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It's 'a good thing': The Commodification of Femininity, Affluence, and Whiteness in the Martha Stewart Phenomenon

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Abstract
This study examines the ideologies of gender, race, and class present in Martha Stewart's unprecedented popularity, beginning with the publication of Stewart's first magazine in 1990 and ending in September 2004, after Stewart's conviction for her involvement in the ImClone scandal. My approach is built on the intersection of American mass communication research, British cultural studies, and feminist theory, and utilizes Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to examine how social, cultural and political discourses circulate in and through a mediated text and how those meanings are interpreted by those who receive them. Drawing from textual and ideological analysis of over thirteen years of Martha Stewart Living magazine and twelve weeks of Stewart's four television programs, I investigate the ways in which the mode of address in Stewart's media texts positions her simultaneously as a close friend and respected teacher. As the model for "living" in her media texts, Stewart uses these

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modes of address as the foundation of her messages about women's roles, racial and ethnic traditions, and social mobility. To understand how readers and viewers make sense of these messages, I conducted focus group interviews with thirty-eight fans of Martha Stewart Living between October 2002 and July 2004. Two distinct types of fans emerged as my interviews progressed, and the participants, who have a range of different gender, race, sexuality and class identifications, expressed a variety of positions on the messages about gender roles, racial representations, and class aspiration they observed in Stewart's texts. I was uniquely positioned to examine how fans' feelings about Martha Stewart and Martha Stewart Living changed when Stewart was indicted, convicted and sentenced to prison because of her sale of ImClone stock; as a result of my observations, I argue that scholars should take a closer look at how fan practices and beliefs function in fans' lives and in the larger culture. In total, this examination of Martha Stewart's media texts and audience members offers a rich account of the ways in which discourses of gender, race, and class influenced American culture at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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