and “socially constructed in all societies” (p. 132)—thus, ads are societally-specific. He names changes in transportation, communication, urbanization, and increased mobility—both social and geographic, and especially for women—as the roots of American consumer culture. He asserts that patent medicine advertisements were fundamental to the growth of ad agencies, funding the growth of American media. He also argues that in the early 20th century advertisers realized that people have goals other than time or income; one such goal is to stay current in society, which opened up new kinds of advertising appeals. Schudson concludes that advertising does not create values, but communicates what society *already* values as it “fosters a consumer way of life” (p. 238). Overall, he finds that advertising is just one part of all of the influences on Americans’ values and consumption choices.

In *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* Sivulka (1998) provides an overview of American advertising through the 1990s. She describes how, after the industrial revolution of the early 1800s, mass production and created a need for advertising to stimulate demand for products. The Civil War further powered the consumer economy, and advances in

printing created more avenues for ads as well as more attractive ad aesthetics. She points out the importance of patent medicines in building the ad industry, acknowledging proprietors as pioneers of brand-name prepackaged products. She writes that by the late 19th century American consumer culture was becoming established as Victorian advertisements promoted new convenience products, labor-saving devices, and ornate furnishings. Sivulka also describes a shift from the *hard sell* (facts and hyperbole) to the *soft sell* (feel-good messages). She describes a shift to cleaner design through the early 1900s, and the influence of American culture's embrace of efficiency, science, and technology up through WWI. She also notes that during this time, ads continued to transition from informational to persuasive, using more suggestion and emotional appeal. She writes that, post WWI, advertising took on a new role in shaping lifestyles as lifestyle and image became key in ads. Sivulka describes how through the 1920s, advertisers also became more sophisticated about the gender and class differences of their audiences, while American leisure culture emerged. According to Sivulka, through the depression era up to WWII advertising became less optimistic and returned to the hard sell. It also embraced a photojournalistic style and returned to sensationalism. She describes the postwar boom as a time when Americans could dream again, with ads heavily pushing consumption—ads promised happiness in suburbs, emphasized competition with peers for status, made luxuries into necessities, and implied that one could buy a better lifestyle. Finally, she describes the then-contemporary era, from 1960 to 1991. This includes the creative revolution of the 60s and 70s which fueled an ethos of personal liberation and a later shift back to emphasizing the product over fantasy. The economic downturn of the 70s brought back aggressive pitches and the hard sell, while

the 80s brought prosperity and materialism. Here Sivulka describes “image building” (p. 334): leaving product descriptions behind for a style-over-substance approach. Finishing with the 90s, Sivulka talks about the influence of globalization and technology, emphasizing that a single message would no longer work for most consumers. Here the role of women changed dramatically in ads, and environmental appeals entered the mainstream—changes that may still be felt today.

Wu (2016) explores what he calls the *attention industry*, which includes the advertising industry among other media fields. He makes the argument that from the very inception of advertising, advertisers have been jockeying for consumer attention. Wu emphasizes the importance of the patent medicine industry as the foundation for modern advertising, asserting that with the advent of the American ad agency, patent medicines provided the bulk of work, providing a training ground for copy writers and future admen and women. Wu also discusses how the industrial revolution led to a crowded marketplace of products, and that advertisers found that with so many options offered, products weren't as interesting to consumers. He also makes the case that as advertisers transitioned into modernity, they began relying more on appeals to consumers' beliefs and emotions, understanding that attention is itself a valuable commodity that fuels consumer purchases.

Medicine

A review of scholarly work on medicine in general uncovered not only general histories of American medicine, but specific frameworks for beliefs about disease, changing modalities of alternative medicine, and exploration of attitudes and behaviors regarding complementary and alternative medicine. These works present a multi-layered

and somewhat complex landscape of American medicine throughout the last two centuries, where alternative and mainstream medicine have both blurred together and stood in opposition to one another.

Tesh's 1988 work *Hidden Arguments* describes the dominant theories of disease causation in the 19th and 20th centuries, which she asserts are foundational to health-related practices and attitudes. Tesh (1988) names four major 19th century theories of disease causation: *contagion theory*, *personal behavior theory*, *miasma theory*, and *supernatural theory*. Contagion theory recognized that disease could be spread through personal contact, though people in the 19th century did not fully understand what was being spread. Personal behavior theory emphasized the role of individuals' behaviors in causing disease, purporting that it was bad behavior like drinking alcohol, smoking, and fast living that led to disease. Miasma theory focused on foul air as the cause of disease, looking to decaying matter, pollution, and bad smells in general as the primary cause. Supernatural theory looked to supernatural forces like demons, spirits, and divine punishment or providence as disease causes. Tesh goes on to name the major disease causation theories of 20th-century America as *germ theory*, *lifestyle theory*, and *environmental theory*. After falling out of favor, germ theory became popular in the late 19th century. This theory holds that diseases are primarily caused by germs (microbes)—even cancers. In contrast, lifestyle theory looks to the interaction of multiple lifestyle factors in disease causation, including alcohol and tobacco use, exercise, and stress. Lastly, environmental theory views toxins in the environment as the cause of disease—toxins both in the environment (contaminated air, soil, water, etc.) and on the job (occupational exposure to dangerous chemicals). These theories continue to today,

influencing how Americans view health and wellness as well as advertisers' messages about wellness.

In his book *Medicine in America: a Short History* (1991) Cassedy gives a general history of medicine in America. In it he describes the practices of influential medical figures in the 19th century. This includes Samuel Thompson, a self-taught herbalist and medical practitioner who favored alternative approaches over mainstream medicine. Cassedy recounts how Thompson's approach to medicine grew into a medical sect called *Thompsonianism*. Based on humors and folk medicine, it used botanicals to induce sweating. Thompson and his followers emphasized self-treatment over mainstream medicine, encouraging patent medicine use throughout the era. Cassedy continues to follow the evolution of American medicine up through the 1990s, examining changes in theory, practice, and legislation.

Whorton (2002) provides a history of alternative medicine in America, noting a softening of "medicine's historic disdain for alternative medicine" (p. x) over time. He points out the contrast between "heroic therapy" and "reliance on nature" (p. 4) as differentiating orthodox and heterodox 19th century medicine. He asserts that medical sectarianism in the 19th century has evolved into medical pluralism in the 20th and 21st centuries, with alternative and mainstream medicine transitioning from animosity in the 19th century to cooperation in the current era. He discusses the main irregular sects of the 19th century: *Thompsonianism*, *homeopathy*, *hydropathy* or *hygeiotherapy*, *Mesmerism*, *magnetic healing*, *hypnosis*, and *Christian Science*. Whorton also discusses the drugless healing movement of the early 20th century, licensing, and *Osteopathy*, *Chiropractic*, and *Naturopathy*. He describes a late 20th century transition from labeling unorthodox

medicine “medical cultism” to “alternative medicine” (p. 221), with the 1970s “explosion of holistic medicine” (p. 249) bringing growing interest and acceptance. This included backlash against aggressive pharmaceutical use, an indictment of medical specialization as a barrier to holistic care, rejection of authority, and more individualism in care. Whorton asserts that this holism put emphasis on achieving “high-level wellness” (p. 251) rather than ordinary health. Whorton discusses the transition from “alternative medicine” to “complementary medicine” (p. 271), arguing that by the late 20th century mainstream physicians were more willing to incorporate alternative therapies. Whorton asserts that alternative medicine is here to stay, with more MDs adding alternative medicine practices in with mainstream ones.

In the last chapter of Susan Cayleff’s book *Nature’s Path: A History of Naturopathic Healing in America* (2016), she explores the booming interest in holistic health that began in the 1970s and continues to today. While her book focuses on naturopathy specifically, she describes a rebirth of natural health in the 1960s and 70s, which saw renewed interest in hygiene, fitness, and other aspects of alternative medicine. Cayleff argues that this change came with the countercultural revolution of the 60s as a backlash against conservative 1950s American culture, as “caring for and understanding one’s body and health became a statement of self-determination” (p. 275). She describes how alternative health publications became popular, with many individuals adding self-help into their conventional medicine practices. She points out the “natural foods movement” of the 1970s and the questions of antibiotic over prescription as bringing prescription drugs into question, with surgeries gone wrong and toxic reactions pushing people toward natural medicine in the 1980s and 90s. Cayleff argues that natural and

holistic medicine are increasingly seen as legitimate in America. However, she also discusses criticism, skepticism, and hostility, though she names acupuncture and herbalism as some of the more mainstream CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) practices, noting a surge in interest in botanical and herbal cures during the 1990s. She describes the story of naturopathy as illuminating “the ongoing tension between allopathic [conventional] medicine and traditions that emphasize the body’s ability to heal itself” (p. 301), a tension which has arguably existed since the earliest days of formalized medicine.

Ramadurai et al. (2016) investigated what kind of person uses CAM, looking for user similarities or differences explore *why* people choose unconventional treatments. Their initial investigations found that people are either pushed toward from conventional medicine by bad experiences or pulled toward CAM because they agree with alternative medicine philosophies, and that use of CAM can be for “everyday well-being” (p. 1217), relief of symptoms, a desire to control one’s own health, or an aversion to the side effects of conventional medicine. Ramadurai et al. then conducted a qualitative study with participants who had chosen CAM treatments for themselves or a family member. Defining three kinds of participants, they identified familiarity and comfort with CAM, a holistic approach to health, bad experiences with conventional medicine, a “sense of abandonment” (p. 1222), “hope of recovery” (p. 1222), empowerment, “trusted recommendation” (p. 1223) and “skepticism” (p. 1223) as motivators among the groups. The resulting Pathfinder Model of CAM Usage sees usage as determined by three dimensions: therapeutic objective, reliance on conventional medicine, and empowerment, emphasizing that life experiences have a significant impact on CAM usage.

Patent Medicines

A review of existing literature on American patent medicine advertising provided multiple studies of interest, providing not only histories of the time period and media form but also findings on ad content. This section of the literature review will begin with literature discussing patent medicines themselves before covering works concerning patent medicine advertising.

Patent Medicines as Products and as an Industry

Carson (1961) makes the case that patent medicines are paradoxical as their heyday coincided with scientific advances that were used to discredit them. He argues that “[t]he trend toward self-dosage in the last hundred years was a consequence of the rise in literacy, cheap postage, newspaper advertising, and the easy-money years of the 1880s” (p. 48), describing how a convergence of many factors created the environment where nostrums thrived.

Young (1962) posited that ultimately it was the massive demand for medicines that kept the industry going, compounded by Americans’ inability to “handle evidence rationally” (p. 70). He also makes the case that as doctors (responding to heroic medicine with therapeutic nihilism) became more cautious about prescribing medicines, patients used to taking drugs sought out nostrums so they could continue their habit. Young argues that people made decisions based on how strongly a point was argued, not how much sense it made, compounded by the fact that medicine was a confusing field. According to this view people who were suffering also looked anywhere they could for relief, naturally wanting to hear positive and hopeful news rather than the truth. Young also points out that patent medicine vendors were pioneers of good-tasting medicine

(Young, 1962), often promising easy relief with “mild and pleasant treatments” (p. 37) that added to their appeal over conventional medicines. He acknowledges that while journalists and reformers made concerted efforts to convince the public that patent medicines were unsafe, their use grew, and laws that had set standards for those practicing medicine were repealed rather than more legislation put in place. Young theorizes that the American public may have had difficulty discerning between credible and non-credible sources for information, as the same newspapers that brought news of new medical discoveries also advertised quack medicines. He asserts that new medical information also took time to be applied appropriately to various diseases—diseases like influenza, tuberculosis, and dysentery that had killed people for centuries. The medical profession would eventually gain more prestige in the 20th century, but Young argues that people are willing to pay for a sense of security, with or without evidence.

The article *Folk into Fake* by Young (1985) connects folk medicine and patent medicine, highlighting folk medicine as “one of the key sources of commercialized proprietary [sic] medicines” (p. 225). He examines how the patent medicine industry was built upon a foundation of folk medicines such as botanical laxatives and other homemade remedies. Proprietary manufacturers capitalized on an established respect for Native American medical knowledge, often invoking Native American culture in their products and advertising. He also emphasizes the popularity of laxative patent medicines—their action provided “palpable proof of its [the medicines’] power” (p. 230) acting as purgatives and possibly tapping into the old cultural ideas of purging evil or sin from the body. Young found that though at the time just about anyone, trained or not, could attempt to devise their own medicine, many proprietors concocted fictionalized

origin stories for their new products and hailed them as great discoveries. Young believes that such was the importance of the mythology around the medicines that when it came to patent medicines, consumers were more interested in magical cures than hard science.

Focusing on the role of journalists in changing public opinion and government regulations, Valuck et al. (1992) examine the role of muckraking journalists on the patent medicine industry, the American pharmacy, social reform, and the writings of foreign authors. They find that the muckraking movement of the late 19th and early 20th century was one of the most important contributing factors to the passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906 and the exposure of the dangers and falsehoods of patent medicine to the public. They assert that pharmacists at the time provided fuel for this crusade—there had long been pharmacists speaking out against patent medicines, but the muckraking movement drew new attention to their efforts. His research concludes that these journalists also had significant effects on reforms in America, including a greater awareness of social injustice; American muckrakers also inspired writers in other countries to employ similar methods.

Patent Medicine Advertising

Larson (1937) explores patent medicine advertising in the early American press, describing how the rise of the newspaper helped to transition patent medicines from products purveyed via word-of-mouth to an entire industry and examining the content of some of the earliest patent medicine ads (through the colonial period until the mid-19th century). While the earliest ads listed ingredients instead of selling products, later ads pushed remedies with spectacular claims—sometimes purporting to cure dozens of illnesses. Larson describes how, through the revolution, advertising fattened newspapers.

He found that pre-revolution, medicines invoked royal approval in their ads, while during the war ads turned to simple lists of ingredients and products. Turning to early 19th-century ads, Larson notes heavy use of superlative language, “[m]ystic and high-sounding names” (p. 337), and romanticism (especially of Native Americans). He found that some language was especially common, including “‘genuine,’ ‘original’ and ‘nature’s own’” (p. 341), asserting that such techniques had persisted until his day (1937).

A 2003 study of period texts by Torbenson and Erlen examines changes in the content of trade cards that advertised for the patent medicine Lash’s Bitters, analyzing the content of cards printed before the U.S. government the enacted Food and Drugs Act, and after. Examining 41 unique advertisements for Lash’s bitters, they note the increasing use of color in the cards over time, an example of the way ads changed with improving production techniques. Analyzing the cards’ content, Torbenson and Erlen found that cards from before the act passed contained claims that it was a family medicine, but more often contained sexual innuendo. Cards printed after the act passed seldom contained sexual innuendo, instead shifting their messaging to associate Lash’s Bitters with the consumption of alcohol (as a curative for its ill effects). Such findings highlight the effects of federal regulation on advertising content, exemplifying how advertisers are able to adapt to restrictions, tailoring messaging to both the cultural environment and to external regulations.

Conrad and Leiter (2008) explore the concept of *medicalization*: when problems not previously considered medical are seen and treated as medical problems, or when actual medical intervention is used to treat such a problem. Focusing on direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising, they point to parallels between ads for the patent

medicine *Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound* and the contemporary drug *Levitra*. They also point out that throughout patent medicine's popularity, patent medicine companies tried to distinguish themselves from doctors by marketing their medicines as safer, quicker, gentler, and more cost-effective, while simultaneously (and paradoxically) borrowing from "the rising prestige of medicine" (p. 827). Conrad and Leiter found that Lydia Pinkham's product established a culture of medicalization in America, and that culture continued to the time of their study. While they conclude that the extravagant claims of the patent medicine ads would be curtailed by today's laws, they found that the contemporary ads (i.e. the *Levitra* ads) sent medicalizing messages that are much subtler and more sophisticated, thus remaining legal under current law. Comparing antique ads to contemporary ones, they point out that despite the intervening decades, some advertising messages remain the same at their core.

Marcellus's 2008 study examines the representations of women and Native Americans, finding that women were often represented as either grandmotherly or hysterical, while Native Americans were typically represented as exotic and untamed, yet wise healers. Marcellus also describes how, during the 19th century, doctors became known for their "aggressive use of strong medicine" (Marcellus, 2008, p. 787), in a battle against sickness, throwing every medicine they had at disease. She also makes note of a "growing distrust of orthodox medicine" (p. 787), providing explanation for why patent medicines may have been so appealing.

A study by Burt (2012) analyzes five 1890 advertisements for the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company, examining the social tableaux they contain. She asserts that these ads send messages about a woman's place in 1890s America, when the traditional

idea of the *true woman* began to be challenged by the emerging construct of the more liberated *new woman*. Burt emphasizes that these ads are more than persuasion tools; they also have embedded messages about the world for which they were created. She posits that the message of the ads was more appealing to women because they were innovative in making women the main character. Burt asserts that the Pinkham's ads are "rich cultural texts," (p. 215), shedding light on how women at the time negotiated women's roles as well as women's struggles with changing roles. She examines each ad through a close reading, discussing how each element relates to the female archetypes of the *true woman* and *new woman*. Going sign by sign, Burt demonstrates how the signs in ads work together to communicate broader messages, and how those signs can be read to uncover issues and ideologies within a particular time period.

Maines' 2012 study examines almanacs from the Dr. A.W. Chase Medicine company (though the almanacs were Canadian, as a near neighbor to the U.S. their patent medicine industries were similar and manufacturers often sold both in the U.S. and Canada). Maines looked through the almanacs to gain insight into how consumers used them, finding that they were usually used as calendars and/or for keeping financial records and tracking household purchases. The study also analyzes the kinds of advertising messages the almanacs contained, finding that they promoted the entire line of Dr. Chase products, not just one medicine; the original line of products included "Nerve Food, Liver Cure, Backache Plasters, Ointment, Catarrh Cure, Syrup of Linseed and Turpentine, and Kidney-Liver Pills." (p. 182). This line was sold by the company through the 1950s with little change. The main advertising messages appealed to the traditional quality of the medicines. Maines also explored the elements of pseudo-science

that the almanacs contained, finding that the almanacs' explanations for the effectiveness of the medicines they promoted relied on pseudo-scientific understandings of how human organs work. One claim even linked constipation to such varied diseases as colds, communicable diseases, kidney and liver troubles, appendicitis, and inflamed organs. The study also looks at the almanacs' promotion of self-medication, finding that not only were the products repeatedly promoted as medicine, but consumers were also encouraged to self-administer them. The almanacs assured consumers that the higher price of the products was because of their "special medicinal ingredients" (p. 183) while encouraging them to be their own doctors with slogans like "Be Master of your Health" (p. 183) and "Every man his own physician" (p. 183) as well as promises to ". . . restore health rather than to afford mere temporary relief" (p. 183). They also emphasized the scarcity of medicine and doctors during WWII. Finally, Maines examined the almanacs' techniques for assuring consumers of their scientific legitimacy, finding that nearly all the almanacs studied contained direct appeals to scientific legitimacy; some touted recent discoveries in medical science, such as the development of vitamins. Maines concludes that the patent medicine era was deserving of further study.

Finally, another study by Burt (2013) asserts that mass production showed manufacturers a need for public awareness about their products. Her study of illustrated advertisements for Pinkham Company's products examined representations of class and social status, focusing on ads portraying women. The analysis found six categories of women portrayed in a study of 200 ads, from working women, to opulent beauties, to studious young girls.

Dietary Supplements

A review of scholarly work on dietary supplements in general provided information on not only the histories of dietary and herbal supplements, but consumers' interactions with them (including attitudes and beliefs) as well as studies examining ad content. This section covers dietary supplements themselves before discussing literature focused on dietary supplement advertising.

Dietary Supplements in General

Schaffer et al. (2016) report that the National Institutes of Health dictates that a whole plant or part of a plant used for medicinal or therapeutic purposes, its scent, or its flavor is referred to as a botanical (herbs are a subcategory of botanicals). A dietary supplement must be plant-based and used for "health promotion, disease prevention, or treatment" (p. 39) to be considered an herbal supplement. They also identify 6 of the most commonly used herbal supplements (in the U.S.) as Echinacea (used for its purported immune stimulating properties), Asian (panax) ginseng (used for its purported immune system support), ginko biloba (used for its purported concentration and memory enhancing qualities), plant-based omega-3 fatty acids (these are believed to have positive effects on reducing cardiovascular risks), green tea (have been used to mediate cardiovascular risks), soy isoflavones (thought to positively affect bone health and symptoms of menopause), and garlic (used for its purported immune-boosting, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer effects), establishing what kinds of substances can be considered dietary supplements.

Dietary Supplement Advertising

Mason et al. (2007) conducted a study examining the impact of warnings and disclaimers as well as experience with a product on consumers' beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of dietary supplements (in this case, weight loss supplements). They showed participants dietary supplement advertisements, either with a warning, a disclaimer, or neither (depending on their group). The participants then shared their thoughts about the ads before answering questions to assess how they perceived the product in terms of its safety, efficacy, and their overall evaluation. Mason et al. found that between those exposed to a warning and those exposed to a disclaimer, perceptions of safety were significantly lower. They found the same result with overall product evaluation; those who viewed the warning had a significantly more negative perception than those who viewed the disclaimer. Overall those who viewed the warning had a lower perception of safety and gave a more negative evaluation than both the disclaimer and control (no warning/disclaimer) groups. Those who viewed the disclaimer had no significant difference in safety, efficacy, or overall perceptions than the control group. While they found no significant differences in perceptions of efficacy between any of the groups, users reporting high product use perceived the product as more effective than light users and non-users. Ultimately, they conclude that for the majority of consumers the disclaimer will likely not have its intended effect. When looking at consumers' experience with a product, those who had used dietary supplements heavily had a different response to the disclosures than light users and non-users.

Another study by Ashar et al. (2008) illustrates the importance of continuing to research the advertising industry around dietary supplements, as they examined how well

members of the public understood how the U.S. government regulates dietary supplements. They showed participants an advertisement for a dietary supplement and then gave them a survey asking questions about how the advertised product had been federally regulated. Ashar et al. found that 52% of participants didn't understand that the supplement hadn't received FDA approval, and 63% of participants didn't know that the ad hadn't been approved by any government entity prior to publication. Regarding their findings that a majority of participants didn't clearly understand the FDA and FTC's role in regulating dietary supplements, they theorize that "[th]is misunderstanding may provide some patients with a false sense of security regarding safety and efficacy of these products." (p. 26). They conclude that overall participants were unclear about how the U.S. government regulates dietary supplements, suggesting education would greatly benefit the public and increase awareness. According to Ashar et al. regulatory changes have resulted in "... a dramatic increase in the number of products being market to consumers," (p. 23) and ads with "misleading, erroneous, or unsubstantiated information" (p. 23) showing how concerns over false advertising in alternative medicine today echo those of over a century ago.

Shaw et al. (2009) studied dietary supplement ad and editorial content in eight magazines with high teen readership, examining the quantity and quality of health information they contained. They evaluated 88 claims, with the results as follows: 15% accurate, 23% inconclusive, 3% inaccurate, 5% partially accurate, and 55% unsubstantiated. They evaluated 95 advertisements, with the results as follows: 43% were full page size or larger, 79% had no visible DSHEA warning, 46% referenced research, and 32% employed testimonials. They found that the teen-specific ads had very few

mentions of dietary supplements, but those they had were not accurate. The magazines for adults (with high teen readership) had more dietary supplement-related content, but this too was of “questionable accuracy” (p. 159). They conclude that teens and adults are commonly served dietary supplement claims and information that is not backed by enough solid research.

A review by DeLorme et al. (2012) of dietary supplement advertising in the U.S. concludes that there is a general lack of advertising research on dietary supplement advertisements. They also found that a majority of consumers may find ads for both prescription and dietary supplements untrustworthy, with more educated and wealthy consumers have been found to be more skeptical (DeLorme et al., 2012). According to DeLorme et al. (2012), while it’s vital that dietary supplement advertising is “truthful and non-misleading so consumers can make safe, appropriate and informed decisions,” (p. 554) the promotion of these products has still raised difficulties, especially as advertisers increasingly employ condition-specific claims. According to DeLorme et al. (2012), “[a]dvertising is thought to play a key role in the purchasing and consumption of DS [dietary supplement] products and, along with other sources, help meet consumers’ informational needs” (p. 548) Dietary supplement advertising provides fertile ground for vague health claims, such as advertising fiber as maintaining bowel regularity, or supplements claiming to positively affect alertness—although legal action has been brought in the past when the FTC found companies to be making unfounded medical claims (DeLorme et al., 2012). DeLorme et al. also assert that DSHEA had significant consequences for the dietary supplement industry; broadening the definition of a dietary supplement has made the market even more diverse. DeLorme et al. point out that critics

believe FDA regulations allow too wide a range of unsubstantiated claims, doubting that the FDA has the resources for full enforcement. They also assert that while supplements can be helpful in preventing disease and maintaining health (because some medical conditions can be related to nutrition), they shouldn't be seen as effective standalone medical treatments.

Kim et al. (2014) conducted a study examining the effect fear appeals had on college students while informing about the risks of a particular dietary supplement (creatine), focusing on how the participants' responses related to their level of familiarity with creatine. After participants saw advertisements containing information about potential side effects of creatine (some of which contained fear appeals) they answered questionnaires about their attitudes, perceived risk, and how they intended to act on the messages. Kim et al. found that fear appeals had the most effect on participants who were least familiar with the product; they stress that it may be important to inform the public about dietary supplement risks before they develop an affinity for such products independent of reliable health information.

Pan (2014) examined what factors influenced consumers' intention to purchase dietary supplements, with a focus on advertising content (specifically sexually-oriented ads). Study participants were in one of two groups: a group where they viewed generic ads for dietary supplements, and a group where they viewed sexually oriented ads for dietary supplements. Measuring attitudes toward advertising with questionnaires, Pan concludes that while sexual images can feasibly be used to attract attention to dietary supplement advertisements, such images are ineffective for motivating consumers'

intention to purchase products. Pan also raises concerns that the DSHEA allows for dishonest marketing tactics within the dietary supplement industry.

Another study by Ethan et al. (2016) features a content analysis of dietary supplement advertisements in 32 issues of muscle enthusiast magazines, focusing on marketing strategies as conveyed through specific word choices and common health claims. While examining how prevalent the ads were within the magazines and looking for individual marketing characteristics, they found that the majority of ads didn't have a readily identifiable product, nor did they indicate the product's primary ingredient—even though nearly 80% of the ads studied contained health claims. Additionally, only 70% of the ads studied included the required FDA disclaimer asserting that the FDA hadn't evaluated their statements—and even then, ads would feature the disclaimer in a tiny font, typically smaller than 8 points. Finally, Ethan et al. (2012) found that, in the supplement marketing studied, the most common language invoked muscles and strength. They also assert that in recent years media may have become an even more important information source than health professionals and educators. According to their assessment, in addition to advertising's role in promoting health-related products, today's consumers continue to rely on media like advertisements for health and nutrition information (Ethan et al., 2016).

Finally, Avery et al. (2017) examined structure-function claims in 6,179 American dietary supplement advertisements from 2003–2009, analyzing the structure-function claims to see if they were similar to health claims (unlike structure-function claims, the FDA requires more rigorous scientific evidence for health claims). Their analysis included looking for seals of approval and other guarantees. They found that not

only were such seals of approval very common, but the structure-function claims “strongly mimic[ed] FDA-prohibited health claims” (p. 82). They conclude that such structure-function claims were indeed likely to confuse consumers as they interpreted them.

While I explored literature on advertising, medicine, patent medicines, and dietary supplements, this thesis aims to fill a gap in advertising research by providing a deeper qualitative study of dietary supplement ads, focusing on the signs they contain. Recognizing an opportunity to connect health-related ads from America’s past to health-related ads today, this thesis uses contemporary dietary supplements as a modern parallel to patent medicines, providing a qualitative analysis that compares underlying themes represented through signs and symbols in the ads of both eras.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis seeks to examine the messages and the overarching themes conveyed through advertisements' imagery and copy by using *semiotic analysis*. Therefore, an understanding of semiotic theory as conceptualized by Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure is necessary. *Semiotics* consists of breaking down elements of media texts (ads in this analysis) into the building blocks of language and examining how, building upon one another, they create meanings ranging from literal and obvious to broad ideas that speak to the larger values and beliefs of a society. As signs are dependent on common meaning for their power to communicate, the very fact that signs are used in an ad implies that their messages had resonance with audiences at the time. Thus, signs have the potential to shed light on what people believe, value, and want, and as this thesis seeks to compare two slices of American history and culture, semiotic analysis will provide a window into the state of medicine both today and over a century ago. Finally, as the signs analyzed include visuals, additional understanding of visual analysis is also beneficial. *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger (1977) discusses the theory of visual analysis, and is referenced as particularly informative for the general study of semiotics. Because this thesis seeks to uncover differences and similarities between two time periods separated by at least 100 years, Berger's emphasis on understanding the context in which images were created is also pertinent for understanding the ads studied. It is through understanding this context that I intend to connect the signs identified to each culture's beliefs about health, medicine, personal agency, and what constitutes "the good life."

Semiotic Theory

This research employs the method of semiotic analysis, which examines how visuals make meanings (Rose, 2001). This semiotic analysis uses basic semiotic theory, originated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, which holds that languages (any language system, not just verbal or written language) is constructed from systems of *signs*, or elements that convey meaning (Hall et al., 2013). As Rose (2001) describes it, a semiotic analysis involves “. . . taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning” (p. 69). The sign is the basic tool of semiotics, “the basic unit of language” (Rose, 2001, p. 74). Barthes (1967) introduced the concept of the “semiological sign” (p. 40-41) which, while including word-based language, can also include anything (photos, music, clothing, drawings, etc.) that can convey meaning as it is experienced. Stuart Hall (Hall et al., 2013) and Gillian Rose (2001) describe how a sign consists of two parts: the *signifier*, and the *signified*. The form of the sign (the material part that can be physically experienced) constitutes the *signifier*. Rose (2001) describes it as “a sound or an image that is attached to a signified” (p. 74). Meanwhile the mental/immaterial construct associated with that signifier constitutes the *signified*; Rose (2001) describes this as “a concept or an object” (p. 74). There is also the *referent*, a real-life counterpart Rose (2001) defines as “the actual object in the world to which the sign is related” (p. 74). A complete sign is constructed by an encountered signifier and its associated signified; language systems made of signs are often culturally and temporally dependent, as meanings change over time and social conventions shift (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967; Hall et al., 2013; Saussure, 1959). Saussure held that signifiers have no inherently fixed signifieds, asserting that “the bond between the

signifier and signified is arbitrary” (Saussure, 1959, p. 67). Signs connect with specific meanings through *systems of differences*: systems where signs’ meanings depend on their relationships to other signs, and one must understand what a sign is not in order to understand what it is (Hall et al., 2013). These relationships are the basis of linguistic systems that allow meaning to be encoded and decoded in a consistent and sensible way (Hall et al., 2013). Saussure describes such language as “a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (Saussure, 1959, p. 114). At the same time, Saussure saw these language systems as flexible, acknowledging that meaning is connected to signs through culture (Hall et al., 2013). Because of this flexible and changeable nature—their dependence on culturally accepted meaning—I believe signs will be useful for uncovering cultural differences (and similarities) between the 19th and early 20th centuries and today.

Signs can also be interpreted on multiple levels, as theorized by Barthes (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967; Rose, 2001). Barthes separated signs into two levels for interpretation, which he called *denotation* and *connotation* (Barthes, 1964/1967). Signs are interpreted on their most basic, face-value level on the denotive level, using widely-accepted conventional definitions that have been collectively agreed upon by a culture (Hall et al., 2013). Such signs describe something, and are generally easier to decode (Rose, 2001). The second level of signification, connotation, features signs carrying “a range of higher-level meanings” (Rose, 2001, p. 82). Here the researcher interprets signs in terms of their significance within broader culture, examining meta-themes and meanings that tie into general language systems (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967). This could be the language of youth, or romance, or as with the

advertisements studied here, the languages of health, wellness, and efficacy. Signs can also tap into what Barthes calls *myths*, which connect with deeper ideology and cultural significance (Hall et al., 2013; Barthes, 1957/1972). The meanings of denotation are literal and basic, while those of connotation and myth rely on shared meaning in broader culture and ideology (Barthes, 1964/1967). A myth is constructed when a complete sign (a signified associated with a signifier) is associated with a meta-theme or broad concept (a secondary signified), itself becoming a signifier (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967). The new sign that results is what Barthes (1957/1972; 1964/1967) calls myth: a second level of signification. This second level elevates a jump rope from representing a toy (the first level of signification) to signifying youth and the carefree days of childhood (the second level of signification). Thus, signs will be informative for multiple layers of analysis as this thesis examines advertising—from discovering the kinds of products sold, to comparing the types of appeals used, to tapping into the ideologies that may be at work.

Meanings associated with signs are not inherent but come from common practice and convention within cultures (Rose, 2001). Therefore, context is important for analyzing the signs from historical texts in this thesis, particularly since I am comparing and contrasting two time periods. Semiotic analysis is appropriate for studying advertisements, having been found useful by researchers such as Judith Williamson and Robert Goldman; they chose to perform semiotic analyses to go beyond ads' ubiquity and semblance of reality and realism in order to study their underlying ideologies (Rose, 2001). Indeed, part of the function of advertisements comes from the way they use signs to transfer desirable qualities to the products advertised (in the minds of potential

consumers) (Rose, 2001). Rose (2001) cites Judith Williamson's concept of *objective correlates* (p. 83) as a powerful tool in advertising, where "certain objects become taken for granted as having certain qualities" (p. 84); when the transfer of the qualities of a particular object to a product is common enough, it becomes generally accepted, as with young, muscular men signifying youth and vitality in the general consciousness. In order to do this, however, advertisers must have an idea of what qualities are desirable—therefore by looking at the qualities they promote in ads, I hope to learn more about those desire both in the patent medicine era and today.

As mentioned previously, semiotic theory has already been used by other scholars analyzing advertisements and exploring how they make meaning. In her book *Decoding Advertisements* (2002) Judith Williamson uses semiotics to examine ads for many different kinds of products, from automobile tires to perfume. Williams emphasizes that the way advertisements make meaning must be examined in order to understand what they mean. This concept is also a key reason why I have chosen to study advertisements through the lens of semiotics; rather than looking at what ads say on a surface level alone, semiotic analysis also explores how meaning is made. My research questions seek to explore not only what advertisers in each era say through their ads, but how those messages relate to prevailing ideologies, attitudes, and historical context (as well as how the eras compare). Signs don't function in a vacuum—as their power to communicate comes from culturally agreed upon meanings, they are largely dependent on time, place, and culture (Hall et al., 2013). Therefore, semiotic analysis will help to reverse-engineer the cultural meanings prevalent in each era studied as it uncovers how the signs work.

Williamson asserts that it is vital to go beyond studying ads' face-level content (their overt messages, or the signifier), proposing that the form of the ads (the invisible sets of relationships that give context for the ad content, or the signified) should also be examined. As Williamson examines each advertisement, she begins with what she has determined to be the overall meaning of the ad, and then proceeds to break down the components of the ad bit by bit. As Williamson goes through each piece of copy and each visual element, she describes their face-value meanings; but, she then connects those meanings to one another within the ad, describing a second level of signification. For example, looking at an ad for Goodyear tires, she describes the copy as having a rational message of safety, and the image of a jetty (where break testing is performed) on its face signifies danger and risk—if the car fails, it will go into the sea. However, Williamson points out that because the jetty looks like a tire, on another level it also signifies safety because it is outside, withstanding the elements. Her analysis demonstrates how signs in advertisements can have an overt meaning (corresponding to Barthes' *denotation*) while also signifying deeper, less obvious meanings (corresponding to Barthes' *connotation*). This multi-level view of signs is foundational to semiotics and emphasizes that it is not just individual signs that communicate messages, but their relationships to one another. Similarly, this thesis examines the individual components of the ads (copy and visuals) to discern their overt meanings (denotations), while also exploring how those meanings work together to create other meanings that speak to broader cultural beliefs (connotations and myths).

This thesis's inclusion of visual analysis necessitates an understanding of how people see: what images are, and how meaning is derived from them. How do we

understand images from the past, as some of the ads studied here are a century old? John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1977) provides ideas that are applicable to the process of semiotic analysis as it provides additional methods for looking at visual work. Berger (1977) describes the disconnect between understanding through words and understanding through sight. And yet, in this vision, what we know and what we choose to look at both influence the way we see (Berger, 1977). Berger's work defines an image as "man-made," (Berger, 1977, p. 9) and "a sight which has been recreated or reproduced . . . an appearance, or set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time [when and where it first appeared]" (Berger, 1977, p. 10). According to this view images not only represent things that are absent, they also convey things that once were; the author adds that "[n]o other kind of relic or text from the past can offer such a direct testimony about the world which surrounded other people at other times," (p. 10) an idea relevant to this thesis' analysis of historical ads. Berger's work discusses how in viewing images, we accept the way the artist saw his subjects, but only insofar as those ideas match our own ideas and experiences of the world (Berger, 1977). We view images of the past with the understandings of the present, seeing them in a novel way—the advent of the camera, for example, fundamentally changed the way people see images, even those created before its invention (Berger, 1977). This idea seems especially pertinent in viewing the patent medicine ads sampled; while the 19th century is not so different as to be wholly unfamiliar, today's understanding of the world is quite different, coloring any conclusions. Berger's work (1977) emphasizes the powerful role that images can play in communicating experiences, especially those of the past. Through this thesis's analysis it will be important to bear in mind that one can never view images from the past through

the same eyes as their original audiences. That is why the analysis will necessitate the incorporation of historical context and insights—as advertising (and, as Berger [1977] writes, any visual media) is not created within a vacuum, neither can it be understood fully apart from the environment for which it was designed and in which it was created.

Because semiotic theory provides such a broad definition of language that includes any means of conveying a message, I carefully examine all the elements of the ads studied, treating all of them as signs. This includes visuals (both images and photographs) as well as copy. This means more than simply looking at an image and identifying it as a grim reaper, or simply noting the phrase “miracle cure” in a heading. For a deep analysis, I break down visual components, including colors, facial expressions, activities depicted, clothing styles, and written copy, including word choices, to understand not only their denotations but their connotations, and the greater myths they construct. Thus this semiotic analysis of both patent medicine and contemporary dietary supplement ads breaks down the parts of each ad according to their literal and surface-level meanings (denotative signs), the next level of less obvious meanings created by the denotative signs themselves associated with more cultural meanings (connotative signs) to identify the meaningful themes they embody, constructed from those deeper meanings being further connected to broader ideological and cultural concepts (i.e., broader myths). By identifying these broader themes, I am able to compare and contrast the ads of both eras, taking into account the historical, legal, and cultural similarities and dissimilarities of these two periods, over a century apart. This process explores each culture’s messages about health, wellness, disease, medicine, values, and aspirations, comparing each era while also drawing parallels where

appropriate. This exploration shows not only how far we have come since the 19th century, but also how some beliefs about health, commerce, and what makes life worth living have persisted through the decades.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

This thesis focuses on an analysis and comparison of advertisements for both categories of products (patent medicines and contemporary dietary supplements) seeking to answer the following questions while taking into account each time period's knowledge of disease and the human body: How do the semiotic signs compare and contrast between the time periods examined? What themes emerge, and how do those themes compare across time? What messages do the advertisements studied convey about conceptions of health and disease, personal agency concerning health, and "the good life" in America? What do these ads suggest about the prevailing attitudes toward death, disease, and health at the time they were published? What do the signs—consisting of words and images—convey in terms of the idea of health and healthfulness, personal agency over health (either prevention of ill health or action against disease), and life aspirations? How do the signs convey these concepts? By understanding these questions, we are able to understand more about what Americans believed (in the patent medicine era) and believe (today) about medicine and health, a prominent part of not only American commerce, but American culture. These questions also reveal the changing values of evolving American society, underscoring how historical, cultural, commercial, and regulatory factors can influence the kinds of messages we see and the kinds of lives to which we aspire.

Methodology

To answer these questions, I use semiotic theory to break down the content of sampled ads into individual signs on three levels: denotative, connotative, and myth. The

analysis focuses on how these signs build upon one another to communicate messages; these messages, in turn, should provide insight that answers my research questions. As Schudson (1984) asserts, while advertising may not necessarily create a society's values, advertisements certainly convey the existing values, tastes, and beliefs within a society; therefore, this study hopes to glean something about all three in answering the research questions listed above.

Sampling

The first portion of this analysis uses a convenience sample of U.S. patent medicine print advertisements originally published during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Upon deciding to use patent medicines as one type of media for comparison, the key to the search for texts was finding high-quality examples of such ads, along with reasonable assurance that they were authentic. This was slightly challenging, as even the most recent patent medicine ads were published over a century ago—finding a large enough sample of ads in their original publications seemed impractical and improbable given my resources and time constraints. Therefore, the search narrowed to reliable online archives and books obtainable from the Middle Tennessee State University Library. After exploring both avenues, I discovered that the U.S. Library of Congress has a collection of digitized pieces labeled as patent medicine ads in their collections, and so those were included for exploration. Two books from the MTSU library (found to be the best available books featuring high-quality printings of authentic patent medicine advertisements) were also included in the search: *The Great Patent Medicine Era* by Adelaide Hechtlinger (1970) and *One for a Man, Two for a Horse* by Gerald Carson (1961). An examination of the ads in the Library of Congress's digital archive (from a

collection of patent medicine advertisements they had available) and both library books provided the initial sample pool. For this thesis, patent advertising labels are considered advertisements, as the style of the time produced labels that followed an advertising-style format (Hechtlinger, 1970; Young, 1962). Therefore, all samples are referred to as advertisements. While the advertisements obtained from the Library of Congress included an approximate date, the ads obtained from the books did not. Therefore, it was necessary to do additional cursory investigation to roughly determine each ad's date of production. Because the investigations were not definitive, the dates for these texts are approximate. Because I am striving for as much parity as possible between the patent medicines and modern dietary supplements, and because the texts presented as patent medicines also include ads for animal medicines and human medical devices, I focus on medicinal products for human consumption within the patent medicine sample. Additionally, as English is my first language, I focus on ads in English.

This analysis also utilizes a convenience sample of advertisements selected from the magazines, *Amazing Wellness*, *Clean Eating*, *Marie Claire*, *Oxygen*, *Runner's World*, *Rodales Organic Life*, and *Yoga Journal*. Once I had decided to search for contemporary dietary supplement ads, magazines seemed like an appropriate modern analog to the kinds of publications in which patent medicine ads originally appeared. Understanding that advertisements for natural products (including dietary supplements) often appear in publications centered around alternative and holistic health and wellness, these seemed to be a reasonable genre of magazine on which to focus; however other genres of magazines were also examined for the purpose of observing ads for other kinds of products (including mainstream pharmaceuticals) for comparative purposes, and also for any

additional dietary supplement ads they might contain. I purchased the July 2017 issues of three print magazines (*Well Being Journal*, *Yoga Journal*, and *Amazing Wellness*) and also purchased the October 2017 issue of *Marie Claire*. Using the Texture app, a digital application and platform that provides access to digitized versions of print magazines, I widened the sample pool with the digitized November issues of *Allure*, *Backpacker*, *Bon Appétit*, *Cooking Light*, *Clean Eating*, *Country Living*, *Domino*, *Entrepreneur*, *National Geographic*, *Oxygen*, *Prevention*, and *Runner's World*, *Shape*, *Travel and Leisure*, and *Yoga Journal*, the March 2017 and November 2016 issues of *Rodale's Organic Life*, the December 2017 issue of *Yoga Journal*, and the February 2018 issue of *Eating Well*. Issues of *Amazing Wellness*, *Clean Eating*, *Eating Well*, *Marie Claire*, *Oxygen*, *Rodale's Organic Life*, *Runner's World*, *Well Being Journal*, and *Yoga Journal* contained ads for dietary supplements. To further solidify the sample as containing dietary supplement ads (as defined by the U.S. FDA), the final sample pool is limited to ads including the FDA dietary supplement disclaimer (“[t]hese statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.”) and/or the labels of “dietary supplement,” “herbal supplement,” or “herbal remedy.”

Analysis

According to Hall (1975), the first step in qualitative analysis includes an initial “preliminary soak” (p. 15) taking in all of the ads for patent medicines and dietary supplements in their totality and paying attention to any themes that emerge. The next step consists of narrowing down the themes to explore and selecting the best representative examples to analyze for each theme. I examined both sample pools (patent

medicine and dietary supplement ads) in order to identify common themes in response to the research questions. I also compare and contrast the themes I found in both time periods, bringing in the differences and similarities of each time period and cultural context. As Marchand (1985) notes that the rise of modern advertising brought with it a focus on people and their lifestyles rather than products alone, and Rose (2001) points out that people frequently function as signs in advertisements (as advertisers hope to transfer their qualities to the products advertised), the ads selected all featured people as the primary subjects.

In her book *Visual Methodologies*, Gillian Rose (2001) discusses methods for analyzing visuals, and this study is influenced by her methods for conducting semiotic analyses in that it not only considers elements of physical composition but also social and historical context. She describes semiotics (what she calls semiology) as “a very productive way of thinking about visual meaning” (p. 96), requiring detailed and careful analysis. Rose argues that in today’s *visual culture*, there are 5 critical points to think about regarding images: images have their “own visual effects,” meaning they actually do something (p. 15); the “ways of seeing” (looking at images and considering how they represent different social categories) activate these effects (p. 15); both of these factor into how social difference is produced and reproduced in images; the social context (general culture) in which an image is viewed intersects with the effects; and the “visualities its spectators bring” also connect with the created effects when an image is viewed, meaning some audiences be resistant to images’ messages (p. 15). Rose argues that it is important to think about both the social conditions and the effects of visuals when interpreting them, therefore this study considers the production of the images

sampled, the images themselves, and the audiences/broader social context for the images in interpreting the signs within the texts and the messages they convey.

In outlining compositional interpretation, Rose (2001) offers useful guidelines for examining the physical aspects of images; she argues that because every image creates its own effects, it is important to look closely and carefully at the images studied.

Compositional analysis includes: examining how the image is produced, including who made it, and what it is made out of; and examining the images itself, including color (hue, saturation, and value), how the space is organized (the volumes and lines in an image), perspective (where the eye level is, the real and implied gazes in the image), light, and “expressive content” (p. 46) which deals with the effects of the subjects and an image’s appearance as well as the overall feeling or impression created by the image. Therefore, those elements that are readily discernible—particularly the images themselves, the space, perspective, light, and expressive content—are examined throughout this study’s semiotic analysis. As Rose (2001) explains, semiotic analyses focus heavily on the composition of images, but also considers the social context of those images. Therefore, during my analysis I bring in the history and literature discussed previously, exploring how the ads studied may interact with the insights others have offered. Rose also asserts that, when analyzing images, it is useful to also look at the differences between them; therefore, this analysis compares and contrasts the ads sampled, both within the two eras and between them. Rose (2001, p. 91) outlines 5 steps for semiotic (semiological) analysis, which includes determining what the signs are, deciding what those signs “signify ‘in themselves,’” thinking about how these relate with the image’s other signs (and with signs in other images). Next Rose suggests exploring any connections to “wider

systems of meaning,” including codes (dominant or otherwise), referent systems and mythologies; and lastly returning to the codes of the signs to explore how they communicate ideology and mythology. Therefore, this thesis seeks to analyze the images sampled, carefully examining their appearance (including text and visual elements) and content to uncover signs and their plausible meanings, all while connecting them to their cultural contexts. For this analysis, that means looking at signs first on a denotative level (their overt meanings), then on a connotative level (their less obvious meanings), and finally on the level of myth: the meanings the signs create by tapping into broader cultural ideas and ideologies. Informed by Berger’s (1977) work I also bring in history and context to be able to uncover significance that may have gone unnoticed if I approached all of the ads from a contemporary perspective. While history and context are especially important for my analysis of patent medicine ads, they also have a place in my analysis of contemporary ads. Though the contemporary ads and I are both products of the same time period, I inevitably view the dietary supplement ads through the lens of my own ideas and experiences. That is why it is also important to bring in context from the dietary supplement industry, medicine, and attitudes about health today—this may provide context to make otherwise unnoticed significance clearer.

In summary, because the content of advertisements (both visual and textual) communicate the values, beliefs, and other characteristics of the eras and societies that create them (Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Schudson, 1984), it is my intention that analyzing the content of the sampled ads by breaking them down into their component signs reveal the cultural similarities, differences, values and beliefs (particularly regarding health and wellness) that my research questions seek to uncover. While the

existing patent medicine and dietary supplement literature reviewed has focused on ad content from either era, I have not come across many studies that qualitatively analyzed advertising content of non-pharmaceutical medicines from both the patent medicine era and today. This study fills in this gap by not only analyzing advertisements for both patent medicines and dietary supplements, but also comparing these two categories and eras. The overall context is the evolving state of medicine, health, and wellness in America, and this thesis seeks to not only analyze advertising content on its own, but to also examine it in light of the changing knowledge, beliefs, and practices of American medicine throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries as the line between folk medicine and formal medicine has blurred, cleared, and blurred again, with influences including medical advances and the rise of the American consumer society (Cassedy, 1991; Schudson, 1984; Whorton, 2002).

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

Overview

Though this thesis only examines patent medicine and dietary supplement advertising—arguably a small fraction in the landscape of America’s dense advertising history—the ads studied displayed a fairly wide breadth of basic human motivations and desires, from the simple desire to be well, to the drive for personal achievement and even pushing personal limits. Through these ads, we are afforded a unique window into what Americans think and want regarding medicine, health, and wellness—and through that window, we see not only how different, but also how similar our patent medicine counterparts were compared to people today.

For the analysis, I systematically analyze the selected patent medicine ads from the 19th and early 20th centuries and dietary supplement ads from today, examining the signs created by their visuals and copy. I consider the signs on three levels according to Barthes’ conceptualization of semiotic theory: denotation, connotation, and myth (1957/72; 1964/1967). From the outset, it is important to keep the producers of the advertisement—as well as their contexts—in mind (Rose, 2001). While a considerable portion of both the contemporary and patent medicine ads sampled were in a digital format, all of the ads were originally designed for print, produced by advertisers for companies desiring to sell their products. Therefore, it is beneficial to bear in mind that each image is actively trying to persuade the viewer to buy (both products and ideas) whether overtly or subtly—as this sheds additional light onto what the signs used are signifying on a deeper level.

While examining all of the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads gathered, three broad themes emerged among them: *nature and naturalness*, *power*, and *the good life*. Across a wide range of content (signs depicting various kinds of people in varying situations and activities, as well as diverse products), the way that these themes were communicated varied between the eras; therefore, the themes of power and the good life have been further categorized into sub-themes. Power has been broken down into the sub-themes of battle, magic, and the supernatural (represented in the patent medicine ads) and the sub-theme of tackling life (represented in the dietary supplement ads). The sub-themes of the good life theme are beauty, family and relationships, and stress-free living—all three of which appeared in both eras of ads to varying degrees, signified in different ways.

The first of the themes discussed is *nature and naturalness*, where the representative ads used signs that signified the natural world and emphasizing the natural (organic, harmless, sourced-from-nature, etc.) qualities of their products. While the signs used in each era have shared denotations (depictions of plants are a common thread), a key difference is that the time periods differ in the intensity of the nature-related messages. The contemporary ads for dietary supplements appeared to be more explicit than the patent medicine ads in their references to nature, with connotations of nature much more common than in their 19th and 20th-century counterparts. This suggests that the myth of nature and naturalness is more salient in the public consciousness today.

Among the ads representative of the theme of *power*, the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads diverged into two subcategories according to how they signified their products' effectiveness: battle, magic, and the supernatural, and tackling life (i.e.,

accomplishing what one has to do and wants to do). Ads representing battle, magic, and the supernatural signified power with signs connoting violence, magic and mysticism, and higher powers like gods and demons. This suggests that Americans in the patent medicine era—though they were treating their own illnesses with medicines—saw disease and health as a more external force, something inflicted from without and healed by applying the right external remedies. Ads representing the latter category signified power with signs related to the ability to do desired activities and accomplish goals. By contrast, this suggests that today Americans take a more inwardly-focused view of health: poor health is a matter of the body going awry or not getting what it needs and healing the body from within allows individuals to meet the demands of their own lives (i.e., health is highly individualized). Through the lens of semiotics, we see a myth of poor health as an almost inexorable force in the patent medicine era, and a myth of health as achievable and self-actualizing today.

Lastly, the third theme that emerged centered around *the good life*: i.e., how the ads signified an ideal life. Within this theme there are also three subcategories. The first is beauty, where signs signified attractive physical qualities as part of an ideal life. The denotations of the signs related to beauty were fairly similar across the two time periods studied (the heads of beautiful women appeared in both), but those of the contemporary ads had additional connotations of beauty that *does*: beauty that allows consumers to self-actualize, to get what they want out of life. Analyzed through semiotics, this suggests that the myth of outer beauty as connected to inward health has evolved over time, and that today American culture values self-actualization, or beauty as self-actualization over beauty for its own sake. While it is arguable that Americans in the 19th and early 20th

centuries might also have sought to self-actualize through their appearances, the signs of the contemporary advertising seem to promise this result more overtly.

The second subcategory is family and relationships, where signs signified familial and romantic relationships as constituting an ideal life. Just as the signs denoting and connoting beauty were similar across both eras, these signs were also similar (families were common visual signs). Because semiotics holds that signs are used because of their resonance with audiences, this suggests that relationships have been a perennial aspiration for Americans over the last two centuries. However, the signs of the contemporary ads also had connotations beyond the relationships themselves; their signs spoke more to participating in activities *with* family, suggesting that for Americans today good relationships are about more than affection and a lack of conflict (both of which are signified in the patent medicine ads studied)—they are about actively living and enjoying life with others.

The third subcategory is stress-free living, where signs signified freedom from stress and emotional distress as the ideal life to which people should aspire. The most notable comparison between the ads of the two eras studied is the prominence of signs denoting and connoting stress (as specific condition and called stress by name) in the patent medicine ads, and the prominence of such signs in the contemporary ads. This suggests the emergence of stress-free living as a more important value in American culture today, as well as the emergence of a myth that positions freedom from everyday cares as a part of the best kind of life.

Across all three themes the individual signs taken as a whole suggest that while American cultural values may have changed, other values have remained important. The

findings reveal not only marked differences between the signs and messages of each time period, but also similarities that have spanned a separation of over 100 years—years that saw tremendous changes in not only health and medicine, but the American way of life (Cassedy, 1991; Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962).

Nature and Naturalness

In the patent medicine materials observed, denotations and connotations of nature were less prominent than in their contemporary counterparts. Explicit verbal signs, such as the use of the word *natural*, were less frequent, and signs tended to be visual. In advertising language, the word natural carries with it connotations of health, purity, positive qualities in general, ecological responsibility, a nostalgic ideal, and authenticity, as well as describing the ingredients in and the processes used to make products (Salvador, 2011; Sivulka, 1998). Salvador (2011) asserts that in the past decade the concept of naturalness has become “a powerful part of our [advertising and marketing’s] vocabulary of persuasion” (p. 80). But, today the FDA has no formal definition of the word, though they informally consider it to mean “nothing artificial or synthetic (including all color additives regardless of source) has been included in, or has been added to, a food that would not normally be expected to be in that food” (U.S. Food & Drug Administration, 2017, November 11). Because the FDA has no strict definition for them to enforce, the FTC also does not provide a definition of natural (Federal Trade Commission, 2012); they have, however, brought lawsuits against companies that claimed their products to be “all natural” while including synthetic ingredients in those products (Federal Trade Commission, 2016). Viewed through the lens of semiotics, this suggests that today signs explicitly associating nature with health and well-being have

become familiar within American culture—part of the contemporary linguistic system—perhaps because today’s society is generally less intimately familiar with the natural world (due to urbanization) than that of the patent medicine era (Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Young, 1962). However, there was a key similarity—in both sets of ads, the signs communicating the idea of nature connected naturalness with ideas like pleasantness, harmlessness, and a “good-for-you” quality. By associating nature-related signs with products (for the purpose of selling them) the advertisers position natural qualities as beneficial and desirable; therefore, an intensified use of these signs in the contemporary ads can tell us that consumers today may place more value on the idea of a product being natural than consumers of the patent medicine era did.

Patent Medicine Advertisements

For example, an ad for several medicines from the Dr. Miles Medical Company (Dr. Miles Medical Co., ca. 1885-1911), an image of the company’s office (perhaps a factory) is ensconced in a wreath of leaves growing from a single stem, connoting nature and plant-based medicine. From the leaves five flowers sprout, each with the name of a product: “heart cure,” “nervine,” “pain pills,” “tonic,” and “nerve & liver pills,” again connote nature, but also signifying the company’s medicines as being the product of nature—literally the flower of all nature has to offer. The whole plant grows from an ornate pot, itself decorated with leaves and flowers, with the name of the company written across the top. The whole of the text connects the company itself, and its products, with nature as both the building and product names sprout from the plant. This imagery of plants echoes the patent medicine industry’s roots in plant-based folk medicine, as well as the Thompsonian sect’s emphasis on botanicals as an alternative to

harsh regular medicine (Anderson, 2000; Young, 1985; Whorton, 2002). From a semiotic standpoint, we see practical information on the denotative level: the company name and the products available with some attractive foliage for decoration. On the connotative level the decorative plants communicate more than something nice to look at—they associate the company and products with nature generally and perhaps herbal medicine more specifically. This connection, further associated with health and medicine in general, taps into the broader myth of nature as provider and healer, and of humans as the harnesser of nature’s power to cure; nature is safe and a giver of good things for mankind’s benefit. We are left with only this association of the products with nature, as there is no further description of any of the products beyond their names.

Another ad, for *Hale’s Honey of Horehound and Tar* (C.N. Crittenton, ca. 1885-1887) also features multiple significations of nature. The product name itself includes three natural products: honey, horehound, and tar—the choice to include these ingredients in the name (rather than inventing a more fanciful name) connotes the connection to nature as well as simplicity, and perhaps also safety (as all three do not seem particularly exotic or unusual). And yet, emphasizing the multi-ingredient composition of the medicine implies that consumers of the day were interested in knowing that a product contained enough ingredients to get the job done. This seems connected to the idea that medical practitioners (both regular and irregular) often tried multiple treatment modalities—using whatever they could—during a time period when medicine lacked effective treatment for many diseases (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Parascandola, 1999; Young, 1962). This connotation of safety is further reinforced by the copy, as it includes the words and phrases “wonderfully remedial,” “[w]ell known,”

“[r]apid and permanent cures,” with a description of the medicine as “. . . a pleasant and efficacious remedy, which does not contain anything whatever injurious to the most delicate constitution.” While it is no surprise that patent-medicine-era consumers would be interested in an efficacious, rapid, or even well-known cure, the inclusion of the line about its harmlessness indicates that this was also a salient concern to consumers at the time. The presence of such a sign indicates that other products *could* be outright harmful—a testament to consumers’ reliance on proprietors and advertisers as the sole providers of assurances of a good product. This may also be related to a growing awareness of harmful patent medicines, as this ad ran during the latter part of the 19th century when skepticism was on the rise (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961; Valuck, 1992; Young, 1962). Through semiotic analysis we see denotations of plants and other decorative imagery, perhaps simply advertising the product’s ingredients. The imagery of the ad is filled with symbols of nature: blooming rose plants climb through the copy as butterflies flit through the air and perch on another plant that appears to be horehound. These denote the flora and fauna themselves, but on a connotative level they also symbolize pleasantness, even an idyllic return to nature. During the 19th century, flowers and plants were also assigned symbolic meanings (Greenaway, 1978). Roses could stand for many different meanings, including love, beauty, virtue, “brilliant complexion” and “freshness” (Greenaway, 1978, p. 50). Organic scrollwork, delicate lines, and other flourishes continue the natural symbolism more subtly, bringing connotations of gentleness, refinement, and delicacy. Near the top is an image of a beehive—the source of honey—against a backdrop of pines, a source of tar. These depictions of the natural sources of the medicine’s ingredients again bolster the ad’s natural, fresh and healthy

connotations, creating an overall myth of nature as a gentle, safe, and pleasant healer. Another part of the copy proclaims it as “Invaluable in the first stages of croup, before a physician can be had.” As a sign this denotes usefulness but also connotes the insufficiency of physicians and the urgent need for rapid do-it-yourself action; this ads to the nature-as-healer myth, positioning the power of home remedies against those of modern medicine.

Dietary Supplement Advertisements

In terms of semiotic theory, the commonness of natural symbolism suggests that advertisers today recognize the relevancy of naturalness to American consumers, and that the idea of natural products being more healthful is well-established. The signs in these ads indicate that in the American marketplace today the word natural has become more of a buzzword—a sign that immediately imparts connotations of health, goodness, and being better. Americans’ increased awareness of (usually lab-created) prescription pharmaceuticals may also provide a suitable backdrop for promoting natural alternatives (Conrad & Leiter 2008); emphasizing supplements’ natural qualities may appeal to consumers averse to synthetic medicines. Several examples among the ads studied indicate that the color green has also become closely associated with healthy, natural products, serving as a linguistic shorthand to signal to potential consumers that a product is natural. In fact, each of the contemporary ads sampled use the color green in significant amounts. The color green can also be interpreted as signifying general growth, life and energy, and even wealth and abundance. Though the color green is not an object in a literal sense, this close association of green with the natural functions as an objective correlate (Rose, 2001), demonstrating the power of repeatedly connecting an object with

an idea. In this case, the color green immediately signifies natural qualities before the consumer ever reads the word natural.

An Irwin Naturals ad for their dietary supplements (Irwin Naturals, 2017) relies heavily on the color green to signify nature; copy, medicine labels, imagery (green grass), and even the company logo are all rendered in shades of green that evoke plant life. Images of plants also appear, denoting the plants themselves but further connoting naturalness: the logo itself depicts two green leaves wet with dew, while the bottles of medicine each have a line of green grass across the top of the label. Within the ad, the bottles sit in a foreground of the same green grass, almost as if they are sprouting and ready for harvest. This connotes nature as a source; while the bottle images denote the product, this arrangement positions them as the product of the earth. A bright drop of water drips from the capsules illustrated on each bottle's label, connoting both freshness and purity. The copy reinforces this connotation, beginning with the company name: Irwin Naturals. Copy from the labels includes "sunny mood," tying improved mood to the vision of a sunny sky, while the "Six-Tea Ancient Energy" boasts a "natural caffeine boost" and "natural energy boost," explicitly signifying its natural qualities. The bottle of Ultimate Omega Oils Flaxseed-Plus also reads "Delivers Beneficial Plant Oils," signifying plants as beneficial and healthy. In terms of semiotics, the Irwin Naturals ad's signs serve the purpose of displaying the product, but they also build an image of medicine-as-home-grown with signs connoting new growth. These connotations, connected with the broader idea of health, create a myth of nature as a source of health and healing, and of nature as beneficial and safe. Here we see a similarity with the Hale's Honey and Dr. Miles ads discussed above, as all three examples seem to use nature as a

signifier for safety and gentleness. Rather than positioning the products as medicine like the patent medicine ads, here the ad presents the supplements as if they were no more than a fruit or vegetable to be picked and eaten for good health.

Organic India's ad for their moringa herbal supplement (Organic India, 2017) also heavily uses the color green and images of plants: the products are superimposed over an entirely green image of a moringa plant, while the company logo features a green plant, another image of moringa leaves. The images of moringa denote the plant itself (the main ingredient of the product) but on the next level of signification they connote nature itself, suggesting that there is something attractive about the idea of fresh green leaves. The labels also show the top of a mountain covered with vegetation, further connoting nature, and perhaps also a wildness that implies purity and the untamed. The name of the company, with its use of the word "organic," connotes naturalness and plant life, while also bringing a connotation of purity, as today Americans recognize "organic" products as being freer from chemicals or toxins (McEvoy, 2016). The header copy touts moringa as "the most nutrient dense plant on earth," not only describing the purported benefits of the supplement, but connoting an association between wholesomeness and plants, and between the supplement and the earth. The word choices in the descriptive copy at the bottom also connote nature and the association between nature, and healing, but healing of the earth rather than healing of the body. It promotes the company's "regenerative agricultural practices" and how they "restore vibrant health to the environment." This subtle association, along with the other signs, ties into a myth of nature as a restorer of vitality and source of life, even evoking modern-day *regenerative medicine*, which seeks to repair and rebuild damaged parts of the body (including stem cell therapy) (Mayo

Clinic, N.D.). Signs signifying the product's wholesomeness for the body work with those signifying the product's wholesomeness for the environment to create an ultimate myth of holistic healthfulness: we care for nature, nature then cares for us, and we are able to care for ourselves.

Examining an ad by New Chapter for four of its supplements (New Chapter, 2017), the images of natural ingredients that are on the product packaging and superimposed beside the products in the ad denote the contents of the supplements—berries and chamomile, coral (for calcium), turmeric leaf, and fish. However, like other ads, it uses the color green, a background image of tender young leaves, and images of natural ingredients (berries, chamomile, coral, herbs, and fish) to connote natural qualities in addition to denoting the product packaging and product ingredients. Once again this suggests that Americans today are interested in naturalness for its own sake, or possibly that nature has become so closely associated with beneficial qualities that it signifying it implies benefits even without detailed explanation or hard persuasion. The word choices “holistic health,” “gentle,” “made with organic Veggies & Herbs,” “Plant-Sourced,” “An Herbal Approach to Pain Relief,” “100% wild,” “*Wildly Pure*TM,” and “Naturally Sourced” all connote naturalness, purity, and healthfulness. The promises here are less explicit and less aggressive than those in the *Hale's Honey of Horehound and Tar* ad, seemingly inviting the consumer to participate in her own healing. The *Bone Strength* product has the line “take care” under the product name, actively calling the consumer to care for her own health, associating health more broadly with care for oneself—i.e., taking care of one's body is part of looking out for one's best interests in general. Viewed through semiotics, this suggests attitudes about health in American

culture have shifted since the patent medicine era: rather than reactionary and symptom-focused care, the focus here positions care for oneself as more preventative and holistic. On another layer of signification, the copy adds an additional element with the line “Inspired by Nature, Validated by Science,” further connoting evidence-based efficacy with science as a general authority. This marriage of nature and science suggests that in American culture today, science and nature are not viewed as being in total opposition, but it is also arguable that invoking science is also meant to lend credibility and answer criticism from skeptics. Unlike the patent medicine era, which saw natural remedies and folk medicine pitted against newer medical discoveries like metallic medicines (Cassedy, 1991), this ad suggests an acceptance of nature and science as complementary. The broader myth is again nature as great healer, with an added element of science as her helper—both of which empower the individual to take care.

The sampled ad for plnt® supplements (plnt®, 2017) contains multiple signs denoting plants and connoting nature and the natural world: the name (which sounds like plant), a photographic cross-section of earth and growing grass forming the bottom border of the ad, a green box with sprouting grass as a holding shape for the word “new” by each product, photographs of herbs and botanicals—including cranberry, holy basil, and mushrooms, among others—on each product’s box. While the ad does feature specific plants, it is arguable that today’s consumers may be less familiar with individual plants and their uses than 19th-century ones (who lived in a period when herbal medicine was more part of everyday life [Anderson, 2000; Young, 1962]); it is possible that this makes the general significations of plants more meaningful than specific ones. The use of plant growth to signify the product and company also calls to mind the Dr. Miles ad,

which, while more literal, had a similar idea. While these denote the product contents, associated with one another the signs connote the quality of being sourced from nature. This suggests that in today's culture, knowing a product comes from a plant is not enough; the message gets closer to the grittiness of nature, literally into the dirt, to convey just *how* natural the supplements are. This indicates that for consumers the degree of naturalness may be meaningful. Perhaps today's consumers feel the influence of the popularity of natural health and wellness of the 1960s and 70s, when previously fringe practices like health foods and herbal medicines found more mainstream success (Cafferty, 2016; Sivulka, 1998; Whorton, 2002). The copy also constitutes signs that both denote the claimed benefits of the qualities while also connoting nature: plnt® “is growing,” providing “earth-friendly herbs, supplements and whole foods” with ingredients “sourced in nature” without “artificial” ingredients. The tagline is “pure living, naturally true®,” a fitting description for the greater myth: nature as pure and true.

The sampled ad for Dr. Ohhira's probiotic dietary supplements (Essential Formulas, 2017) contains signs signifying nature, but with a slightly different approach: evoking farm fresh produce. Like several of the other contemporary ads, this ad depicts an outdoor scene with green grass and a blue sky, a crate of fresh produce on a wooden table along with the promoted products. All connote wholesomeness and freshness along with naturalness—after all, what could be more safe and good for the body than vegetables? This suggests a cultural shift since the 19th and early 20th centuries, creating parity between supplementary care of the body and meeting basic needs—i.e., nourishing the body through probiotics is equivalent to nourishing the body through healthy food. This association indicates that in America today individuals are looking to go beyond

simply surviving (disease and unpleasant symptoms) to thriving (enhancement rather than simple relief). The phrase “whole-food probiotic” in the subhead supports this notion as it connotes the idea of a nutrient-rich product providing everything the body needs to function well. It also echoes the idea of whole-body and holistic medicine which became more prominent in the public consciousness during the 1970s and are increasingly incorporated into lifestyles today (Cafferty, 2016; Whorton, 2002). The idea of *wholeness* in relation to medicine speaks to the idea of treating the body as a system (including the mind and spirit) instead of individual parts (Academy of Integrative Health & Medicine, N.D.; Cafferty, 2016; Whorton, 2002). This broadening of the scope of treatment carries through the probiotic ad: the product doesn’t just relieve a symptom, it aids digestive health, which then improves whole-body health, which then improves the consumer’s whole life. The body copy, an endorsement from a national talk show host and president of the Texas Organic Research Center (presumably consulted as an expert and minor celebrity), talks about the universal need for beneficial bacteria—this connects plants, animals, and humans alike, again suggesting a more holistic view of health. This subtle connection suggests that life and health are interconnected, implying that attitudes about wellness have moved beyond a simple symptom + medicine = cured model. Word choices like “nurtured,” “natural temperature fermentation,” “all-natural, seasonally harvested ingredients,” and “homegrown health” all denote the production process and product qualities while connoting the idea of wholesome, farm-to-table medicine. Through the lens of semiotics, we see signs that denote ingredients and process that build into signs connoting naturalness and wholesomeness, which then connect to the broader

idea of health and wellness to create an overall myth is one of health from nurturing, holistically feeding the body the fresh bounty of nature to provide health.

Finally, Solgar's ad for their Energy Kicks product (Solgar, 2017) takes a simple approach to copy with repetition of the word natural, touting its "natural caffeine energy source," absence of artificial colors, sweeteners, and flavors, "natural mixed berry flavor," "200 mg natural caffeine" from herbal extracts, and the tagline "isn't nature wonderful?" As with the other contemporary ads, this repetition suggests that in today's culture, the word nature itself has become a loaded sign that instantly communicates beneficial qualities to consumers. The visuals take the connotations of nature further, with the bottle of the product photographically depicted against the illustrated backdrop of an island in the sea, complete with a mountain and green rolling hills and white clouds as holding shapes for copy. This visual suggests that Americans have a conception of what it means to be "natural"—i.e., clean, pure, and far away from any urban setting. However, the influence of humans isn't completely absent; a set of wind energy turbines are also shown on the island, and a fourth spinning turbine, this one with leaves for blades, emerges from the product bottle. While the color green is present in the ad, the turbines can also be seen as conceptually green—i.e., signifying the movement for ecological responsibility. These signify energy in a technical way as wind turbines create energy to power modern life, but also signify bodily energy, connected to the product's purpose (an energy supplement). Another contrast can be drawn between the energy presented in this ad—*clean* wind energy—and older sources of energy, such as oil. This shift from old oil energy to new clean energy subtly calls to mind a shift from old alternative medicine or *snake oil* and new alternative medicine, presented here as clean

and wholesome. This marriage of nature and technology echoes the idea present in the New Chapter ad, indicating a particular modern value: nature and science can work together for the benefit of health (in this case, both health of the body and health of the planet). Here there is a connection between the natural product, human vitality, and the green movement, indicating that all three are important in today's culture. While an image of a bottle denotes the product, placing it within a scene created by signs denoting nature signifies a kind of synergistic relationship between nature, technology, and health. Further associated with health and wellness in general, the overall myth tells a story of not only natural medicine but taking care of the earth as well as the body as the two are subtly linked.

Power

Another theme that emerged through examining the sample was that of power. In the ads studied, signs communicated ideas about both the power of the medicine (i.e., product efficacy) but also personal power, such as the power to fight disease in general, or the power of the individual to influence her own health (personal agency over health). The way these ads signify power demonstrates how the prevailing cultures view health: here disease and/or poor health can be an external foe to be fought, a mysterious force, or a roadblock on the path to optimal health and self-actualization through favorite activities. These significations, differing between the two eras examined, are categorized into to sub-themes. While the 19th and 20th century ads frequently relied on signs signifying physical violence and literal battle, as well as magic and the supernatural, contemporary ads conveying power relied more on signs signifying the accomplishment of daily tasks and athletic goals: tackling life head-on. This signals a shift not only in the

way Americans conceptualize disease and/or non-optimal health—changing from a disease-as-external-foe to disease-as-internal-obstacle—but a change in cultural values and desires from conquering suffering (and survival) to optimizing the body for the purpose of *doing* more with one's life.

Patent Medicine Advertisements: Battle, Magic, and the Supernatural

While battle, magic, and the supernatural were tied together more than once in the patent medicine ads, some texts promoting patent medicines employed signs signifying magic on its own, without violence. One text advertising *Sybilline Leaves* (Florence & Fanny, ca. 1852) connotes magic and superstition with the product name itself: *Sybilline*, referencing sibyls, or prophetic oracles of ancient Greece and Greek myth. This reference subtly connects the medicine to the idea of calling on a higher power, suggesting an attitude that matters of health require external aid—from powers mere mortals do not possess. It may also signify that those who use the medicine have a healthy future ahead of them—a favorable prediction. The image is an illustration of such a sibyl: a young woman with long, loose hair and a flower crown, dressed in an ornate gown and pants in a 19th century orientalist style. To the right is a ceremonial fire burning in a container decorated with gargoyles, griffins, or some other kind of eagle-headed creature; from the fire a plume of smoke winds to the left, the head of a person emerging from the smoke to confront the sibyl, who raises her hand to the apparition, wielding a wand. While these signs reinforce the image of healing as powerful (even mystical), enacted from without, they also fit in with the trend of portraying patent medicines as exotic (Anderson, 2000; Sivulka, 1998; Young, 1962). At the oracle's feet are depicted multiple snakes—both the serpents and the smoke connote the myth of the Greek prophetesses, but perhaps also

bring to mind the rod of Asclepius—a rod with a snake, used as a symbol of medicine. Though the text provides no information about the actual medicine, the signs connote mystical power and the power to see (and perhaps to shape) the future. Viewed through semiotics, we see connotative signs signifying mystical foresight and healing working further associated with health, building a myth of medicine as holding sway over health and life, even thwarting fate—this likely ties into a fatalistic attitude about disease, prevalent through the patent medicine era (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988).

Another ad evoking magic advertises for Hamlin's products (*Hamlin's Wizard Oil*, *Hamlin's Cough Basalm*, and *Hamlin's Blood and Liver Pills* [Allen & Havens, ca. 1861-19?]) using verbal signs alone connoting magic as power. The name of one product, *Wizard Oil*, clearly connotes magic, and this signification is supported by other word choices within the copy. As with the *Sybilline Leaves*, this association of magic with medicine suggests a cultural belief that individuals alone didn't have the power to fight disease—they needed a powerful, external force to ward off ill health. Within the copy one product is called “the great medical wonder,” touting not only its pleasantness, but calling it “magical in its effects.” This also suggests that, just as disease was not fully understood (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962), the action of the medicines themselves were not fully understood (in fact there is no explanation of how any of the products work); by promoting the product this way, the advertisers also communicated that average consumer need not understand how the medicine functioned, only that it did (and wonderfully). It seems that without colorful imagery to draw attention, the advertisers turned to colorful language to connote magic, with each sign (constructed of

word choices) building a myth of medicine as magic: powerful, inexplicable, unknowable, and wonderful.

Still other ads from the 19th and early 20th centuries contain signs evoking both myth and battle. One such ad for *Unicorn Drops* (F.W. Thayer, ca. 1853) uses signs constructed of word choices as well as visuals, creating an overall impression of health as a struggle against disease. One striking sign is the name of the medicine, as it evokes a mythical creature culturally tied to purity and immortality (Laszkiewicz, 2014), signifying supernatural power over disease and death. Again, this supports the idea that within American culture at the time, healing was seen as a heroic battle requiring powerful reinforcements. This remains a theme in American medicine as language evoking battle is still used in mainstream medicine (Khullar, 2014). The word “harmless” and the phrase “can be eaten freely” also signify safety, contrasting the aggressive image while suggesting that power wasn’t the only important consideration. The visual signs include a lion—mouth open in a snarl, hair wild—being held down by the triumphant unicorn. The unicorn is shown head-down, holding the lion with one foreleg, about to gore it with its horn. On a connotative level, the lion signifies disease (in this case, coughs, colds, sore throats, etc.) while the unicorn signifies potent medicine, and relief. The violent action of the unicorn (the implied stabbing about to take place) also signifies powerful effectiveness, as the figurative medicine attacks the affliction and kills it. As the ad features no information about the medicine’s ingredients or pharmaceutical action, it relies on this visual metaphor to assure potential customers that it will cure their ills effectively. This creates a myth of supernatural strength fortifying health and providing efficacy against disease. However, it also suggests that, rather than viewing disease and

suffering as completely inevitable, the idea that disease could be effectively fought had entered the American collective consciousness.

Another advertising text for *Irving's Giant Pain Curer* (Walker & Taylor, ca. 1830–1870) also draws upon mythology (this time Greek and Roman myth), featuring an illustration of Hercules defeating a winged multi-headed monster (perhaps the Hydra specifically) with a club. Here the combination of myth, battle, and medicine again conveys a message of disease-as-conquerable, communicating the message that in the patent medicine era, advertisers and health practitioners conceptualized the “fight” against disease as a battle for many Americans. This is a theme that continues today in mainstream medicine, especially in the way we talk about serious diseases like cancer (Khullar, 2014). Hercules, clad only in a lion skin, holds his club aloft as he prepares to swing and deal a crushing blow to the snarling creature. The connotation is one of medicine’s effectiveness in treating disease—in this case, pain—while on the level of myth signifying power over disease and pain itself, a literal depiction of heroic medicine. Understood through semiotics, the denotations of mythical characters are associated with the medicine to connote medical effectiveness, and these signs are further connected with the idea of health and wellness to create a myth of health as a battle—one in which people can be victorious over pain, a longstanding foe of humanity.

In another ad for *Dalley's Magical Pain Extractor* (J. Wright & Co., ca. 1860), the choice of the word “magical” for the medicine’s name again signifies effectiveness and supernatural power. It also alludes to the fact that, at the time, both pain and medicines’ effects on the body were little understood (Estes, 1988; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962); therefore, any medicine that proved to be effective might appear to do so as if by

magic. The phrase “pain extractor” calls to mind a surgeon or dentist plucking out an offending tooth, signifying an abrupt and total end to pain caused by disease. “Extractor” itself carries connotations of pain as a foreign invader needing to be “removed” from the body; this suggests a view of disease as an external force acting on the body rather than arising from within. On its face, the text below the image reading “Molly Pitcher, the heroine of Monmouth, avenging her husband’s death” signifies a historical account of a real-life event. Calling out this event also signifies effectiveness by evoking the idea of “heroic” doctors (in this case, the patent medicine’s creators) fighting the “battle” against disease; Molly is a “heroine,” bravely “avenging” the death of her husband. This idea of the fight against disease as a literal battle is reinforced by the visual signs of the ad, which features Molly Pitcher in front of soldiers, mid-battle, preparing to fire a cannon. A soldier lays on the ground in visible agony, signifying the pain that the medicine is meant to alleviate. Pitcher is taking an active role in the fight, signifying the effective action of the medicine, and the take-charge, do-it-yourself attitude often associated with patent medicines and their use (Estes, 1988; Torbenson and Erlen, 2003). Again, the audience is given no information about the medicine’s ingredients or action on the body; the active, sensational scene signifies the medicine’s action on the whole, and is the main persuading force of the ad. The broader myth is one of disease as a foe to be attacked.

An ad for *Wolcott’s Instant Pain Annihilator* (Royal L. Wolcott, ca. 1867) is also rich in verbal and visual signs. The choice of “annihilator” for the name signifies effectiveness as it evokes a complete, violent elimination of pain; the word “instant” similarly signifies swift effectiveness. The names of the ailments the medicine proposes to treat (“headache,” “weak nerves,” “consumption,” “burns and scalds,” “catarrh,”

“neuralgia,” and “toothaches”) are written around the ad, suggesting that Americans of the day would be familiar with any of those conditions on a regular basis. The most striking signifiers in the ad are the multitude of demons signifying pain from the specific afflictions named: one stabbing a man with a lightning bolt, two poking another man’s inflamed mouth, one beating a headache sufferer over the head with a club, one using a corkscrew on a man’s head, another (accompanied by a demon) leading a pale, sickly man toward his demise, multiple tiny demons hanging upon a man’s head, a group of demon’s tormenting a man in bed, a red demon afflicting a man with fire, and a final demon in the center, signifying pain in general. The central demon is armed, ugly and grimacing, crouching above a fiery crevasse filled with even more demonic tormenters. This personification of illness as supernatural tormentors again suggests an externally-focused view of disease; here sufferers are tortured from without. This demon of pain is held at bay by a classically dressed woman, signifying the medicine, and relief; she holds a bottle of medicine in one hand, her other hand outstretched, as she looks down on the demon firmly and defiantly, signifying the full ability of the medicine to arrest pain. The interaction of these two figures is challenging, and combat-like, once again signifying the “fight” against disease. Two external forces, medicine and disease, square off in the battlefield of the human body. This also echoes Biblical themes of the struggle of good and evil and even demonic oppression; in 19th-century America religion (chiefly Christianity) was not only a significant part of mainstream culture, it was much more integral to health care (Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). The idea of literally fighting demons was therefore arguably much more familiar to consumers at the time, explaining the use of such signs. Above the scene, a rainbow bearing the medicine’s name signifies a near-

mythical relief from pain, perhaps even evoking the Biblical connotation of the rainbow as a sign of troubles being over (as with the Biblical narrative of Noah's flood). The bottle of medicine also appears elsewhere in the ad; a man, previously covered with demons, holds it joyously as the demons retreat, signifying the medicine's power. Two men are also depicted seated with a bottle, a group of revelers enjoying themselves behind them; this signifies the medicine's connection to a joyous, pain-free life. With no explanation of how the medicine works, the visual metaphor of demons-as-disease signifies the unpleasantness of pain as well as the mystery surrounding the exact medical cause of such pain. These signs build upon and continue a myth of disease as an unknown, outside force requiring outside help to be combatted.

The 1872 ad for *Hunt's Remedy* (William E. Clarke, ca. 1872-81) offers the phrase "never known to fail" and the word "cures" as overt signifiers signifying effectiveness; the inclusion of this phrasing suggests that consumers at the time were used to products that *did* fail (thus the need for hyperbolic assurances of effectiveness). The word "remedy," also signifies a cure and a resolution to medical problems. The visual signs of the main illustration depict a skeleton and a man in a physical altercation, speaking to the grim realities of life in the patent medicine era, when Americans' everyday lives were frequently touched by suffering and death just as death is physically touching the man in the image (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). Here the skeleton signifies death; his scythe (perhaps evoking the grim reaper) and hourglass (signifying that the man's time has run out) lie behind the pair. The skeleton grips the man, but is shown being bested by him (and the medicine), signifying that death can be overcome. The man is beating the skeleton with a bottle of Hunt's Remedy, signifying

victory over disease and again evoking the image of medical practice as a “fight” against death and disease. The man looks death in the eyes, triumphant, ready to deal the final blow; here, the aggressive imagery is overt as the man literally beats death over the head with the bottle of medicine. This seems like a personification of the idea of heroic medicine: an extreme and aggressive act of healing. As with other ads, there is no explanation for how the medicine works, only a powerful image signifying assured victory over medical troubles and death—as long as the right medicine is taken. The signs signifying aggressive action, associated with health and healing, construct a myth communicating that death and disease, prowling for all, can be thwarted through decisive action. This is not a passive act of healing or watching and waiting; the signs here suggest that an attitude of increased medical agency—i.e., being able to do something about disease—had come into American culture at the time.

While these significations demonstrate that Americans might have begun to believe disease was not totally inevitable, the messages seem to be less about personal agency than those of the contemporary ads. As medicine and disease are both repeatedly portrayed and personified as external agents, the sufferer is more passive—the scene of the battle, rather than the hero. This suggests that while Americans’ attitudes about medicine may have been shifting (toward seeing them as effective, and toward seeing disease as something conquerable or at least treatable) the idea of the individual taking a highly proactive role may be more of a modern concept.

Dietary Supplement Advertisements: Tackling Life

By contrast, the contemporary ads connote power through signs signifying the tackling of life’s challenges, from meeting life’s everyday demands to accomplishing life

and athletic goals. Instead of magical power and outright violence, the action of the contemporary ads is living life to the fullest and higher bodily performance: not beating disease and death, but optimizing health. Put another way, the emphasis moves from having “power over” disease to being personally empowered to change one’s own body for the better. The messages here seem to be more individualistic, focusing not only on the disease or symptoms to be treated but the personal desires and goals of the consumer. Here we can see that the ads are not simply trying to persuade that something can be done about health issues—that seems to be a foregone conclusion—rather, their persuasion is aimed at convincing consumers their (already good) lives can be *even better*. This contrasts with the ad technique of attempting to persuade consumers that their lives are actually terrible and/or they personally need to be fixed; more common in the early 20th century, advertisers have a history of creating a problem and then proposing a product as the consumer’s solution (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). This emphasis on improving something good rather than fixing something broken suggests a change in values for Americans and speaks to the improvement of health over the last century. Additionally, the lack of supernatural references and emphasis on science in the contemporary ads also suggests that American culture sees humanity as dominant over the supernatural, flipping the narrative present in the patent medicine ads.

While the supernatural did not appear frequently in the contemporary ads, one ad did include signs with supernatural connotations. The advertisement for *Syntol AMD* (Arthur Andrew Medical, 2017) features an illustration of a fanned line of tarot cards at the top, a nod to supernatural powers as they are used to predict the future. This is supported in the ad’s subhead: “don’t leave feeling better to the cards” (suggesting that

Tarot cards are not powerful or reliable enough to predict a path to wellness, and that personal action over health is preferable to leaving it to chance) connoting the idea of fate and presenting the supplement as a solution to the vagaries of life that drag down health: “Brain fog. Fatigue. General malaise.” Unlike the patent medicine era ads, the supernatural element isn’t lending its power to the product’s ability to resolve symptoms; instead, we see the supernatural reduced to a visual metaphor for being able to think clearly, and for being able to act proactively to obtain better health. These signs put the impetus for action squarely onto the shoulders of the consumer, suggesting that consumers today readily accept the idea that they can improve their own mental clarity and energy—the ad presents a world that is controllable, with humanity having mastered issues of personal health. Examined through semiotics, signs denoting the product’s benefits build signs connoting personal agency and foresight. The detox product is presented as a means to take fate into one’s hands, invoking a higher power and building a myth of channeling the powers afforded by modern medicine to improve health.

Another ad (North American Herb & Spice, 2017) for products containing wild chaga—a fungus traditionally used in herbal medicine in Northern Europe and Russia (Wold et al., 2018)—transitions from purely invoking the supernatural to supporting life’s demands and accomplishing athletic feats. Overall, the signs in the ad signal a cultural shift from a focus on relief of symptoms to lifestyle improvement, suggesting that the ability to do desired activities (here, physical pursuits) has become an important value for Americans today. Though the copy proclaims the herb is a “Gift from God,” signifying a higher power, power is also communicated through phrases including “King of all herbs,” “most powerful adaptogen known,” “preferred superfood for everyday

needs . . .” “increase daily strength and energy,” and the repeated use of the word “superfood.” Rather than invoking external supernatural power, these signs communicate that the product’s qualities imbue it with power. While the divine is invoked, the ad also subtly suggests that humanity has found the tools (i.e., the supplement) to become powerful without the supernatural: a more humanist connotation that hints at people supplanting God. The copy also recounts the story of a man named Fred Hatfield who purportedly took wild chaga and broke the world record for power lifting. The illustration in the ad, a stereotypical strong man—muscular, bald, with a waxed mustache—lifts a barbell high above his head as he stands on a raised platform cheered on by a crowd. The connotations are effortless accomplishment and great physical strength, and their celebration. According to the ad’s copy, “His [Hatfield’s] secret was wild chaga, which gave him unimaginable strength. It can give you strength too, for whatever you need.” This also connotes great physical strength and energy: the supplements not only make the body strong and energetic, but strong and energetic enough to take on life’s challenges. Additionally, the signs connote individualism and personal agency; like all the ads sampled from both eras the message is to the individual, but the focus is on the consumer’s life and everyday activities. The focus is not on healing a particular disease, but on granting additional abilities; this suggests that today consumers of dietary supplements are also interested in life improvement (the ability to *do* more) in addition to life sustainment (simply the ability to keep living, or relief from symptoms). The signs denoting the products (product visuals) combined with those denoting a strong man create signs connoting strength and ability. Linked with the general ideas of power and health the broader myth here is that modern life requires strength and energy, and good

health grants the power to meet those demands; with a finely-tuned body, an individual can be the hero of her own life story.

Similar in message but striking in its simplicity is an ad for Olly's *Daily Energy* supplement (Olly, 2017). With visuals rendered in a color palette of bright greens, a young woman leaps over a half circle shape (taken from the company's logo), hair streaming behind her, right arm bent up in a bicep flex. While the denotation is a woman jumping high, the connotation is that she has the energy to fly through her day, tackling any task. Again, the emphasis is not directly on her symptoms, but her ability to perform—being able to *do* more is just as important (if not more important) than feeling better. The bright green colors connote life and energy (as well as nature), and though the woman wears a skirt, she is wearing sneakers and tube socks, connoting energy, activity, and athleticism. The tagline “solve your energy crisis” reinforces the connotation of high energy, but also speaks to getting through life with the word “solve” while also giving a subtle nod to the oil shortages of the 1970s. The implication that life is a series of hurdles to jump, and this supplement provides the energy and good health needed to get over them. These signs position the individual as very active in improving her own health, which contrasts to the more passive significations of the patent medicine ads (which seem to be more about the medicine doing something than people doing something). The myth here is that with enough energy and good health life is easy, and everything is possible. Health not only enables life, it makes life easy and allows for increased control.

Another ad for Solgar®'s *No. 7* (Solgar, 2017, November) uses signs of power that present the body as a finely-tuned machine requiring nurturing, care, and power to accomplish an athletic goal (in this case, running). On the left page of the two-page

spread, a younger woman dressed in athletic clothing stretches at the left side of the ad, the sun (either rising or setting) creates a glow over her shoulder as she gazes to the right, past the copy. Beyond the obvious athletic connotations, the woman's placid and optimistic expression, the glow of the sun, and the golden tones of the image all connote vitality and energy while presenting her as on the cusp of greatness, getting ready to tackle a challenge head-on. Though the ad deals with running, the model is in a gentle stretch on the ground, signifying more gentle care as well as flexibility and relaxed strength. On the right page, a photograph depicts a pair of well-worn running shoes, connoting an active and productive athletic life. This signals that the most important effect of the supplement is the ability to perform, contrasting to the patent medicine ads that focused on relief unpleasant symptoms. Again, this suggests that Americans today want more than relief; they likely have a vision for their lives and it includes activities they want to accomplish. More signs connoting power, athletic prowess, and care for the body are sprinkled throughout the copy: "rev up your recovery" connotes the body as an engine; the supplement is meant to "power your run," again focusing on providing internal power to fuel goal accomplishment rather than simply provide relief. The ad's advice suggests that consumers "love your joints and muscles" while promoting the supplement as improving "joint comfort"—taking the supplement is presented as self-care, nurturing the body and making daily activities more comfortable. Through the lens of semiotics, we see that the signs denoting activity (running) and the product are further connected to health and self-care to create another level of signs connoting health as a way to a better life, one where desired activities can be easily accomplished. On the level of myth, we see health equated with optimizing the body, and with overcoming the

body's natural limitations from everyday wear and tear; additionally we see a message of humanity mastering nature, with people able to go anywhere they please, no matter how challenging the terrain. The myth hints that there need not be any limits to what people can do with their bodies: with supplements like this one, people can prevail over discomfort that holds them back from doing what they want to do. This kind of next-level promise distinguishes the contemporary ads from the patent medicine era ones, demonstrating the increasing cultural importance of individualistic pursuits.

An ad for *OsteoMove* (Natural Factors, 2017) again associates health with taking on a physical challenge, reinforcing the idea that for Americans today good health is more than just relief or the absence of suffering, it also includes an improved lifestyle. The main image is a photograph depicting a young woman crouching at left, dressed in athletic clothing and wearing a backpack, signifying she is on a longer journey while denoting her athletic activity. She's overlooking rolling hills in the distance, photographed from behind, with the camera in an almost over-the-shoulder point of view. While these further denote her identity as a hiker and the activity she's engaging in (hiking), on a deeper level the signs also connote readiness to take on a challenge: the hiker is surveying the hills that she has either already climbed up or plans to scale. She is not just feeling good, but feeling *so* good that she can take on her goals; this reinforces the idea that for Americans today it is not just important to feel good, but to be able to live the life they desire—an idea found throughout the contemporary ads sampled. The sky is golden and pink, connoting vibrant health and even optimism with its pastel brightness. “Stay active,” the line at the top proclaims, putting the impetus on the consumer and granting them the personal agency to take control of their own health while

also targeting consumers worried about declining abilities (such as those who are older). Through semiotics we find that while on a denotative level we have a message about a hiker hiking, this message is further associated with signs signifying health, personal agency, and goal accomplishment to connote self-actualization through supplementation. These signs build a myth around thwarting the hindrances of imperfect health: with supplements, it is possible to not only do what you *need* to do, but what you *want* to do. Unlike the patent medicine ads, disease is presented not as an external force to be fought, but an internal hurdle to be overcome in order to do more. Thus, the ad speaks to a cultural undercurrent that says health for its own sake may not be enough—to entice the consumer, these supplements promise the ability to live life more fully.

Another ad for Ridgecrest Herbals' *Adrenal Fatigue Fighter* and *PhysiQOL Natural Pain Relief* (Ridgecrest Herbals, 2017) also employs simple but powerful signs to connote power through physical accomplishment, continuing the theme of power as “the power to do more” and further demonstrating the contrast between the externally-focused, battle-oriented signs of the patent medicine ads and the internally-focused, goal-oriented signs of the contemporary ads. However, in its name, *Adrenal Fatigue Fighter* does hearken back to the health-as-battle ethos of the patent medicine era, though the visual signs frame that battle as accomplishment-related and not a literal battle (as the patent medicine ads did). The background image is a photograph bathed in golden light, showing a silhouetted man leaping from cliff to cliff against a backdrop of rocky mountains. While hyperbolic, this sign signifies the ability to accomplish great things, translating to a promise of physical ability for consumers while suggesting that such accomplishment is the most important thing for prospective customers. A photograph of a

bottle of *Adrenal Fatigue Fighter* is on the left beneath the cliff the jumper has leapt from, while a photo of the *PhysiQOL Natural Pain Relief* is on the right under the cliff he is leaping to. On the left are the words “get there,” on the right, “and back,” tying into the products’ purposes: one is meant to fight fatigue (and thus gives energy for activities), while the other is for relieving pain (which may result from those activities). Building on the denotations of the man jumping and the product bottles, the connotation is that the medicine not only allows consumers to do what they want, but to also avoid the negative consequences of what they do. Again, the emphasis is on being able to do as one pleases without negative effects, further exhibiting the individualistic current running through many of the contemporary ads. Connecting the connotations of physical ability to health, here the broader myth is that the power of health is in both action and overcoming natural hurdles that stand in the way.

Finally, an ad for the pre-workout supplement *Pre W.O.* (Dymatize, 2017) contains the most aggressive and battle-like signs of the contemporary ads, but it still focuses on internal ability rather than fighting an external force. The main image is in black and white, save for a red-tinted highlight across the left-side planes of a female model’s face and body. This pop of red connotes aggression, perhaps even blood, further signifying the scene as a battle. But here the battle is not with disease—it is with the body and its natural limitations that inhibit meeting a personal goal. The woman is young, muscular, and fit, dressed in workout clothes and holding athletic equipment (perhaps jump rope handles). Her body is tensed and in motion, her expression aggressive: furrowed brows and face in a near-snarl, her mouth open in a yell. She is powerful, focused, and looking not at the camera, but above it: her mind is on her own goals. While

on a denotative level we see a woman working out, associated with the ideas of health as a battle, on a connotative level this further signifies the action as an individualistic pursuit; she is self-motivated and doing what *she* wants. Even the word choices have an aggressive connotation: “crush every goal” signifies not just completion, but absolute mastery and overpowering, while the word goal reinforces the idea that she wants something specific out of life. The copy doesn’t just promise successful workouts, but “super-intense, explosive workouts,” tying in the element of power that connects effectiveness to more than just the supplement’s action; the medicine is effective because *the woman’s body* has become more effective (and explosively so). The myth these denotative and connotative signs build is one of health as a battle not against sickness, but a battle against the body’s physical limits. Again, health is not simple healing (relief from suffering), but bodily optimization (and extreme fitness) that allows individuals to meet their own goals and live life how *they* want to live it.

The Good Life

The third broad theme uncovered during my analysis had to do with what constitutes an ideal life, or “the good life.” Three sub-themes within this vein were beauty, family and relationships, and relief from stress—all three appeared as answers to the broader question, “what makes life good?” Their signs connect health with each vision of the good life; across both eras beauty and family and relationships are the reward of health, while the contemporary era offers an additional benefit: a life free from stress. While there were notable similarities between the two eras (physical beauty and good relationships seem to be fairly straightforward values that have appealed to Americans across time) a key difference is that the contemporary ads added an active

element. Not just beauty, but a beauty that *does* (i.e., allows the individual to look good while performing all their other life activities); not just good relationships, but relationships that facilitate enjoyment in the context of activities. This carries through an idea seen in the other contemporary ads examined previously: an idea that Americans today expect lifestyle benefits that aid in self-fulfillment through activities. This provides insight into what American culture values today, and how health relates to that.

Beauty

Across both time periods physical beauty is signified as a reward of health. And, across both eras, the message of beauty is gendered; all but one of the ads sampled exclusively depicted women. It seems that both then and now, women are expected to value physical appearance more than men. However, while an improved appearance is presented as a benefit in the ads of both eras, the contemporary ads marry this benefit with general lifestyle improvement and the ability to “have it all,” signifying a shift in values from beauty-for-its-own-sake to beauty as a tool for and benefit of an improved life in general.

Patent medicine advertisements

As a first example, an ad for *Cuticura* the patent medicines (Potter Drug and Chemical Corporation, ca. 1865-90s) has straightforward signs signifying healing and improved appearance. The ad is printed in black and white, but a simple line illustration depicts a young woman in profile; her skin is clear, her features are fine according to the beauty standards of the day, and her hair is thick and neatly arranged. On the first level of signification these denote the purported benefit of the product: clear skin and a clear scalp. However, on the second level, as this sign is connected with the messages of the

copy it connotes that health brings not only relief from skin ailments but physical beauty and wholeness. The ad copy uses words emphasizing the negative emotional and visual effects of the “skin, scalp, & blood disease” *Cuticura* is supposed to cure. Such illnesses can be “torturing, disfiguring, humiliating,” as well as “distressing,” while the medicine *Cuticura* serves as a “skin purifier and beautifier” while *Cuticura Resolvent* is a “blood and skin purifier.” This demonstrates a significant difference between the way beauty is signified in both eras; the patent medicine era shows an emphasis on the negative symptoms—the disfiguring diseases—while the current era emphasizes idealized beauty alone. This suggests that the advances in health and hygiene enjoyed by Americans today have turned a beautiful appearance into more of a need instead of just a want (or a side-effect of cured disease). As seen in the ads signifying power, it seems that today dietary supplements are marketed more for optimization (i.e., making the good even better) than for alleviating bothersome symptoms (as the ad for *Cuticura* does). These visual and verbal signs also connect health with purity and beauty, perhaps tapping into beliefs about morality and physical health prevalent in the patent medicine era (Tesh, 1988). While on one level we see literal promises about what the medicines are supposed to do, on the next we find subtler promises of improved personal qualities like attractiveness and purity; tied back to the idea of healing, these signs build a myth that internal physical perfection is linked to outward physical perfection, and that this (not just better health) is the ultimate goal.

Another ad for *Scott’s Emulsion* (Scott & Bowe, ca. 1892) includes an illustration of not one face, but the faces of three young girls in succession. As the copy contains a story of a little girl brought back to health by the medicine, this is likely using the three

images to represent her progression from sickness with consumption to health, as the faces become more rounded, the skin darker, and the expression happier from left to right (though the illustration style as well as the reproduction of the image make it difficult to tell for certain if it is the same girl). The copy promises “a quick return to rosy health,” connoting not only victory over consumption, but an improved appearance that comes with health. This second-level signification connects healing to physical beauty (a secondary benefit) rather than relief from symptoms and freedom from fear of death. A line in the body copy reads that the girl in the story began “to look so plump and rosy, as though she had never been ill.” In this ad beauty signifies the erasure of disease and suffering, indicating that this was a significant struggle in America at the time (as supported by Cassedy [1991], Tesh [1988], and Young [1962]). The connotation is again that a blooming appearance is connected to health: the myth of youth, and vibrancy, and beauty with health. In this ad, to be beautiful is to be free from the shadow of consumption, again recognized as young and vital.

The simplest of the patent medicine ads trading in messages about beauty is one for *Peruna* (Peruna Drug Mfg. Co., ca. 1880-1910), with only an illustration and two pieces of copy: “Pe-ru-na,” and “brings health and beauty.” The copy’s signification is clear: Peruna’s healing powers bring not only health, but beauty. The image is a stylized bust of a young woman with the features considered attractive for the day: rounded cheeks, small mouth and nose, large eyes, and pale skin. Her hair is thick and upswept in a loose Gibson Girl style. This denotes the woman herself (a specific type of woman), who might represent the kind of woman the consumer would like to be; however, on a second level of signification, she may be seen as health and beauty personified. Vines of

roses frame her face at left and right, signifying softness beauty in general, but also carrying connotations of youth and even purity. Again, in the 19th-century language of flowers, roses could symbolize beauty and a fresh and lovely complexion (Greenaway, 1978). By associating these signs with the broader concept of health and healing, a myth is built on this physical ideal: the literal bloom of youth and beauty is brought through health. While Sivulka (1998) argues that sex wasn't an overt part of American advertising until the 1920s, this ad supports her observation that even through the 1800s American advertisers used attractive women (first their heads and shoulders alone, and later their whole bodies) to sell products. Notably, the woman is idealized for her appearance alone—unlike the contemporary ads, there is nothing else to indicate her personal qualities other than her pretty face and smile. This suggests that at the time, beauty for its own sake was enticing enough to American consumers (particularly women), or at least that advertisers felt a woman who had beauty needed little else to be happy about her life—arguably connected to the role of women at the time, which was limited to the home sphere and to improving the lives of her husband and family (Sivulka, 1998).

Another ad, this time for *Cascarets* (Sterling Remedy Co., ca. 1890s), promises “health and beauty,” while also portraying the more intangible benefits of that beauty. The copy offers “pure blood, clean complexion, sweet breath,” describing the tangible benefits of the medicine while also connoting purity and beauty, signifying those as common desires and values within American culture at the time. The tagline at the top proclaims the product as “Cupid’s friend,” signifying that the medicine can be an aid to relationships—particularly romantic love. This connotation is borne out in the ad’s illustration: a young man and woman are in a hammock. The man sits up, looking down

lovingly at the woman, who reclines in his arms and looks up at him adoringly. The connotation here is that the medicine offers health, that health makes the body more pleasant and beautiful, and that a pleasant and beautiful body is more attractive and likely to enjoy a good relationship. While this message is more similar to those of the contemporary ads (going beyond beauty for its own sake to promise an improved life), it is also more passive; the beauty offered by the product is to attract someone else (therefore bringing pleasure) rather than to please the product user. While the consumer is called upon to do something about his health (and therefore his relationship status), the promise of benefit from beauty is more indirect, suggesting that while beauty for its own sake was valued at the time, advertisers were beginning to realize that consumers wanted more than that. By connecting the denoted scene of a couple in an embrace with the promise of health, the ad constructs a myth of beauty from health by adding a new layer: a healthy and beautiful body is worthier of love. Yet we see that the focus is still external, emphasizing love from without (from another person) instead of love from within (which is signified more in the contemporary ads).

Dietary supplement advertisements

By contrast, the contemporary ads using signs signifying physical beauty link beauty not simply to health, or to relationships, but to personal accomplishment, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. In these ads, we find not only women who are beautiful, but women who derive personal joy from both their beauty and their ability to get what *they* want out of life. This arguably ties into *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, a psychological model widely used today for understanding the different levels of human needs (Pinchère et al., 2015) According to this model, the most fulfilling level of human

needs relate to relate to personal accomplishment or self-actualization: an individual's development of her own personality and identity (Pinchère et al., 2015).

The three contemporary ads studied, like the *Peruna* ad, all have a young, attractive woman's face as the visual focal point. One ad for Reserveage Nutrition's *Beauty R&R* (Reserveage Nutrition, 2017) features a photograph of a woman whose skin is flawless and nearly poreless, her hair and eyebrows perfectly coiffed, her makeup immaculate. Through the lens of semiotics we see this as a simple denotation of the promised result: an improved appearance. The product is supposed to promote good sleep, but also specifically connects good sleep to skin; the package reads: "promotes a restful night's sleep needed for radiant skin." The model's eyes are closed, her expression a gentle smile as if in a pleasant dream—an illustration of a sleep eye mask and closed eyes are superimposed over her face, all connoting pleasant, restful sleep. On a deeper level of signification, these signs associate being well-rested with being healthy, and being well-rested with being beautiful, thereby linking being beautiful with being healthy. The copy reinforces the connection between good sleep and beauty, encouraging consumers to post pictures of their "beautiful morning" to social media. While the patent medicine ads were directed to consumers, there is a new individualistic focus here; consumers are invited to participate, further individualizing the promised benefits (not just beauty, but beauty for *your* life). Instead of just celebrating beauty for beauty's sake, the ad copy also signifies how feeling good (from sleep) and looking good (from improved skin) provides the power to get through the day easily. Here we see how in American culture today beauty that *accomplishes* something (like a personal goal) is more valuable than beauty alone. Throughout the ad signs signify that with this product,

the consumer will not just wake up well rested, they'll be able to “shine” throughout their day. The hashtag “agedefyers” connotes not only an improved appearance, but a thwarting of the natural progression of age—again reinforcing the idea that today the supplement industry may be more concerned with optimization than healing disease. The promise is summarized well in the last line: “Wake up refreshed and ready to sashay through your day.” Again, the myth is that health (from good sleep) beautifies from the inside out, and will make life easier in general.

Another ad for a Reserveage Nutrition product (*Collagen Replenish*) (Reserveage Nutrition, 2017, November–December) also features a young female model with natural-looking makeup and perfectly smooth skin; she touches her cheek with one hand as she smiles and looks above the camera. Like the other Reserveage ad, the visuals denote the product's promise: flawless physical beauty. The copy signifies a message of beauty through health, but again, the deeper connotation goes beyond simple promises of smooth skin with lines like “shine this holiday season” and “shine every day.” Here the signs signify the idea of beauty with purpose—looking good for the holidays and looking good to make every day better. The word shine does signify beauty, it can be interpreted more broadly than that, also connoting vibrancy, success, and standing out from the crowd—all indications that in American culture today individuality and personal success are highly valued. The myth here is based in the connection between being beautiful and being exceptional that positions beauty as more than a physical trait—it is being exceptional and successful all around. This suggests that today the myth of beauty may be even more closely linked to personal identity, tied into what people can do as well as how they look.

The last of the beauty-related ads sampled is one for Olly's *Undeniable Beauty* supplement (Olly, 2017), the name of which overtly denotes beauty. The model wearing minimal (but expertly applied) makeup smiles widely as if she's laughing as she lifts a pair of sunglasses off of her face. While this signifies the promise of an improved physical appearance on a basic level, it also signifies self-satisfaction on a deeper level, connecting that satisfaction to beauty. She is beautiful, but in an approachable, active, and joyful way, connoting an active engagement with life that is unlike the cold and distant beauty of the patent medicine ads (where the facial expressions were demure and the figures were much more static). The copy supports this signification of beauty with a purpose, containing the lines "so much more than a pretty face" and "#eatlifeup," connoting beauty that is more than merely ornamental: this beautiful woman has life to live, and goals to accomplish. Again, this reinforces the importance of self-fulfillment in American culture today, positioning improved health as a means to improved beauty which then allows self-actualization through doing what one wants to do. From a semiotic standpoint basic signs denoting beauty construct connotative signs signifying beauty through better health; these signs—connected more broadly with health and the vision of a life well-lived—tap into the myth of being able to "have it all." Here beauty, health, success, and happiness are all within reach with the right products—a message of personal agency that ties taking control of one's health to taking control of one's life.

Family and Relationships

A sub-theme common to both the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads was that of family and relationships constituting "the good life," the ideal life the consumer is expected to (and told to) desire. In the patent medicine ads, this primarily took the form

of scenes of a family enjoying a life of quiet domestic bliss, although the promise of improved romantic relationships does make an appearance. Here the messages of both eras seem quite straightforward and similar, though there are subtle differences in the way intangible social benefits are signified (as well as similarities). However, it is interesting to note that the relational theme seemed more common among the patent medicine era ads; this suggests that while Americans today certainly still value relationships, Americans of the patent medicine era may have valued them above other possible benefits.

Patent medicine advertisements

An ad for *Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup* (Curtis & Perkins, ca. 1886) relies on the straightforward sign of a young mother cradling her baby, denoting the purpose of the product: a calm and happy child. Rendered in an illustration, the mother reclines with her cherubic infant in a pastoral scene, looking lovingly at her baby as she holds the medicine aloft. The baby reaches for the medicine as she looks at her mother, her attitude docile and contented. On a deeper level, these signs signify a loving and nurturing relationship between mother and child—a more intangible benefit. Unlike the contemporary ads explored later, the relationship itself seems to be the primary reward signified in this ad (rather than being able to participate in an activity). This suggests that for mothers in the era, a pacified baby relieved of suffering was the main goal while reinforcing the idea that it was the mother's responsibility (not the father's) to ensure that children were healthy and well-behaved. Signs denoting relief from crankiness build into signs connoting a strong and happy bond between mother and child, creating a myth of medical care as strengthening familial bonds—the act of caring itself (not just the medicine) is

signified as resulting in a rewarding relationship. Caring for health becomes an act of love, and giving medicine becomes a means for improving a relationship (while also soothing a cranky child).

Three other ads sampled also feature scenes of domestic family bliss. An ad for *Dr. Wieland's Celebrated Sugar Worm Lozenges* (C.F. Wieland, ca. 1856) presents an ink illustration of the interior of a Victorian home. Two women, one presumably a mother, sit on a sofa and rocking chair among five young children: two playing calmly on the floor, one holding the arm of the woman on the sofa, one (an infant or toddler) amusing herself in the arms of the woman in the rocking chair, and one reaching for a box of the lozenges advertised (casually left on a table in the center of the room). On a basic level of signification, these signs denote the desired result: a calm home with healthy and happy family members. But on a deeper level, the scene also signifies an intangible sense of home and familial love: togetherness, nurturing, and care. The expressions of both the children and the women are placid and calm, connoting both freedom from suffering and enjoyment of their time together. The room is comfortable and well-ordered, again connoting well-being and pleasantness that echoes the Victorian-era ideal of the placid home as the ideal sphere for women and the working world as the sphere for men (as a father is notably absent) (Sivulka, 1998). Not only is every furnishing in its proper place, but every *person* is in her proper place. This suggests that at the time order and calm were the most valued qualities of a familial relationship, contrasting with the active pursuits of the contemporary ads. In a panel above, a secondary illustration implies the manufacture of the product: a line of women working at a table, overseen by a gentleman in a top hat (perhaps women working with raw materials

for the medicine); an African American raising a hammer to crates at center (perhaps opening the shipped materials, or packaging the final product); and a man among laboratory equipment—distillation equipment, scales, glassware, a pestle and mortar, and a tube—either stirs a large pot or uses a large pestle and mortar. Paired with the central image it connotes a kind of farm-to-table myth: medicine from raw materials to the happy family it brings. This taps into the myth of medicine as a preventer of domestic troubles, built upon the denotations of a happy family and honest production process and connotations of happiness through health and nurturing.

Another ad for *Williams' New England Cough Remedy* (Williams & Carleton, ca. 1890s) also uses an illustration of a family to signify a relationship between good health and a happy family. A mother and father in middle class Victorian dress sit at a table with their four children. As the father reclines in an arm chair, smoking a cigar as he gazes upon his wife and children, the mother feeds the baby in her lap the cough remedy. The three other children approach the mother, arms outstretched for the remedy. Like the Wieland's ad, the family scene denotes the desired outcome of the product: a healthy family. The expressions of the family are all smiles, signifying the connotation that this medicine will make everything right, even bringing joy. Copy in the corner calls it "the great family medicine," driving home the connection between healing and family through second-level signification of family happiness through health. This builds a myth that health and healing leads to a happy family, and a happy life (here positioned as fulfilling for patent medicine era-lives), tapping into the Victorian culture which highly valued the traditional, including the nuclear family and a sentimental view of home life (Sivulka, 1998).

One ad for *Barker's Liniment* (Barker, Moore & Mein Medicine Co., ca. 1859-90) takes relationships out of the home with a color illustration of a family riding on a buggy, embarking on a country drive. While this speaks to the family ideal seen in the previous ads, it also has a visual note similar to the contemporary ads in that the family is shown enjoying themselves through a shared activity. This suggests that by the time this ad was created (the style of dress indicates it was created closer to the turn of the century) leisure was being incorporated into the cultural concept of "the good life." A fatherly figure drives the buggy, smiling, a young man (perhaps his son) riding beside him, expression placid. Four pretty young ladies ride behind the pair, all in fine dress, two waving handkerchiefs. The overall scene, one of a happy family enjoying a ride on a sunny day, connotes health that brings liveliness and the ability to make the most out of life as a family. While the ad offers no explanation of what the medicine is for, liniment was typically used for pain (Carson, 1961); therefore, the signs can signify that living pain-free allows for enjoyable activities (the buggy ride), also signifying that a life worth living includes participation in such activities. The signs denoting a family enjoying a ride connect with the idea of health (and the product) to connote freedom (to do what one pleases) through health. This, in turn, builds a myth of health as the bringer of joy and life, for individuals and whole families—a message that seems quite contemporary.

Two other ads signify not improved family relationships, but romantic ones. The first, an ad for *Blaud's Iron Pills* (P. Blaud, ca. late 1800s-early 1900s) uses an inked drawing of a couple on a sled. The simple scene of the two enjoying themselves at a fun winter pastime connotes health in that the two couple are healthy enough to enjoy physical activity outdoors (certainly the desired benefit of the product). However, on the

second level of signification the visuals connote togetherness and enjoyment while reinforcing the copy's message of the pills' health benefits. Unlike the ads featuring scenes within the home (which appear to have been printed earlier), this ad uses a fun activity to signify a good relationship and overall life enjoyment (similar to the contemporary ads studied). The next-level connotation here is that improved health allows for consumers to not only feel better but to have a good time getting close with their special someone. Tying back to the idea of health and wellness, this continues the myth that being healthy and active means getting more out life, including making the most of relationships.

The second ad for *No-To-Bac* (Sterling Remedy Co., ca. 1895) is much more overt in its significations of romantic success as a benefit of health (i.e., an indirect benefit of the product). Understood through semiotics, the illustration is of a well-dressed young man and woman in a close embrace, about to kiss, at once denotes the basic product benefit (improved breath because of quitting tobacco) and connotes a promise of romance. On the ground are scattered cigars, a pipe, and tobacco, again signifying how the product has allowed the man to quit tobacco. An illustrated hand acts as an arrow to the discarded tobacco, with copy that reads: “. . . this young man has thrown away his pipe, tobacco and cigars, and has thereby won the love of a stunning girl.” This overtly signifies the connection between the product and finding love—signifying that a romantic relationship is a sought-after reward in life, worth sacrificing another enjoyable habit (smoking). The main tagline also reads “No-to-bac made a man of me,” more subtly signifying that real men are those that attract women, and this product will aid that. Together these signs communicate the value of “being a man” (i.e., being able to win the

love of a woman) in the patent medicine era. As with the ads for *Cascarets* and *Cuticura*, it is up to the consumer to improve his own status (here, his romantic relationship, in the others, physical appearance) via health improvement—but the motivation is external (seeking the love or approval of others) rather than purely self-motivated. The denotative signs signifying a couple embracing connect with the health-related product to construct signs connoting health as a means to have a romantic relationship; further associated with the idea of wellbeing and the ideal life, the connotative signs work together to construct a myth that good health leads to a life improved by successful romantic endeavors.

Dietary supplement advertisements

For the contemporary ads, the signs signifying close relationships as “the good life” were focused on family and friendship, as well as living life to the fullest outside the home. Like the ads for *Barker’s Liniment* and *Blaud’s Iron Pills* did, the contemporary ads portray families enjoying themselves during activities, contrasting the patent medicine ads that signified familial harmony through quiet and sentimental home scenes. This suggests that today American culture values active family time over passive familial harmony—perhaps today “the good life” means a life kept busy with enjoyment rather than a life quietly enjoyed.

One ad that connects the good life to good times with family is for Carlson’s probiotics (Carlson Labs, 2017). While the copy emphasizes the good feeling the probiotics will give (along with immune system and digestive benefits), the image is a photograph of a multi-generational family enjoying dinner together on a beautiful day. Understood through semiotics, the copy and visual together denote the basic promise of the product: the probiotic is meant to make eating and digestion easy and comfortable.

But on a deeper level, they also connote that the supplement not only provides a “good gut feeling,” but an overall sense of well-being and the ability to enjoy time with family. Within the visual a grandfather, grandmother, mother, father, and two children smile at one another over their meal on a summer day, bringing together multiple generations. This presents such enjoyable family time as a cultural ideal—something to be desired by today’s consumers. As the family is also eating, it connotes that the ideal life includes sensory pleasures like enjoying meals, especially with loved ones. The message is that true enjoyment is more than a matter of eating successfully and having good digestive health—it includes all aspects of life, including the social. The broader myth here, like the other ads, connects health to an improved life via enjoying family time. With good health, one is free to fully enjoy family relationships.

Another ad for Paradise®’s *ORAC-Energy Greens* (Paradise, 2017) features a main image conveying a message of family fun and togetherness through layers of signs. This ad emphasizes shared family activities and an active lifestyle the life goal to aspire to, again suggesting that today an active life is more culturally aspirational than a calm and staid one (as was shown in the patent medicine ads). In the photo, a father and mother walk with their daughter and their dog through a verdant forest path on a bright day. The parents each hold their daughter’s hands as she swings playfully between them, up in the air. The light is bright and golden, further connoting joy and lightheartedness. On the most basic level, these signs denote the benefit of the product: having enough energy to perform desired activities like taking a walk. However looking deeper, this tableau of family fun in a bright and beautiful natural setting connotes health bringing people together by allowing them to enjoy their favorite activities as a family. The setting

also connects with the product (“energy greens”) to signify nature as a source of healing and good health. The copy adds that the product is “whole food goodness for your whole family!” allowing consumers to “stay in the game,” connoting that the supplement is not just good for individuals, but good for families as a whole. The “stay in the game” copy also connotes that being able to stay active is a vital part of a good family life—that the family that plays together stays together. Through the lens of semiotics, the scene and the copy denote the product purpose (more energy) and are further connected with nature (to connote the natural qualities of the product) and family fun together to connote life enjoyment. On the deepest level, these signs connect to the idea of health as a contributor to overall happiness, creating a myth that connects good health to enjoying life—with enjoyment that comes from a good family life. Portraying family as of high value, contemporary culture echoes that of the patent medicine era, suggesting that some values, like social relationships, may withstand the changes of outside forces like scientific and medical knowledge, standards of living, and consumer behaviors. Such values arguably tap into basic human needs, and this may be why they have endured.

Lastly, an ad for *Kinoko® Gold AHCC®* (Quality of Life, 2017) taps into the myth of power through accomplishment, connecting life satisfaction and health to the ability to accomplish goals (in this case “summer pastimes”). But, it also uses images signifying good relationships as “the good life,” demonstrating how advertisements can use multiple broad themes to promote their products. Inviting consumers to “have the picture-perfect summer,” the ad depicts a series of faux Polaroid photos of people enjoying themselves, signifying sustained energy and physical capabilities (the purpose of the product). At the top is a group of three young women and one young man in

swimsuits jumping off a dock into a lake. This connotes good times with good friends, connecting it to physical health (the ability to run and jump) by associating it with the product and the ad copy. The next image shows an attractive young couple riding bicycles in a sunny pastoral scene. They laugh as they pedal, fit and dressed casually but stylishly. This connects the denotative signs showing physical activity with connotations of positivity and optimism (the happy people, the bright light quality) as well as connotations of life success (their happy relationship, leisure time, and relative affluence). Next, a photo of a mother and father and two children shows them walking along a beach at sunset, signifying relaxed and enjoyable family togetherness in an exotic locale. Beyond the signification of a close family relationship, the vacation scene also has connotations of affluence and comfort, which, associated with the product, subtly communicate that its use may lead to greater life success. Finally, a young man, woman, and child (likely a nuclear family) pose together on a bright summer day, each smiling exuberantly as the little boy rides on the man's back. The woman (stylishly dressed) leans in, her hand on her partner's shoulder, signifying warmth and closeness. The occasion for the photo is unclear but the aspirational activity is simple: having a good time as a family in a beautiful natural setting. The body copy implies that avoiding sickness (by using the supplement) will keep consumers from missing out on life: i.e., being able to enjoy their "favorite summer pastimes" such as those depicted in the photos (swimming, hiking, etc.) The ad urges consumers to "take control of your immune health," connoting that consumers can take health matters into their own hands. This connection between being able to do things and good health suggests a key cultural belief in contemporary America: today poor health (or, more appropriately, non-optimal health) is framed as a barrier to

living life fully. This is arguably a common-sense line of reasoning, but the difference lies in how today's culture—and today's advertisers—define “living fully.” Considering the findings here, that definition is closely tied to activity. This contrasts the message conveyed in many patent medicine ads, which framed poor health in either more serious terms (a barrier to daily functioning or even life itself) or as an inhibitor of social acceptance. Through the signs in this ad, we see a myth communicating that by taking care of oneself and preventing bad health, one can enjoy all the activities and relationships life has to offer.

Stress-Free Living

The final sub-theme of the theme of “the good life” is the portrayal of an ideal life as one without stress. Interestingly, a key difference among the ads sampled was that the concept of stress appeared to be a modern construct; while patent medicine ads contained references to “nervous complaints” and other non-physical symptoms, it was only in the contemporary ads that stress was called out by name and discussed as a condition unto itself. It is important to note that such complaints called out in the patent medicine ads are not exactly synonymous with today's concept of stress; such *nervous diseases* or *nervous complaints* functioned as a kind of catch-all during the 19th century and could stand for multiple conditions ranging from mental illness (including anxiety) to issues of sexual health, and even women's so-called delicate constitutions (Wood, 2007). This seems to be a significant cultural difference between the patent medicine era and today, suggesting that a changing understanding of the relationship between mental and physical health has led to a different understanding of what stress is and the value of its treatment (Cassedy, 1991; NIH, N.D.). It also suggests that today's consumers are more familiar with the

concept of stress as a health-related buzzword, as the contemporary ads using it do so without a detailed explanation of what the complaint is. General use of the word stress to denote hardship began as early as the 1300s, originating from the word “distress” (Stress, 2018, January). According to the American Institute of Stress (What is Stress? N.D.) the current use of “stress” in American language (stress as a condition) didn’t begin until 1936, although the Oxford English Dictionary cites 1942 as the date of the earliest use of stress to mean “an adverse circumstance that disturbs, or is likely to disturb, the normal physiological or psychological functioning of an individual” (Stress, n., 2018, January) Today the NIH describes stress as “how the brain and body respond to any demand [stressor]” with stressors including “exercise, work, school, major life changes, or traumatic events” (NIH, N.D.). This explains some of the differences uncovered during analysis.

The 19th and 20th-century patent medicine ads sampled had no mentions of “stress,” but they did give passing mentions to mental/non-physical ailments that seem related. An ad for M.K. Paine’s *Wild Cherry Tonic* (M.K. Paine, ca. 1858-88) claims the medicine cures “all nervous disorders,” which may signify mental complaints as well as nerve disease (such as pain). Another ad for *Puritana* (Puritana Compound Co., ca. 1890s) proclaims the nostrum is a cure for “starved nerves” and “fagged brain” in addition to a long list of physical diseases, suggesting that while physical illnesses may have been considered more important, non-physical ailments were at least recognized as negatively affecting health. Another ad for the famed *Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound* (Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co., ca. 1880s) also claims the medicine “removes faintness,” “nervous prostration,” “general debility, sleeplessness,” and

“depression” in addition to the “female complaints” listed, further signifying the role of non-physical complaints in general health. Yet another ad for *Iodine Water* (Dr. H. Anders & Co., ca. 1863) from Dr. H. Anders & Co. names “nervous affections” among the typical “derangement of the liver,” “rheumatism,” and “dyspepsia,” suggesting that perhaps its inclusion was a catch-all to entice all potential buyers. Finally, a mail order ad for an unnamed medicine by a Professor Hart of N.Y. (Prof. Hart, ca. 1880s) signifies mental/non-physical illness in a way that seems more contemporary than the others. Addressing the consumer, the ad copy asks “Are you nervous, irritable and gloomy? Do you have evil forebodings?” These conditions sound like the equivalent of modern-day stress, though they are only two symptoms among many others listed, such as dry skin and “thick and stagnant” blood (though this, too may refer to feelings of lethargy or depression). The broader connotation for the signs signifying stress-like complaints in these ads is that mental strain is simply one ailment among many: a product of physical imbalance. This is indicative of medical understanding at the time, which often focused on physical imbalances as the source of all health complaints (Cassedy, 1991; Hechtlinger, 1970; Whorton, 2002; Young, 1962).

By contrast, the contemporary supplement ads sampled offered more overt promises of a calm and stress-free life, perhaps correlated with an increased recognition of stress as a disease condition as well as an increasingly fast pace of life in America. An ad for Natural Vitality’s *Natural Calm* “anti-stress” drink (Natural Vitality, 2017) is ripe with signs signifying relief from life’s stresses. The background image is one of clear blue water rippled with light reflections—the kind found in a swimming pool. A bottle of the product is depicted floating in the water as if it is itself relaxing on vacation. While

the product image denotes what is being sold, on a deeper level of signification, showing it in this setting also connotes calm and relaxation. The word “calm” is in the product name, and is prominently featured in large, bold, capital letters on the product label, loudly signifying the intent of the product on a basic level. The product label also uses an image which reinforces the connotations of calm: a clear blue sky with only a few clouds, evoking beautiful days spent outside, or perhaps freedom from cluttered and stressful thinking (i.e., a clear mind versus a mind clouded by stress). The label copy calls the product a “relaxing” supplement and describes it an “anti-stress drink,” while the tagline of the ad copy invites consumers to “feel the calm experience” for themselves. Again, these connote relaxation, holding up the absence of stress as a modern ideal—but it also connotes personal agency as it invites the consumer to experience the product, suggesting that in today’s culture consumers recognize the possibility of improving their own lives through stress management. Interestingly the main body copy mainly talks about the importance of adequate magnesium for balancing calcium intake, blood pressure, and heart and bone health (rather than managing stress)—though it does mention that magnesium “helps support a sense of calm.” This is indicative of the influence of regulation—it is likely that the manufacturer is choosing what to emphasize carefully based on what regulations allow them to say (as all contemporary supplement advertisers must). The visual imagery and key copy promote calmness as the ideal (and a benefit of taking the product), connecting the product with signifiers of relaxation to build a myth that connects health to a stress-free life (presented as an ideal life).

Another ad for Natrol®’s *5-HTP* (Natrol, 2017) uses verbal signs to denote relaxation and the absence of stress while also signifying a connection between a lack of

stress and having the best life possible. While the product's label promotes it as a "mood enhancer," the bold capital letters of the ad call it "zen in a bottle," signifying that the product brings not just calm, but a state of calm on a higher level—almost a religious experience that arguably speaks to the increasingly diverse religious and spiritual landscape in America. The body copy offers "inner balance all day long" and "calmness and a more positive outlook," denoting the product's purported benefits but also signifying a calm mental state as the ideal natural and balanced way to live. It goes on to claim the supplement helps consumers to "stay relaxed long past your morning meditation," not only supporting the connotations of relaxation as ideal (the "good life") but signifies relaxation techniques (meditation) as a normal part of a well-lived life. This also suggests that, at least among the targeted consumers, stress and stress reduction are known concepts. Another part of the ad reads "Calmness. Owned." again connoting calm and relaxation as a state of health, but also connecting that state to personal action and personal agency over one's well-being. With denotative signs signifying the product as stress-relieving building into connotative signs signifying those stress-relieving qualities as more than simple mental relief (deep peace and well-being), the ad builds a myth of self-help as a way to health and happiness: bad moods and stress are not just outside forces to be endured—by taking control, consumers can find true peace of mind on a deeper level. With this myth, people are empowered to self-improvement of not only physical health, but also mental health and a calm mental state are presented as key components of an ideal life.

Lastly, an ad from Olly for their *Goodbye Stress* supplement (Olly, 2017) communicates the message that life in America today is stressful, but that stress can be

combated. Rendered in shades of aqua blue (blue is often seen as a calming color in American culture), the ad has a photograph of a younger woman and a little girl. As the little girl hits a piñata (shaped like the Olly logo), confetti flutters out, connoting the stress of a child's birthday party. The woman stands in front, directly facing the camera as she stands stiffly, her head cocked, her mouth tense, and her eyes widely communicating a state of stress. Seen through a semiotic lens, this scene denotes the kind of stressful situation familiar to consumers today. At right a photo of the product's bottle sits under the words "all the chill you can chew," connecting the product to its purpose while connoting both self-improvement and calmness within reach. The name of the product, *Goodbye Stress*, also signifies self-treatment for stress; here the signs intimate that stress can be waved away with a simple chew, leading to the ideal life the ad promises. The signs of the ad create a message that stress is a common part of life, but it also prevents enjoyment (the woman is stressed about the child's party instead of having a good time, signifying how stress can ruin even fun activities). The signs denoting the stressful scene and connoting the promise of relief build a myth that stress is common nowadays, but relief is easy—a good life is one where one is proactive about stress and able to enjoy everything that life has to offer. The woman, like many of the other people featured in all of the ads studied, can take her health into her own hands. Together the signs signify that health concerns prevent enjoyment, but consumers can take steps to get everything they want out of life.

These findings have uncovered a wealth of differences and similarities between the ads of both eras studied, with differences and similarities in messages, values, beliefs, and practices demonstrated through the use of signs and the meanings they create. As

discussed above, through examining these signs the broader themes of nature and naturalness, power, and the good life emerged. This thesis will next explore these signs further through a discussion connecting the themes explored (as created by the signs in the ads) to the historical and cultural contexts of their eras, bringing in broader ideas about health and medicine, advertising, American cultural values, and governmental regulation.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

The Three Themes

In analyzing the sampled advertising texts, it is worthy of note that of all the themes—nature and naturalness, power (signified with battle, magic, and the supernatural as well as tackling life), and the good life (signified with beauty, family and relationships, and a stress-free life) were present, in some form, in both eras. The significant differences are in the ways advertisers in each era communicated their messages—the different approaches to signifying each theme—highlighting how both American medicine and culture have changed over the last 200 years. As Sivulka (1998) explains, “[a] successful ad works because it creates a connection between the product being advertised and some need or desire that the audience feels” (p. 107). Therefore, it follows that the signs advertisers chose to use in both eras tell us something about the collective beliefs and desires of Americans in both the patent medicine era and today. In both eras, signs like plants and landscapes signified natural qualities and their connection to health, but the contemporary ads more frequently did so, with natural connotation playing a more central role in ads, perhaps connected to the rise of the scientific paradigm, America’s urbanization during the industrial revolution and modernization (and Americans’ increasing disconnection from nature); significations of nature today arguably have more meaning as a benefit because consumers may be less familiar with botanical medicine and the natural world in general (Marchand, 1985; Schudson, 1984; Young, 1962). Additionally, the contemporary ads’ significations of nature suggest that American culture perceives humanity as dominant over nature, mastering it and re-constituting it as a health product. They arguably show that, for American consumers today, the idea of a

product being “natural” has become an accepted part of the cultural lexicon; today “natural” has become shorthand for ideas like “safe,” “pure,” and “good for you” (Salvador, 2011; Sivulka, 1998). This is likely connected to a growing awareness of both alternative medicine and “green” living—including environmental conscientiousness and the presence of health foods into the cultural mainstream (Cassedy, 1991; DeLorme et al., 2012; Schaffer et al., 2016; Sivulka, 1998), signaling that natural qualities may have more value to Americans today.

In both eras, the advertisements used signs to communicate that their products had the power to effect some kind of positive change in the body, and those signs fell into two general categories: violence, magic, and mysticism for the patent medicine ads, and accomplishment, or “tackling life” for the dietary supplement ads. The crux of this difference is the way the ads of each era signify the source of power of their products. In evoking gods and goddesses, angels and demons, and even the mystical powers of fate, patent medicine advertisers reference a higher power—power from outside the human body. In the patent medicine ads featuring violence, death and disease are signified as a force outside of the body to be defended against—again, an external struggle. As the contemporary ads instead featured healthy people accomplishing their goals and living life to the fullest, the power is signified as coming from within—the body itself is the agent of health, made whole, as modern consumers are imbued with the personal agency to optimize their own health. This difference arguably relates to the view of suffering and disease as inevitable during the patent medicine era, as well as individuals’ lack of control over health issues and the tendency to attribute poor health to unknown or unknowable forces (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). This contrasts sharply

with today's optimistic marketplace focused on self-actualization and health improvement—a fantasy of an improved life—rather than avoiding suffering (DeLorme et al., 2012; Schaffer et al., 2016; Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016).

With respect to ads' portrayal of the ideal American life, the signs in the ads sampled demonstrate that an improved physical appearance spans the centuries as a sign of good health and happiness. However, the contemporary ads did make sure to connect physical beauty to personal accomplishment, supporting the idea that contemporary Americans think about products in terms of self-actualization and identity-building instead of product benefits alone (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). While the 19th-century ads signified beauty for its own sake, the dietary supplement ads used signs connecting improved appearance to living life to the fullest: accomplishing goals and looking good while doing it. Among the ads connecting the good life to relationships, one observed difference was that the patent medicine ads used signs depicting both improved romantic and familial relationships, while the contemporary ads only used signs of friendships and familial relationships. This may have more to do with a shift from sensationalism in advertising to aspirational realism than a decreased importance of romantic relationships in American life—or it may be that today's consumers (at least the consumers targeted for dietary supplements) are more skeptical of promises of romantic success, or that the language of romance has become more subtle with the increased fluidity of romantic relationships today (i.e., a move away from elevating the marriage relationship as the main life goal) (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). However, while family scenes signified the good life in both the patent medicine era and today, the former featured quiet nuclear families in line with the Victorian values of the traditional

home and sentimentality around the family (Sivulka, 1998). In contrast, the contemporary families were shown more actively, supporting the idea that the modern era brought a greater emphasis on leisure and entertainment in American culture (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). Finally, the signification of an ideal life as a life free from stress seems to be a modern construct, with patent medicine ads only incidentally using signs connoting freedom from stress, while some of the contemporary ads studied focused exclusively on de-stressing and relaxation and its connection to health and well-being. This difference is likely connected to the rise of the lifestyle theory of disease causation (as conceptualized by Tesh [1988]), America's industrialization and urbanization as it entered modernity (Marchand, 1985), as well as a general increase in awareness of stress as a condition unto itself (American Institute of Stress, N.D.; Cassedy, 1991; NIH, N.D.) and a shift in American culture from valuing hard work and duty as the core of personal identity to leisure and pleasure-seeking as a main life goal (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998). The following discussion further explores these differences and their connection to changes over time, looking to American medicine, culture, and advertising for possible reasons as to why the ads differ the way they do.

Medicine and Messages

The differences in messages and signification between the two eras arguably connect back to broader differences in how Americans at the time understood disease causation, prevention, and treatment. Tesh (1988) describes the prevailing theories of disease causation in both the 19th and 20th centuries, as medical and scientific advances as well as social changes shaped how Americans viewed health and disease. As described previously, Tesh (1988) names four major 19th-century theories of disease causation:

contagion theory, holding that disease is spread person-to-person (though the connection to microbes was not fully understood or recognized); personal behavior theory, holding that bad behavior (alcohol use, poor diet, etc.) leads to disease; miasma theory, holding that bad smells in the air caused disease; and the supernatural theory, holding that disease is caused by supernatural forces such as demons, or divine punishment for sins (especially the latter). Tesh goes on to describe the major disease causation theories of the 20th-century America as germ theory, which holds that germs/microbes cause diseases; lifestyle theory, which holds that lifestyle factors and multiple interrelated factors cause disease, emphasizing personal behaviors (stress reduction, exercise, alcohol use, etc.); and environmental theory, which holds that toxins in the environment cause disease. Looking for a link between these theories and the signs of the ads studied, multiple possible connections stand out.

Throughout America's early history, disease had been seen as inevitable, or even an act of divine providence; life was harsh, medicine and medical treatment could be scarce and expensive, and treatments were often ineffective (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). However, during the 19th century, the theory that personal behavior was closely tied to health and disease became embedded in the public consciousness (Tesh, 1988); by the 1830s there was a greater emphasis on personal health among Americans, with increasing interest in both hygiene and physiology (Cassedy, 1991). Public figures such as temperance preacher Sylvester Graham emphasized the importance of pure living, diet, and exercise for good health, with a cultural spread of idea that living cleanly, or *hygienically*, would keep disease away (also perhaps tied to miasma theory, which emphasized clean conditions/reduced bad smells as a preventative

of disease) (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988). This shift in viewing disease as something preventable (through personal action) helps to explain the rise of patent medicines, as proprietors marketed products not just for treating dire conditions, but for improving general health and preventing serious illnesses from developing. This increased emphasis on personal agency—on being able to *do* something about disease—explains why the patent medicine ads studied take the tone of convincing the consumer to use a product. Yet disease during 19th century America was a dire matter, with serious illnesses like yellow fever, malaria, cholera, and typhus sweeping through in epidemics, and death and suffering remaining a part of everyday life (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). This latent seriousness of the day's medical climate may explain the patent medicine ads' use of such dramatic (and violent) signs to connote power. Hercules slaying a hydra, a unicorn goring a lion, Molly Pitcher firing a cannon, a man clubbing death to death—these kinds of signs embody the 19th century view that though treatment options were expanding, medicine was still a battle to be fought, with serious illness and death as a familiar foe for American consumers (Cassedy, 1991; Marcellus, 2008; Young, 1962). The use of supernatural/magical signs in the patent medicine ads is also telling, arguably related to the prevalence of the supernatural theory of disease causation. Compared to today, 19th-century America saw religion and the supernatural as more integral to health and medicine, arguably because 19th-century doctors could not do much for their patients; clergy played an important role in caring for the sick and dealing with matters of disease and death (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). With this in mind, it is understandable that the idea of mystical, outside forces would resonate with 19th century Americans as they navigated health and medical treatment: thus angels, demons, and a

prophetess all make appearances in patent medicine ads. The supernatural theory also explains the use of signs signifying purity, as the theory connected personal holiness to good health (Tesh, 1988). This gives signs of purity a two-fold purpose: not only do they send a message about the quality and safety of the medicines and their ingredients, but they create a connection between good health, medicine, and spiritual purity that wasn't present in the contemporary ads studied.

This view of the 19th century contrasts with today's view of health and medicine as evidenced by dietary supplement ads. During the 20th century the supernatural theory had receded (Tesh, 1988), giving an explanation for the lack of supernatural signs in the contemporary ads; the signs with supernatural connotations were more incidental, and the only instance of an overtly supernatural visual sign (Syntol's use of Tarot cards [Syntol, 2017]) spoke more to the idea of fate (i.e., take a proactive approach; don't leave health up to fate) than active supernatural forces. The rise of germ theory may also explain today's turn from mysticism as scientists connected real observable organisms with disease (Cassedy, 1991). Until the latter part of the 19th century—even though some held to the contagion theory—the exact relationship between microorganisms and disease was not yet clearly understood and infectious diseases could seem mysterious, even mystical (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). By contrast, the emerging understanding of microbes and disease and the rise of germ theory may have demystified disease in the public eye along with an increased emphasis on scientific methods and hard research (Cassedy, 1991; Hilts, 2003; Tesh, 1988). As the patent medicine era came to a close, the gap between alternative and mainstream medicine continued to grow, with reliance on hard science and a transition away from botanical medicine in favor new medicines made

of metallic chemicals (Cassedy, 1991). Today science has made its way back into alternative medicine (Cassedy, 1991; Cayleff, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2016; Whorton, 2002), as the contemporary ads studied often used signs signifying science, demonstrating how science has become integrated into the health lexicon of today's American consumers.

The increased prominence of the lifestyle theory is arguably a key factor in the contemporary shift from signs signifying health as a battle against death to signs signifying health as a process of optimizing the body. Throughout the 20th century, medical advances meant that many serious illnesses finally had effective treatments; no longer was it necessary for health practitioners to try anything and everything they could think of in attempts to find something effective (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988). With this change public attention was turned to the things that individuals could do for their own health, bringing the idea of *holistic* health, or treating the body as a whole (not just individual symptoms) (Cassedy, 1991; Cayleff, 2016; DeLorme et al., 2016; Shaffer et al., 2016; Tesh, 1988; Whorton, 2002). This shift is visible in the contemporary ads signifying effectiveness through accomplishing goals and carrying out enjoyable activities; instead of waging battles against outside forces, people are depicted as improving their own bodies: optimizing their performance rather than fending off illness and strengthening and nourishing themselves in order to be able to do more. While the patent medicine messages were more about survival (i.e., don't get sick or you'll die), these contemporary ads are more concerned with holistic health and lifestyle (i.e., avoiding sickness because it will slow you down or hamper your desired lifestyle). This is especially apparent in signs like those in the Solgar No. 7 ad, which uses words like "love" and "comfort" to connote self-care, going beyond simple relief from symptoms.

This further demonstrates that changes during America's modernization, fueled by advertising, introduced the ideas of self-actualization and self-fulfillment through leisure and personal success, and even identity creation through product use as latent cultural values (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998).

The differing states of American medicine in the patent medicine era and today is also evidenced by the ways the sampled ads used signs signifying nature and natural qualities. While at first it may seem strange that the patent medicine ads sampled invoked nature less often and less strongly than their contemporary counterparts, this may be due to the close relationship between botanical/folk medicine and medicine of the day. Patent medicine arose from a well-established tradition of herbal/folk medicine in America, and throughout the 19th century herbal/botanical medicine was often simply viewed as medicine, not a separate category (although a distinction between regular or chemical/metallic-based medicine and botanical remedies did begin to emerge in the late 19th century) (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962; Carson, 1961). Therefore, it makes sense that it would be almost redundant for patent medicine purveyors to use "natural" as a buzzword, as "unnatural" ingredients were not yet widely known, or widely used in medicines for much of the era (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Young, 1962).

The view of patent medicines as alternative treatment options compared to heroic and regular medicine, mainstream doctors' move to increasingly phase out botanical remedies, and the professionalization and standardization of pharmacy all likely laid the foundation for the emergence of alternative medicine as a 20th-century concept, thus paving the way for today's use of nature in advertising language (Cassedy, 1991; Shaffer

et al., 2016; Young, 1962). As the 1940s brought more sophisticated and effective drugs, there also was a growing interest in returning to alternative therapies and holistic medicine (Cassedy, 1991; Whorton, 2002). As the century wore on, renewed interest in folk and herbal medicine (and the introduction of Asian medicine after WWII) blossomed into today's dietary supplement industry, with alternative medicine seemingly more distinct from mainstream medicine than it was in the patent medicine era (Cassedy, 1991; DeLorme et al., 2012). Compared to modern mainstream medicine and patent medicines, herbal and natural qualities seem to have become a distinguishing factor that sets dietary supplements apart. Thus, it follows that contemporary ads would use this as a selling point and employ more nature-related using nature—as demonstrated in the ads sampled for this thesis. In the contemporary ads, there is also evidence of the environmental theory's influence. For example, the New Chapter ad (New Chapter, 2017) uses words like “wild,” another (Solgar, 2017) and boasts “nothing artificial;” the Dr. Ohhira products (and others) are “whole-food” supplements, while many others repeatedly use the word natural. This increased emphasis on purity and minimal processing may be tied to the environmental theory's emphasis on manmade toxins as a cause of disease. It stands to reason that if such toxins are something to be avoided for health and wellness, advertisers will emphasize purity: a way to avoid the contamination that comes with industrial life in America today. There's also a general emphasis on environmental responsibility that corresponds to the environmental theory's imperative to reduce environmental toxins; from the plnt® ad's (Plnt®, 2017) “earth-friendly” label to the images of wind turbines in a Solgar Energy Kicks ad (Solgar, 2017). This also supports Sivulka's (1998) assertion that through the 1990s advertisers brought issues of

environmental responsibility to the fore, further cementing ideas of eco-friendliness into the American cultural lexicon. The contemporary ads also evidence the increased emphasis on holistic health that came with lifestyle theory and an increased focus on mental health as a part of general health (Cassedy, 1991; DeLorme et al., 2012), as the word holistic has made its way into advertising along with messages promoting physical activity and healthy eating as ways to better health.

Another theme of signification that arguably relates directly to changing ideas about medicine is that of avoiding stress to enjoy an ideal life. While only a few of the patent medicine ads originally sampled had references to non-physical ailments that *might* refer to stress-like symptoms, in the dietary supplement ads studied, stress was treated as a known condition with products designed to treat it by itself (such as Olly's *Goodbye Stress*, Natural Vitality's *Natural Calm*, and Natrol's *5-HTP*). As 20th-century American attitudes about health began to incorporate ideas about holistic health, an increased emphasis on whole-body wellness included a greater focus on mental health and stress as issues to be addressed directly (Cassedy, 1991; Cayleff, 2016; Tesh, 1988; Whorton, 2002). This is also compatible with the rise of lifestyle theory, as reducing stress has been incorporated into recognized strategies for improving health along with avoiding smoking, exercise, and nutrition (NIH, N.D.; Tesh, 1988).

While the patent medicine era saw a proliferation of deadly diseases with few truly effective treatments offered, medical advances over time have granted the ability to treat many previously untreatable conditions (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). This may also explain another key difference discovered among the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads: a transition from treating and preventing

suffering to optimizing the body. As the incidence of previously devastating diseases like cholera, yellow fever, and smallpox became less frequent, public attention turned to other conditions that were either chronic or quality-of-life issues, such as diseases of aging, cancer, stress, and cardiac disease (Cassedy, 1991). Compared to the patent medicine ads, the dietary supplement ads—even one for relieving pain—never depicted any actual suffering like the ads for *Wolcott's Instant Pain Annihilator* and *Dalley's Magical Pain Extractor* did. Reasons for this may include the increased availability of insurance over the 20th century (which made professional medicine available to more Americans, improving access to effective treatments) and the improved quality of life Americans began to enjoy thanks to major medical advances; a gradual reduction in everyday suffering might make signs depicting suffering less salient to consumers (Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988).

Analyzing the texts sampled, the patent medicine ads often promised vague monolithic improvements like purified blood or increased vitality or had a long list of disparate and unrelated conditions that the medicine was purported to cure. The ad for *Hunt's Remedy* promises to cure liver, bladder, and kidney diseases, *Cuticura* offers relief from pimples, hair loss, bleeding, eczema and more, while *Puritana* purports to cure diseases afflicting the stomach, liver, blood, and kidneys as well as “weak lungs, starved nerves,” and a “fagged brain.” By contrast, the contemporary ads promising general improvement often focused on increased “energy,” but more often were centered around a single improvement to health like improved skin, reduced stress, or pain-free joints. This kind of specialization likely relates to the continued need for product differentiation (because there are so many producers), as well as the growth of American

consumer culture, which encourages the purchase of as many products as possible (therefore incentivizing manufacturers to promote multiple products for individual needs) (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). The ads were also much more focused on activity: what the consumer can do when they improve their health. Hiking, leaping, weightlifting, enjoying time with family and enduring stressful situations are all activities depicted within the dietary supplement ads. These communicate the message that today, a healthy person is someone who doesn't just feel good but is also able to do it all—a message in line with the feel-good, fantasy-based advertising techniques that emerged during the 20th century (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016).

As previously discussed, within both eras there was an increasing emphasis on personal behavior as a factor in personal health; personal behavior theory influenced 19th-century attitudes, while lifestyle theory's influence began in the 20th century and continues today (Tesh, 1988). The patent medicine era ads studied tended to portray disease as inevitable, speaking to consumers as if getting sick was a foregone conclusion. They offered relief while more often including vivid portrayals and descriptions of suffering—both literal and allegorical—with the specter of death appearing overtly more than once (such as the skeleton of *Hunt's Remedy*, the tormenting demons of *Wolcott's Instant Pain Annihilator*, the battle of *Dalley's Magical Pain Extractor*, mythical battles for *Irving's Giant Pain Killer* and *Unicorn Drops*, and the descriptions of a little girl nearing death for *Scott's Emulsion*). Contemporary ads paint a more optimistic picture, indicating an increased belief that negative consequences of everyday life (like stress or not getting enough sleep) and the natural progression of the body's decline (such as aging or joint deterioration) can be thwarted. The copy of the ad from Natrol proclaims “go

ahead, own your health with Natrol” (Natrol, 2017), driving home the message common to the rest of the dietary supplement ads: bodily decline isn’t inevitable, supplements offer not only relief, but health optimization. The vision of an ideal life (as created by the supplement ads) doesn’t deal with death at all, instead focusing on improvement and the (suffering-free) life consumers will enjoy when they consume the products. This arguably connects with the rising standard of living for Americans, as well as the advances of medicine; many of the harsh realities of 19th and early 20th century living are no longer everyday concerns (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Marchand, 1985; Tesh, 1988; Sivulka, 1998; Young, 1962).

The Evolution of Advertising

Another general difference between the patent medicine ads and dietary supplement ads sampled was that the former tended to use signs that could be considered outlandish or sensational today, contrasted against the contemporary ads’ more slick and idyllic visuals and copy. Phrases including “disease-conquering,” “celebrated,” “greatest of humor remedies,” and “wonderful, unfailling and incomparable efficacy” and images of violence, romance, myth, and mysticism all make appearances. But, the contemporary ads are sensational in their own way, albeit more subdued compared to 19th-century purple prose; models smile gleefully with perfectly airbrushed skin, families laugh together in a vivid green landscape, and athletes perform feats of strength under impossibly golden rays of sunshine, all while the copy makes promises beyond mere pain relief, smooth skin, or better gut health—the ultimate promise is life improvement through health. This focus on the ideal, the vivid, and the unattainable speaks to a simple truth about advertising: humans pay more attention to things that are extraordinary and

personally interesting (Wu, 2016). With the increasing proliferation of advertising both in public and private spaces (Campbell, et al., 2015; Sivulka, 1998) today's consumers are bombarded with sights, sounds, and sensations to grab attention (Wu, 2016); therefore, advertisers still strive to capture consumers' attention with techniques that have been around since the birth of advertising—as Sivulka (1998) explains, advertisers have been alternating between the same hard and soft-sell techniques since the advertising phenomenon of the patent medicine era.

As Wu (2016) explains it, advertising is about more than promoting products: it is founded in monetizing human attention. A modern understanding of attention conceptualizes it as a kind of currency or resource, with the human brain spending a limited amount where it chooses—on the things that most attract attention; thus, advertisers have long competed to get consumers to spend their limited attention on their ads (Wu, 2016). Wu (2016) has identified that there are some nearly universal attention-grabbers: bright colors, people in motion or being active, animals, sexualized people, and even babies are all ways that advertisers have sought human attention from the advent of ads. And through examining the ads sampled, we do see these kinds of commonalities: attractive people, children, and activity appear in the ads of both eras. Marchand (1985) and Sivulka (1998) both name an increased use of color as a distinguishing factor of modern advertising, and this is borne out in the ads sampled; while the patent medicine ads were a mixture of black and white and color ads, all of the contemporary ads were in full color. Because the novelty of attention-grabbing ads does wear off and overexposure leads to indifference (Wu, 2016), it follows that advertisers continue to use the most basic and primal tactics for garnering attention such as people in motion and bright colors—

both of which were common in the contemporary ads sampled. Regarding patent medicine ads, Wu (2016) asserts that as American advertising was getting off the ground, 19th-century merchants still relied primarily on their good reputations and professional networks for commerce rather than actively trying to capture consumer attention. However, the patent medicine industry, birthed in the traveling medicine shows of early America (Anderson, 2000), ignited an increased emphasis on showmanship and accelerated the quest to win consumer attention (Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). This idea is supported by the ads studied, as many of them have pulled out all the stops: mythical figures in battle, cherubic infants, and even demonic forces all vie for the consumer's eye. As Hechtlinger describes it, "[p]atent medicine advertisements shocked, stunned, and bludgeoned the consumer to gain his attention" (Hechtlinger, 1970, p. 223). The patent medicine ads studied often had signs with more forceful language and imagery than the contemporary ads; promises of "cures" appeared again and again, contrasting to today's ads which are restricted from promising a cure for any disease or condition (DeLorme et al., 2012; Hiltz, 2003). The words "magical," "never known to fail," "great medical wonder," and "instant pain annihilator" all unequivocally promise miraculous healing. This reinforces the idea that while patent medicine advertising was certainly fanciful, it encompassed more than attempts to catch consumers' eye with visuals (Anderson, 2000; Wu, 2016). Advertisers made the "hard sell," as they "brazenly promised to make wishes come true" (Wu, 2016, p. 29). The rhetorical style of 19th century America was much more "whimsical" and influenced by popular oral traditions, often featuring fables and colorful language (Anderson, 2000; Sivulka, 1998). Thus, we see the fanciful illustrations of demons, monsters, heroes, and romanticized family

scenes, as well as creative turns of phrase like “don’t tobacco spit and smoke your life away,” “magical in its effects,” and “wonderfully remedial in all cases . . . does not contain anything whatever injurious to the most delicate constitution.” Such language might sound odd in an advertisement today, but it was common in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Anderson, 2000; Hechtlinger, 1970; Sivulka, 1998; Young, 1962). Marchand (1985) points out that after 1912 the “truth in advertising” (p. 8) movement emerged, marking a shift in American advertising toward more realistic promises. As advertising modernized, advertisers moved to persuasion through subtlety rather than long product explanations and aggressive pitches, abandoning these hard sell techniques in favor of soft sell tactics depicting an ideal and associating it with a product and/or promoting the benefits of a product instead of just its features (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016).

As the advertising industry entered the modern age, another major development was the rise of photography in ads; using photographs conveyed modernity, while giving an air of realism and authenticity to the advertisers’ claims, even making advertisements seem like news items (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998). This shift has continued through to today and can be seen in the types of images used in the patent medicine ads versus the dietary supplement ads. While all of the sampled patent medicine ads that had images used illustration (typically line-based ink illustrations), nearly all the sampled dietary supplement ads used photographic imagery for either all of their visuals or for their main visuals (except for the chaga ad, which used vector [digital] illustration alone). But, Marchand (1985) asserts even as photos made ads seem more real to consumers, photomanipulation began as soon as photography became widespread. We also see this in

the highly produced and edited images of the contemporary ads: colors are saturated, flaws and shadows are removed from product shots, and the skin of models appears smooth and uniform. Having spent time as a graphic designer creating product illustrations, I can attest to the fact that today, no photo that goes into advertising or packaging is ever completely unedited—and some images that appear to be photos are either perfected composites of multiple photos or computer-generated imagery (CGI). Designers work to make images appear not just real, but better-than-real to really sell the fantasy of a perfect product—a practice that has gone on since the advent of visual advertising (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998).

American Values: From Benefits to a Better Life

For the ads using signs related to beauty and relationships to signify an ideal life, key differences can be explained by advertising's shift from extolling product benefits to selling consumers an improved life overall (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998). Marchand writes that early modern advertising (around the 1920s) saw the rise of the *tableaux*, or slice-of-life scenes, in advertisements. These scenes are thought to represent the collective aspirations of consumers—or at least, what advertisers believed those aspirations to be. The contemporary ads showing using accomplishment as a signifier of power and those signifying an ideal life through good relationships both frequently used tableaux—the ads for *OsteoMove* (Natural Factors, 2017) and *ORAC-Energy Greens* (Paradise, 2017) are both good examples with signifiers including a hiker in the mountains and a family taking a walk. However, though created before the modern period, some of the patent medicine advertisements featuring the theme of relationships do use tableaux (particularly those depicting family scenes), suggesting that the technique

was not wholly new when used in modern advertising. The advertising for both *Dr. Wieland's Worm Lozenges* and *Williams' New England Cough Remedy* feature depictions of families (adults and children) enjoying pleasant domesticity. Likewise, the ad for *Barker's Liniment* shows a family riding on a wagon through a country scene—probably a familiar activity for consumers at the time. More than selling product benefits, these ads sell the life the products might provide (according to the advertisers): a more modern style of pitch that differentiates products further by emphasizing the intangible benefits they bring (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998). Marchand (1985) and Sivulka (1998) both call out the move to persuasion through subtlety as a marker of advertising's modernization (although advertisers returned to the familiar hard sell technique in certain decades during the 20th century [Sivulka, 1998]), and some of the ads attest to this idea, with those of the 19th and early 20th centuries using signs of violence and sensational language compared to the contemporary ads which take a mild, friendly, and uplifting tone while using only optimistic imagery. The move from promoting services and product benefits to promoting an improved lifestyle (and life) is another important change that has come with modern advertising, and from the early 20th century onward advertisers have moved away from selling fear while putting more emphasis on creating positive moods and provoking emotions (Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Schudson, 1984; Seldin, 1963; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). Marchand (1985) describes how early 20th-century advertising was still associated with patent medicines, with lingering negative effects. Modern advertisers wanted to shake the image of the “carnival barker” and “snake-oil salesmen” (p. 8), and those working in advertising were eager to throw off the suspicion of the public to be seen as professional and respectable. This further explains

the absence of any sort of distasteful or unpleasant imagery and copy in the contemporary ads and supports Marchand's (1985) assertion that modern advertisers focus on comforting consumers rather than sharing "distasteful truths" (p. 207).

As good relationships and physical beauty can be considered basic human desires, it is not surprising that the patent medicine advertisements weren't shockingly different from the dietary supplement ads as they connected these themes with health. Both eras featured pretty young women signifying beauty and purity, and both showed happy families signifying harmony and well-being. However, there was a key difference: the contemporary ads more often had additional signs signifying being able to do or accomplish a goal or activity, while the patent medicine era ads seemed to portray the beautiful appearance and the calm family as the goals and ends in and of themselves. Sivulka (1998) points out that within the 19th and early 20th centuries marriage and family were held up as ultimate goals, explaining why the images of families and the subtle promise of a significant other may have been so powerful within the patent medicine ads—though marriage was also held up as part of the ideal life in ads throughout the 20th century (particularly the 1930s, 50s, and 80s) (Marchand, 1985; Schudson, 1984).

Ads from both time periods used pleasant imagery and copy (though a portion of the patent medicine ads used unpleasant imagery and copy) demonstrating what Campbell et al. (2015) call the association principle, "a widely used persuasive technique that associates a product with a positive cultural value or image even if it has little connection to the product" (p. 396-397). As the ads sampled associate their products with the concepts of nature, power, beauty, family, freedom from stress, and good health in

general, they demonstrate that these concepts have value in American culture. Sivulka (1998), Marchand (1985), and Wu (2016) all emphasize how as advertising has evolved, advertisers have capitalized on the way that consumers will think more positively about a product if it is associated with positive qualities that they also desire.

Marchand (1985) and Sivulka (1998) both discuss how, with the birth of modern advertising, advertisers increasingly relied on visuals in favor of text; psychologists even bolstered this movement as scholarly work in the modern era emphasized visuals' power to excite emotions. This distinction is visible in the ads sampled, with the majority of the contemporary ads leaning heavily on visuals—though some of the patent medicine era ads also relied on visuals as the dominant communication force. While all of the ads from either era used text, multiple ads from the patent medicine era were either all text or mostly text, while none of the contemporary ads were all text, and images dominated the page in most. However, it is clear from the ads studied that patent medicine advertisers were well-versed in exciting emotional responses; violence, heroics, and sweet sentimentality are all common throughout the sample. Today, some scholars argue that an emotional response makes advertising more effective (Poels & Dewitte, 2006; Shen & Morris, 2016; Smith & Marci, 2016). This suggests that patent medicine advertisers may have intuitively understood the importance of emotion in effective advertising even though it has taken until recent times to find data for evidence.

Another common thread between the two eras is that of personal agency over health—though it is manifested differently in the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads. While ads in both eras address the consumer directly to persuade them to take action to improve their health (by using the product), the patent medicine era ads tended to take

an approach of providing reasons why, as if the consumer needed to be convinced that something could be done about their existing problem. By contrast, the contemporary ads (while offering persuasive information about product benefits) more often attempted to persuade through the idea of a better life; the idea that consumers could control their own health, and thereby control the quality of their own lives, was presented as a foregone conclusion. In the dietary supplement ads, improving one's health is subtly linked to improving oneself in general, capitalizing on the cultural undercurrent that promises the American dream: consumers can buy their way to health and happiness and enjoy self-fulfillment by being able to do as they please (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998). This push to promote consumption as a path to self-fulfillment germinated as the continued American production boom after the industrial revolution necessitated mass demand; manufacturers made products, but advertisers manufactured the consumers buying them (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998s). According to Wu (2016), the rise of consumerism meant advertisers could increasingly promote products for as-yet-unrecognized personal problems (such as halitosis, popularized by Listerine). With patent medicines, this took the form of medicalization (framing everyday issues like serious medical problems requiring treatment) (Conrad & Leiter 2008), which we see demonstrated as patent medicine ads list everyday complaints like tiredness together more serious diseases like liver disease (and claiming to treat both).

With the continued production expansion of post industrial revolution America, mass production necessitated mass demand, and the only way to reach enough consumers to fuel this demand was through mass communication; manufacturers made products, but advertisers manufactured consumers, and this began the long relationship between

consumers and advertisers that continues to this day (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). Examining the signs used in these ads and thinking through the myths they create, there is arguably one overarching myth: good health brings a better life. Whether that better life is signified as coming through self-care and nurturing the environment, the conquering of disease, the conquering of goals, successful relationships, a beautiful appearance, or freedom from cares and worries, the promise is that using the products advertised will make things better. Marchand (1985) Sivulka (1998) and Wu (2016) all point out that by the 1920s, American ads began offering more than a solution to an existing problem—they started offering an improved life. This idea is supported by my analysis, as the signs of the contemporary ads appear to be more explicit in their promise to provide more than the benefits of products' function, offering scenes of ideal life and signs signifying how their supplements will not only improve a particular condition but improve one's life overall. While the patent medicine ads studied did sometimes use idealized scenes, the focus was nearly always on what the product did (with the exception of a few like the *Barker's Liniment* and Dr. Miles ads). Through the 20th century advertisers notably began to focus on a "feel-good style" (Sivulka, 1998, p. 55) exemplified by the lack of any unpleasant signification in the contemporary ads, contrasted with explicit denotations and connotations of suffering in the patent medicine ads. Wu (2016) points to the 1960s as a turning point when the technique of winning consumers over with love rather than fear emerged; continuing the move from informational to persuasive advertising, advertisers increasingly tried to position themselves as being on the consumers' side, tapping into Americans' shared desires and dreams as well as the rise of American individualism that later brought increased interest

in marginalized groups and interests (Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). These changes help to explain why some of the contemporary ads seem to be more granular and specific to certain interests (as with the ads using signs signifying running, hiking, or working out); over time, industries trying to gain audiences' attention have shifted from trying to reach all consumers at once to targeting increasingly granular segments (Wu, 2016). While the original publication formats for the patent medicine advertisements studied is unknown, the contemporary magazines from which the ads studied were sourced were mainly niche, catering to health-conscious and active consumers. This further demonstrates how media have become highly specialized, catering to individuals' interests in a way that echoes an increased emphasis on individual interests and self-actualization overall in American society (Marchand, 1985; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016).

Regulatory Differences

Finally, it is also important to address the obvious differences in regulation between the patent medicine era and today, and how those differences influenced the ads studied. The patent medicine ads studied routinely used the word "cure" and other signifiers of curing diseases and ailments, often using hyperbolic language to convey that if the consumer used their product, they would no longer have to worry about their medical concerns. This is arguably because, for the majority of the patent medicine era, there was no real governmental regulation dictating what patent medicine advertisers could promise; even fantastical claims of curative powers could be made (and were made) without proof (Anderson, 2000; Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). This contrasts sharply with the contemporary dietary supplement advertisements, which featured much more subdued claims that not only didn't promise a cure (in fact they featured the required

disclaimer specifically stating they were not intended to treat or cure any disease [DeLorme et al., 2012]) but also described the purported health benefits of the products in more indirect terms. In addition to the medical disclaimer required by the FDA, none of the contemporary ads ever promise a cure for any condition; instead they describe conditions like being stressed, suffering from a cold, or looking tired while simultaneously communicating indirectly about how their products could improve how consumers look or feel. This shift from overtly promising the moon to subtly promising improvement arguably stems from the enactment of governmental regulations that directly impacted what advertisers in general (and what dietary supplement advertisers in particular) are allowed to claim on their labels and in their ads (Avery et al., 2017; Hilts, 2003; DeLorme et al., 2012). As discussed previously, the establishment of the FDA, the enactment of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, and the DSHEA of 1994 all put advertisers' claims (first about patent medicines and later about dietary supplements) under greater scrutiny with increased threat of consequences for violating the rules (Anderson, 2000; Ashar et al., 2008; Avery et al., 2017; Cassedy, 1991; Cook, 1958; DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003; Young, 1962). Today this seems to put dietary supplements in a category in-between regular consumer goods and pharmaceuticals, as they are sold for their benefits to consumers' lives (like non-health-related products) but are also taken internally like many mainstream pharmaceuticals and often viewed similarly by the public (Ashar et al., 2008; Conrad & Leiter, 2008; DeLorme et al., 2012; Ethan et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2016). Thus we see that while the distinction between alternative and mainstream medicine has widened in American culture over the last 150 years (Cassedy, 1991), dietary supplements occupy their own liminal space in the

marketplace as consumer goods that are marketed as such but taken like medicines—just as patent medicines occupied the liminal space between externally-prescribed mainstream medicine and completely homegrown folk remedies during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; DeLorme et al., 2012; Shaffer, 2016; Young, 1992).

By looking at the changing historical, medical, and cultural contexts around the patent medicine and dietary supplement ads studied, we find a window into the reasons why the advertisers may have used the signs they did to signify the messages that they did. As Berger (1977) explains, we cannot understand visuals—and I would argue words as well—apart from what we already know; therefore, by understanding more about the contexts surrounding these ads, we can reach a more complex understanding about what is going on between the signs used and the myths they create. By examining these signs within American history, significant differences have emerged, but also enduring truths that demonstrate how the nature of people seems remarkably fixed through the decades.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

This thesis offers an overview of the birth of modern advertising and the role of advertising in both shaping American culture and consumers' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It has provided historical and cultural context around patent medicines and dietary supplements, as well as the changing state of American medicine and government regulations, American culture, and the evolution of American advertising in shaping both the patent medicine industry's rise and decline and the advertising strategies of today's dietary supplement industry. The commercial connection between medicines, health, and marketing in America began in the colonial era, expanding exponentially during the 19th century with the rise of commercial manufacturing, distribution, and multiple media channels for advertising (Anderson, 2000; Marcellus, 2008; Wu, 2016; Young, 1962). This connection has continued through the 19th and early 20th centuries, propelled by patent medicines, through the 20th and early 21st centuries until today—when dietary supplements occupy a kind of liminal space between medical product and consumable commercial commodity. As both patent medicines and dietary supplements occupy this kind of in-between space, studying their advertisements has provided insight into both health-related and consumer culture in America. Through the analysis of the ads studied, three broader themes emerged: nature and naturalness, power, and the good life. Among the patent medicine advertisements, power was signified with battle, magic, and the supernatural, while the dietary supplement ads used the idea of tackling life to signify power. Additionally, ads of both eras signified the good life with the sub-themes of beauty, family and relationships, and a stress-free life.

Considering the analysis conducted, how do the signs discussed compare between the two eras studied? Overall, there were notable differences in both the general style and substance. The ads of the 19th and early 20th centuries tended to use much more florid and ornate prose, dramatic appeals, and hyperbole (promising to cure completely, for example) compared the contemporary ads which used more measured language in their claims and aspirational messaging in their copy. These differences likely stem from not only tastes in language styles during each time period, but changes in regulation that have limited what dietary supplement makers today are allowed to promise (Anderson, 2000; DeLorme et al., 2012; Hilts, 2003; Sivulka, 1998; Young, 1962). While DeLorme et al. (2012) found that dietary supplement ads are more “claim based” than “brand image oriented” (p. 553)—with advertisers often using health-related claims “to create healthful product perceptions and, thus, sales” (p. 554)—I have found that while the contemporary ads sampled certainly make their appeals based on claims, the imagery and the ideal lives presented within them often took the spotlight.

Moving on to the subject of visuals, there was also a notable difference in terms of color and representation techniques; the patent medicine advertising was a mixture of color and black and white and primarily used illustration for their visuals, while the dietary supplement ads were all printed in full color (save for the ad for Pre W.O., though this was a stylistic choice) and almost exclusively used photography. This difference is arguably due to advances in print technologies which have allowed reader access to color imagery as well as a trend toward seeing color images as more attention-grabbing and commercially valuable, along with the rise of photography as a quick, popular, and familiar technique (along with other media technologies like television) (Marchand,

1985; Sivulka, 1998; Young, 1962; Wu, 2016). Another general trend discovered was that, for both eras, people seemed to predominate as the visual subjects of the advertising, though products also appeared. While Pope (1983) notes that as advertising entered the modern age it became more focused on users (consumers), this suggests that patent medicine advertising may have been ahead of its time in having more of a consumer-oriented appeal (rather than a product-focused one). As Carson (1961) found that patent medicine advertising often had pleasing illustrations, establishing “new standards of style, comfort, and leisure” for Americans (p. 106), it’s arguable that there is no hard line between the transition from product-focused ads of the 19th century and aspirational and benefit-focused ads of modernity. Indeed, though scholars have talked about aspirational advertising being a feature of modernity (Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Schudson, 1984; Sivulka, 1998), we see the beginnings of aspirational advertising in this sample from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Finally, another general comparison between the advertising of both eras is that those for patent medicines included signs that were more negative, signifying fear and suffering, while those for dietary supplements stuck to pleasant or at least positive significations of achievement and well-being. Other scholars have asserted that patent medicine advertisements often exploited common needs and universal human emotions—particularly the fear of disease, suffering, and death which was prevalent in the 19th century (as they were part of everyday life) (Carson, 1961; Cassedy, 1991; Parascandola, 1999; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). Young (1962) also found that many brought up unpalatable consequences of disease, such as fading appearance or social isolation because of bad breath, but frequently frightened with the threat of pain. Though not all of

the patent medicine ads studied in this sample exhibited these characteristics, some did; the key point of comparison to today is that none of the contemporary ads sampled contained those kinds of appeals. This does support existing literature asserting that as advertising progressed through the 20th century it transitioned away from negative appeals like invoking fear, moving toward a model of attracting consumers with aspirational imagery or positive product features alone (Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016). Pope, writing in the 1980s, asserted that “[t]oday, the promises, either latent or manifest in some of the most notable advertisements, are self-fulfillment, escape, and private fantasy” (1983, p. 291). After analyzing the signs in both categories of ads, this idea seems to still be the case today.

Considering the signs uncovered through the analysis, what themes emerged between the two eras? As discussed previously, in terms of uncovering themes within the ads sampled three larger themes emerged with several sub-themes based on differences between the eras. These themes are nature and naturalness, power/effectiveness (broken down into battle, magic, and the supernatural versus tackling life), and the good life (broken down into beauty, family and relationships, and stress-free life). Though the presence of themes demonstrates commonalities between the two sets of advertisements (for example, signs signifying nature and naturalness were found across the entire sample) the ways the themes were manifested in the advertisements’ signs also demonstrated differences. For example, while the theme of power and effectiveness was common to both eras, I found it expressed through signs evoking battle, magic, and the supernatural in the patent medicine sample, and achievement, or “tackling life” in the dietary supplement sample. This mixture of similarities and differences—of finding

common broader themes and differing sub-themes—suggests that as some broader values have remained important in American culture (beauty and relationships is one example), the cultural definitions of those values (i.e., what it means to be beautiful today versus what it meant 150 years ago) has certainly changed, as have the ways that those values are culturally communicated.

With respect to messages about the conceptions of health and disease and the idea of personal agency over health in America, the findings suggest that over time views of personal health and action to achieve it (as expressed through the ads and their signs) have changed. In the patent medicine era advertising, obtaining good health is signified more as a battle against the external, even inevitable forces of disease and suffering. Particularly for the patent medicine ads that used signs signifying violence, magic, and mysticism in relation to power and effectiveness, the more dramatic signs conveying effectiveness go along with the mid-to-late 19th century's limited understanding of how the human body works, how specific diseases work, and what physiological actions specific drugs and herbs have on the human body (Cassedy, 1991; Estes, 1988; Tesh, 1988). In these, the element of personal agency is that a consumer can take a powerful medicine that will do the fighting for them. In a time when both the mechanisms of disease in the body and the actions of medicine on disease were largely unknown, these ads imbue a “fight against disease” narrative that viewed medicine as a battle—a view that began with heroic medicine and carried throughout the patent medicine era even as American medicine began to leave the heroic model behind (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Marcellus, 2008; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962). In a time when death and disease were a familiar part of everyday life, (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Parascandola, 1999;

Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962), ads like these can be seen as offering a powerful solution that may have appealed to those weary of regular medicine that offered little hope of cure or even improvement (Anderson, 2000; Cassedy, 1991; Tesh, 1988; Young, 1962).

Therefore, the idea that something can be done at all speaks to a new spark of personal agency over health among Americans in the 19th century.

By contrast, the dietary supplement advertising presents more of an optimization-centric view that more often signifies health as a personal pursuit towards perfecting the body internally to achieve next-level well-being. They seem to promise not only health, but *even better* health; the appeal is not just that something can be done (to fight a physical ailment, as in the patent medicine ads), but that dietary supplement today now allows for the pursuit of perfection. This arguably goes along with the entrance of self-help and elements of natural medicine into mainstream American culture, as well as Americans' growing interest in not only dietary supplementation but holistic health that focuses on achieving total wellness (Cassedy, 1991; Cayleff, 2016; Schaffer, 2016; Sivulka, 1998; DeLorme et al., 2012; Whorton, 2002). This is in contrast to the patent medicine ads studied. Although not all of the patent medicine ads analyzed signified the quest for health as a battle, when they did, the messages still seemed to be more about achieving a baseline level of health than on achieving the very best health possible. In the dietary supplement ads the message of personal agency seemed to bleed over from health into achieving goals in general—even in the case of products meant to improve physical appearance, that improvement was tied to being able to achieve and to do everything that life requires (effortlessly and stylishly) rather than simply saying “feel better, look

better.” In the contemporary ads, the pervasive promise seemed instead to be “feel better, enjoy this product benefit, and *do more*.”

But what of the values and aspirations communicated in the advertisements—the good life to which advertisers expected their target audiences to aspire? Certainly the findings discussed above suggest that contemporary American life has brought an increased focus on personal action: on doing and achieving for oneself. According to Marchand (1985) the beginnings of modern advertising began a trend where “. . . the older values of discipline, character-building, self-restraint, and production-oriented achievement” took a backseat to “pleasure, external appearance, and achievement through consumption” (p. 234), but the findings of this thesis don’t completely support this assertion. While the signs of the contemporary ads definitely signified personal achievement, pleasure, and appearance as aspirational values, the patent medicine ads weren’t devoid of such messages (though they did tend to focus on symptoms and disease). This suggests that the seeds of today’s culture—one that is more personal goal-focused and consumeristic—were planted relatively early within the history of consumer good production in America, thanks to patent medicines (Anderson, 2000; Marchand, 1985; Schudson, 1984; Sivulka, 1998; Wu, 2016).

As previously discussed, the findings also suggest that the patent medicine era signaled an increasing emphasis on personal agency in health and wellness. This also includes paradigm shift that saw the conceptualization of disease shifting away from an inevitable force that could not be combatted, with Americans beginning to view health as something that can be actively pursued be it through treatments including medicines or through a personal pursuit of wellness (especially lifestyle and behavior choices). This

suggests that personal agency over health has increasingly become a value in and of itself; multiple scholars have spoken of the values of independence and democracy as fueling the rise of irregular medicine in general and patent medicines specifically (Anderson, 2000; Carson, 1961; Cassedy, 1991; Whorton, 2002; Young, 1962).

The content of the contemporary dietary supplement ads suggest that the trend of valuing the ability to take control of one's health has only intensified through the 20th century to today, with the focus of ads shifting from baseline health to the optimization of health; in the contemporary ads sampled the idea that an individual has a high degree of personal agency over her own health almost seems to be a foregone conclusion. Furthermore, the differing uses of signs communicate that while beauty, relationships, and freedom from stress have all been conceptualized as part of the ideal American life from the patent medicine era to today, today's America seems to value self-actualization and self-realization of goals as the pinnacle of living the best life possible.

Considering the findings of this thesis, I conclude that this is the key difference between the patent medicine era ads and those from today: while all of the ads grant the individual some agency over health, the underlying purpose for the patent medicines is to achieve health (i.e., to become free from disease), while the undercurrent for the contemporary ads is to achieve one's best self and best life. While it can be argued that Americans of the 19th and early 20th centuries also made the connection between achieving health and having their best life (and in fact the ads sampled indicate this), the message connecting supplements to overall life achievement seems much more overt within the contemporary ads. Because of this, it stands to reason that over the 20th century the bond between better health and better life—arguably the overarching myth of

all of the ads studied—has been so firmly cemented into American culture that the idea that messages now focus on achievability of the perfect life through health rather than such a connection's existence.

Advertising literature indicates that in America today, advertising has become a nearly inescapable part of life (Campbell et al., 2015; Wu, 2016). Though the cultural climates of each time period examined produce differences in both the messages of the ads and the ways they're conveyed, over 100 years after the patent medicine era its influence is still visible in today's advertising for dietary supplements. As Atwater (1975) writes, "[t]here is little argument that modern methods of advertising were largely the invention of the proprietary promoter" (p. 156), a view supported by multiple scholars who have studied advertising, including Anderson (2000), Carson (1961), Marchand (1985), Pope (1984), Schudson (1984), Sivulka (1998), Wu, (2016), and Young (1962). Wu (2016) also makes an important point regarding patent medicines: it's easy to see 19th-century consumers as gullible, but the same kinds of advertising techniques are still used today as all kinds of consumer products (not just dietary supplements) promise youthful looks, increased vitality, and even a svelte figure as they tout special ingredients and proprietary techniques. Considering this view and what I have found throughout researching and analyzing advertising for this thesis, I believe we should view the advertising of the past with humility, as even today we as consumers will still "surrender to the charms of magical thinking" (Wu, 2016, p. 30). Schudson (1984) also raises a critical point, writing that an ad "does not so much invent social values or ideals of its own as it borrows, usurps, or exploits what advertisers take to be prevailing social values" (p. 221). This view emphasizes that advertisements are less outright tools of

manipulation and more the *products* of their time, artifacts that tell us something about a particular time, place, and culture—and they should be examined as such (just as Berger [1977] sees artwork) (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967; Marchand, 1985; Pope, 1983; Rose, 2001; Schudson, 1984; Williamson, 1978). Though Pope (1983) cautions the prospective researcher to remember that meaning doesn't depend on the advertiser alone, but that “the meaning is created by the readers, listeners, and viewers as they perceive and misperceive advertising messages” (p. 230), examining the signs present in ads to uncover deeper meanings that might not be immediately obvious can reveal elements of culture that daily influence Americans even as they're taken for granted (Barthes, 1957/1972; Barthes, 1964/1967; Marchand, 1985; Rose, 2001; Williamson, 2002).

Because advertising can “create attitudes and inclinations even when it does not inspire belief” (Schudson, 1984, p. 226)—meaning consumers inner thought processes can be affected even when they don't consciously buy into an ad's message—it can be seen as both influenced by and influencing culture. As both representative of and influential for culture, this area of media research offers a wealth of opportunities for future study, and it is my hope that research will continue to probe the relationships between advertising, health, and American culture. As Schudson (1984) asserts, advertisements serve to remind us of the tension between reality and the ideal life they portray, and I believe it's this tension that invites curiosity. My research has endeavored to examine that ideal life and what it says about our culture as it continually evolves and along with American notions of well-being, power, and personal fulfillment.

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