Bodies, Brands, and Bananas: gender and race in the marketing of Chiquita Bananas
Author(s): Maria Iqbal
Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga
Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/25691
Bodies, Brands, and Bananas: gender and race in the marketing of Chiquita Bananas

Maria Iqbal

Chiquita Banana, a product of the Boston-based United Fruit Company (UFC), now Chiquita Brands International, was the world’s first branded fruit. The brand’s mascot, Miss Chiquita Banana was inspired by Hollywood’s Carmen Miranda and quickly inherited the actress’s popularity through her catchy jingles and sexy dance moves. Representations of Miss Chiquita in UFC commercials from the mid to the late 1900s emphasized the exoticness of the fruit’s Latin American origins and took advantage of gendered ideas that were popular in U.S. culture. This essay will explore how and why Miss Chiquita Banana was gendered and made exotic for its market of American consumers. By examining how race and gender were manipulated in three of the company’s commercials, this essay shows the transformation of Miss Chiquita from a racialized and sexualized animated banana into a racialized and sexualized woman. This transformation of the Chiquita mascot reflects a change in the UFC’s focus in its advertising campaigns. Instead of trying to familiarize U.S. consumers with the Latin American fruit as it did through its earlier mascot, the UFC used the gender and race of its new Miss Chiquita mascot to define the features of its newly branded fruit.

The racialization and sexualization of the original Miss Chiquita Banana was enacted in an effort to make bananas more appealing to the American market of the 1940s, for which the fruit was not yet a common commodity. The feminized banana was first used to advertise UFC’s bananas in 1944, when an audio recording of the “Chiquita Banana Song” was released on the radio. “Chiquita Banana” was officially trademarked in 1947 and around the same time, the high heel wearing, frilly dress-donning fruit became part of a series of short animated commercials that aired in theatres. This marketing campaign sought to familiarize American audiences with the banana and convince them to try the foreign fruit. In one of

1 Maria Iqbal graduated from University of Toronto Mississauga in June 2015 with a double-major in English Literature and Historical Studies, and a minor in French. She wrote “Bodies, brands, and bananas: gender and race in the marketing of Chiquita Bananas,” for a seminar called Race and Gender in Modern Latin America. Passionate about journalism, Maria was a former news editor of UTM’s student newspaper, The Medium, and is currently its Editor-in-Chief. She would like to thank Lindsay Sidders and Erica Toffoli for their advice and support while working on this paper.


the 1947 commercials featuring the original jingle, Chiquita Banana dances and sings instructions about the proper method of preparing and eating bananas. She explains, for instance, that bananas can be eaten in a pie or salad, and are best eaten “when they are fleck’d with brown and have a golden hue.”

The feminized banana also appealed to the concerns of American housewives, highlighting the health benefits of the fruit by adding a new verse to the jingle: “bananas are a solid fruit that doctors now include in baby’s diets/And since they are so good for babies, I think we all should try it.”

Chiquita enlisted the authority of doctors to convince viewers that the unfamiliar and exotic Latin American fruit was beneficial for society's most vulnerable members, and therefore must be good for everyone. Bananas were the superior fruit, Miss Chiquita Banana boasted, “it’s impossible to beat them.”

Chiquita’s accent and flirtatious demeanour emphasized the exoticness of the banana. The Chiquita jingles in this period were sung in an American accent by the American-born Monica Lewis, but Spanish words were deliberately included. For example, Chiquita ended the commercial with the words, “si, si, si” and a wink to her audience. The switch in language was a deliberate reminder of the Latin American origins of the banana to heighten the exoticness of the cartoon figure and most importantly, the fruit. The wink added a touch of sensuality, in effect making the exotic fruit seductive through the close association between the foreign language and the flirtatious gesture.

The commercials continued to promote bananas and Latin America as exotic by highlighting the differences between Latin America and the United States. Chiquita sang: “bananas like the climate of the very, very tropical equator/So you should never put bananas in the refrigerator.” The words indicate that the agriculturally centred Latin America, where bananas are grown, was very different from the viewer’s location, the industrialized United States, where refrigerators were common. For the viewer, Latin America appears exotic as the home of fruits that the U.S.’s climate cannot produce, but not superior to the developed and industrialized U.S., which is, after all, home to luxuries such as refrigerators.

This distinction was supported by the imagery of the commercial. Animated bananas are shown at a beach wearing sunglasses, sunbathing, and building sand castles, thereby associating Latin America with ideas about vacationing. This is significant in the context of the then President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbour” policy of 1933, which promoted a stronger relationship with Latin America in an attempt both to secure raw goods for American industries and to keep German influence away from the region in the lead-up to World War Two. The policy also promoted travel and tourism to the region—an idea exploited in UFC’s advertisement. The emphasis on the “exotic” nature of Latin America in the original Chiquita commercials attempted to make the foreign fruit more appealing to American consumers.

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5. Ibid.
UFC commercials also used Chiquita’s femininity to market bananas. The original mascot that was half woman, half banana dances and sings with a Latin American accent in the commercial, all while wearing a fruit-laden hat. Chiquita’s femininity is overly sexualized through her flirtatious winking and eye-rolling and through her frilly dresses and red lipstick. But Miss Chiquita was herself inspired by another popular sexual icon in the period: Carmen Miranda. As part of the “Good Neighbour” policy, the U.S. government recruited Hollywood to help promote positive relations with Latin America through films showing “the people of the Americas united in the struggle against Nazi Germany.” The Portuguese-born actress Carmen Miranda was among the most popular figures employed by Hollywood as a result of this policy. Her popular blend of exoticism and sexuality was a clear inspiration for Miss Chiquita Banana, particularly when the UFC replaced its earlier mascot of the 1930s—a masculine banana which appeared in the company’s recipe books—into a feminine one in 1944. The Chiquita mascot’s fruit-laden hat was inspired by Miranda, in her famous performance of the song “The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat” in Hollywood’s The Gang’s All Here. In this and other performances, the emphasis was on Miranda’s exoticness and femininity. John Soluri notes that Miranda’s performances “brought a nonthreatening form of tropical exoticism...through her costumes (including her signature headwear...), her music (samba rhythms performed by Brazilian musicians), and her often amusing (and calculated) mix of Portuguese and English.” Her roles also emphasized her sexuality, with the actress even straddling large strawberries and bananas while dancing, singing, and winking at her audience.

Race was a major focus in a second animated commercial of the 1940s period entitled “Chiquita Banana and the Cannibals.” The ad opens with a man—whose oversize lips and dark skin make him look more like a monkey than a human—pouring salt and chopping carrots into a pot inside which a white man is cooking. Miss Chiquita enters the scene to save the day, telling the first man through her song that he should “revise” his eating habits so he can be “refined and civilized.” By exaggerating the Latin American man’s skin and facial features to appear like a monkey, the commercial associates people from the region with racist ideas of being barbaric and even inhuman. Chiquita replaces the man’s pot with an oven to teach him how to make banana scallops. Like in the commercial which emphasized the gap between the exotic Latin American beaches and the industrialized refrigerators of the United States, the replacement of the pot with the oven also polarizes what Rachel Bailey Jones refers to as the so-called “primitive” culture of Latin America from the “modern” United States. The colonial gaze of the commercial is further demonstrated by the palm leaves visible in the background of the scenes, indicating that the black man is from a tropical region, thereby associating the Latin American race with

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primitiveness and cannibalism, while portraying the United States as the embodiment of progress and modernity.

Paradoxically, the commercial uses the exotic banana grown in primitive Latin America as a symbol for civilization. When Chiquita Banana tells the man to change his eating habits and eat banana scallops he says the dish is “very cultured,” making a clear association between the fruit and colonial ideas about civilization versus barbarity. For the American audience, ideas about America’s cultural superiority to Latin America were not only reinforced by the commercial, but through the symbol of the banana. Through a brilliant marketing strategy, the ad removed the banana from its ‘primitive’ context so it instead embodied civilization to promote consumption of the fruit among the refined consumers in the United States.

Following UFC’s initial launch of Chiquita Banana, the company underwent a series of changes in response to broader economic, social, and ecological changes in the 1960s. The spread of Panama disease promoted UFC to produce Cavendish bananas that were resistant to the disease. The new variety was however easier to bruise, and this in turn led UFC to experiment with packaging the fruit in boxes. With a new variety of banana and a new package, UFC capitalized on the opportunity to also reinvent its marketing strategy. Whereas the company initially focused on marketing bananas in order to increase consumption, these changes allowed them to begin advertising specifically Chiquita bananas over other brands.

This new marketing campaign placed a stronger emphasis on the “Chiquita” brand rather than the fruit, and it commoditized the female body through yet another transformation of Miss Chiquita. In 1963, UFC promoted the Chiquita brand with blue and gold stickers on its bananas. In 1987, the feminized banana logo of the 1940s was transformed into an actual woman, which Chiquita Brands International claims “reflected the image the public had of Miss Chiquita as a real person.” The conversion of the feminized banana into a human form is significant because it effectively removed any distinction between the identity of the woman and the banana, but in a way that focused specifically on Chiquita bananas. This dramatic blending of the identities of the woman and the branded fruit was demonstrated in a commercial from the ‘post-transformation’ period showing Miss Chiquita—the woman—dressed in the emblematic blue and gold of her brand. Even her lips are a dark tint of blue rather than her flirtatious red. The new Miss Chiquita thereby casts aside her identity as a general banana in favour of an identity as part of a specific brand. Even Chiquita’s body, her symmetrical and curvy figure, and uniformly tanned skin, demonstrated the physical features for Chiquita bananas promoted by UFC around 1970, such as

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14 After moving forward with boxed packaging for bananas, UFC’s president announced the company’s intention to “consider changing our business from the sale of a commodity item to the sale of a branded, identifiable item, which, if adopted, will enable us to advertise our bananas, instead of bananas generally.” Soluri, “Banana Cultures, 72.
“bunch symmetry, the fullness of individual bananas, and blemish-free peels that ripened uniformly.”

By blending the bodies of a woman and a banana, UFC promoted its “top” product in a way that defined Chiquita bananas as superior to any other banana in the market.

United Fruit’s Miss Chiquita started out as a half-woman, half-banana cartoon whose exoticness and femininity were used to make the relatively unknown banana more appealing to U.S. consumers. Through her flirtatious demeanour and deliberate accent, coupled with her close resemblance to the popular Carmen Miranda, Miss Chiquita helped make bananas—and Latin America—both exotic and seductive to American society. The company also associated Chiquita with colonial ideas about U.S. cultural superiority in an effort to sell the banana as a symbol of civilization and modernity, far removed from the ‘barbaric’ Latin America. Following broader changes in the company’s operations, UFC reinvented its Chiquita mascot as an actual woman rather than an animated feminized banana. The new Miss Chiquita’s body was manipulated to align with the image of the fruit, which UFC sought to promote for the Chiquita brand. Through its revised marking strategy, the company sought to redefine its bananas as “Chiquita” bananas, using the gender and exoticness of its past images to give rise to a new form of marketing, resulting in the creation of the first ever branded fruit.