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Teaching Media Literacy and Ad Deconstruction for Making Healthier Food Choices

Society is bombarded with advertisements and media messages. Per year, the average American child views at least 40,000 television commercials (Starsburger, 2001). Some experts say that media are our largest educator. The trend of media consumption is not likely to decrease in the next decade since it has steadily risen over the last 50 years. With children spending on average 7.5 hours per day using media (Henry Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), it is important for children to learn about media messaging and acquire media literacy.

It is well documented that 17% of American children and adolescents are obese (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). While there are several reasons why children have gained weight, such as having a sedentary lifestyle, other factors that may be less apparent, such as food advertisements, also play a role. As children age, it becomes important to learn healthy food choices and how to avoid media influence on less than optimal food choices.

Influence of Advertising on Human Behavior

Advertising is a billion-dollar industry and data indicate that advertisements influence human behavior. Just as watching actors smoking cigarettes in movies and television shows increases the likelihood for adolescents to try smoking, so does watching them drink alcohol. Food commercials are no different. As we watch fast food advertisements, we are more likely to eat when not hungry or more likely to eat unhealthy food. Adolescents are at a particularly vulnerable and malleable age, when critical thinking and analysis becomes essential for making healthy

decisions. When youth make unhealthy decisions, the long-term effects are masked by the body being in peak physical condition. Thus, the negative health effects may not be noticed until older adulthood. The earlier children and adolescents learn healthy habits to maintain health, the more likely these healthy habits will continue into late adulthood. The top two chronic diseases that cause death for older adults are heart disease and cancer. Heart disease is largely influenced by lifestyle factors such as high fat consumption, leading to deposits in arterial walls and ultimately clogged arteries, while smoking and obesity are the most important lifestyle risk factors for cancer ([The American Cancer Society](#)). Learning about unhealthy influences at an early age may help improve long term health and wellness.

Educational Strategies for Media Literacy

Health educators need to create lesson plans on media literacy. For colleges teaching future registered dietitians and health teachers, it is necessary to share innovative teaching techniques on this subject. Technology such as mobile health applications and media streaming have become very exciting and alluring, suggesting that health educators must use innovative teaching methodologies to keep up with the media.

A gold standard in teaching media literacy analytical skills is teaching students advertising deconstruction. Exercises may include such activities as commercial journaling homework and in-class group advertisement analysis. Commercial journaling involves having students watch television for two hours with the ability to

use a pause button. It is important not to use streaming programs such as *Netflix* because they may not include commercials. Students record the time duration of each program and each commercial. Students then describe each commercial and how the advertiser tried to sell the product or service. The students write a reflection on the advertisements (ads) viewed and their reactions to the ads. Students must also indicate if food commercials were viewed, and how it made them feel (such as hungry or excited).

In class, students are broken up into groups of 3-4 people and select a food advertisement from a magazine. Students must analyze the ad for colors, text, and images as well as interpret how the advertiser is selling the product or service. [The Media Education Foundation](#) has a list of questions students can use to help [deconstruct the ad](#) (see page 8). The groups must indicate the long term and short term health benefits or detriments of the product and service. The class reunites and each group discusses their findings.

Along with nutrition lectures and making healthy food choices, students may keep a food diary as part of the activity via [Myplate.gov](#). It is useful for students to record their own daily dietary intake in order to become fully aware of ingredients, portion sizes and quantities. Students may also keep a daily record which indicates if any food choices were made because of a media influence or if mindless eating occurred.

The theme is to identify the influence of media on food consumption and nutritional choices. The challenge in watching media and eating is not only wanting to eat “finger foods” (foods eaten with fingers) but also mindless eating. People may snack when not hungry on calorie dense, nutritionally deficient foods such as chips or cookies. When students learn to be more analytical and more understanding of what impacts their food choices, they may be more inclined to make healthier choices and eat with hunger cues rather than from external cues such as boredom.

We as professors, health educators and instructors can all benefit by using the same behavior of mindful eating. As we know, role modeling can be the greatest educator of all.

References

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Education and Health

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