CONNECT!ONS Med!aLit moments

Consortium for Media Literacy | *Volume No. 32* | *September 2011*

In This Issue…

Theme: Media Literacy and Nutrition

In 2004, researchers recruited third to fifth grade students in Baltimore City Public Schools (and their parents) to participate in a study of students' recognition of food advertisements and logos, and their understanding of the persuasive intent of food advertisements. When researchers asked students, "Who produces television commercials?" just 12% identified companies and advertisers. Some students had very interesting responses. Ten percent of the group answered that "God" was the producer. Other responses included, "The man--the one who runs all the companies," "The commercial inspector," "Donald Trump," and "The Governor." (Batada and Borzekowski, 2008, p.30).

When asked to describe the difference between television programming and commercials, only 22% described commercials' purpose to sell or advertise (p.29). Most researchers agree that children are generally able to understand the persuasive intent of advertisements by the age of 8. Yet in this sample, many 10-year-olds had difficulties distinguishing between program and commercial content. Clearly, the children in this group needed practice with media literacy skills.

But the need for media literacy education is much greater—and the stakes much higher—than the results of this single study might suggest. Obesity has become a major health challenge to children in the United States. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys ending in 2002 found that 16% percent of children and adolescents 6 to 19 years old were obese, and that another 16% were overweight. These data represent a 45% increase in obesity rates from the previous survey, which ended in 1994 (Jordan, 2007). And media are clearly implicated in these changes. Over the last decade, researchers have been documenting significant correlations between television viewing, food advertisements, and childhood obesity. And a few experimental and longitudinal studies have made an even stronger case for media use as a causal factor in childhood obesity.

Conversely, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia also have roots in media usage, due to unrealistic body images promoted in the media world.

In this issue of Connections, you'll read about the sophisticated methods that food advertisers use to draw young audiences to their products, and we discuss the associations between the eating habits of children and the commercial messages they receive. Also in our research section, we review the evidence on the effectiveness of media literacy and nutrition implementations, and we demonstrate how CML's framework has been used to help students become aware of the motivations and techniques of food advertisers, and to respond to advertising messages with action to change their diet, including their media diet. We're also pleased to introduce our first MediaLit Moment geared towards media construction. This lesson gives your students a chance to re-examine the role of street art in their schools and communities.

Research Highlights

Food Fantasy Island

The nature and reach of food advertising in the United States clearly demonstrates that media literacy is a necessary component of any nutrition education initiative. According to a 2004 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, children who watched television viewed an estimated 40,000 commercials annually ("The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity," p.4). Most research studies concur that, of commercials targeted towards children, half or more are for food products; and, as other studies have documented, the great majority of food advertisements targeted towards children are for unhealthy foods. For example, one recent study found that nine out of ten food advertisements shown during Saturday morning children's television programs are for foods high in fat, sodium or added sugars (Batada et. al, 2008).

There is also compelling evidence that screen time in and of itself is related to obesity in children and young adults. The Framingham Children's Study, published in 2003, followed the body mass index (BMI) and television viewing habits of a group of just over 100 children from preschool to early adolescence, and found that TV viewing was an independent predictor of increased body mass (KFF Report, 2004, p.3).

But screen time does not simply encourage children to consume unhealthy foods. Television food advertisements can influence children's food choices. For example, in a recent experimental study conducted with 11-13 year-old school children in Britain, students who had viewed a television program which included food advertisements displayed a preference for more branded items (all unhealthy), high fat items and food items *per se* than a control group of students who had viewed a program which featured only toy advertisements (Halford et. al, 2008). And branding itself can influence food preferences. In a study published in 2007, Northern California Head Start children tasted samples of McDonald's food, and one item (carrots) not sold at McDonald's restaurants. The same foods were contained in both branded and unbranded bags and wrappers. When asked which samples tasted better, the children showed a strong preference for the branded items—even the carrots (Robinson, et. al.).

Though most marketing firms are not willing to share research data with the public, content analyses can reveal which kinds of appeals food advertisers believe will be effective with children. Some of the most frequently employed appeals used in marketing to children include magic/fantasy, action/adventure, and characters who demonstrate speed or strength (Warren et. al., 2008). In a recent study, researchers conducted focus group interviews with 8- to 10-year old children after they had viewed a number of food advertisements, and many of them reacted with a desire to imitate the actions of the characters seen in the advertisements (Folta et. al., 2008). Two other frequent appeals include premium offers (such as gifts or sweepstakes), and cross promotions, usually in the form of licensed characters from films or television programs. In 2008, citing the influence of such appeals, the British Office of Communications (OfCom) banned premium offers, celebrities and licensed characters from

advertisements of high fat, salt or sugar foods targeted towards children 15 or younger (HFSS Advertising Restrictions—Final Review, 2010).

Web sites for food products are plentiful, but media effects research on these sites is anything but robust. A 2006 descriptive analysis of food sites targeted to children by the Kaiser Family Foundation reveals that food companies are pursuing a number of new advertising strategies and appeals. With "advergaming," children participate in games on branded sites that allow companies to draw attention to the brand in a playful way, and for an extended period of time. Viral marketing is another strategy. For example, children are encouraged to send branded e-cards (for birthdays or other occasions) to friends. The authors conclude the study by noting that much of the content on these sites blurs the line between advertising and entertainment ("It's Child Play," p.32).

But exclusive attention to media targeted towards children obscures the importance of larger cultural patterns. If we live in a media landscape dominated by images of thin people, that landscape is also dominated by "fat" diets. For example, a content analysis of nutrition practices in top-grossing movies from 1991 to 2000 revealed that foods high in fats, oil and sugars were disproportionately shown (KFF, "The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity," p. 7). A 2008 comparison of children's and general audience food advertising on television found that nearly three quarters of *all* food advertisements were for unhealthy foods such as pizza, soda and sweets (Warren et. al.). Writing in the American Journal of Health Promotion, a team of Canadian researchers argue that the "reality" depicted by television features a diet in which no food is considered a "bad" food (Thomson et. al., 2008).

Children become adults, and the 'fantasy island' of food choices which they encounter in both media content and advertising messages will continue to follow them into adulthood. If children are to successfully question this mediated reality, a single intervention program in the elementary or middle grades will never suffice. What's needed is an education in media literacy and critical thinking skills which they can carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Media Literacy and Nutrition Interventions

Research studies on the health outcomes of media literacy programs has been growing in numbers since the late 1990s, and a few of these have examined the impact of media literacy interventions on children's viewing and food choices. Most recently, an article by two Yale researchers has pointed to the effects of parent-child critical viewing in the home. In a survey study of 200 college students published in 2009, researchers found that the efforts of parents to counteract unhealthy messages on television (also referred to as critical viewing), along with efforts to teach healthy food preferences, can beneficially affect their children's food choices, even into adulthood (Harris and Bargh).

In a randomized, controlled trial conducted in two California elementary schools with about 200 third and fourth grade students, a group of students participated in an intervention which

included a screen 'turnoff' period of 10 days, followed by a 7 hour per week time budget, and a group of media literacy lessons to help students use their television viewing and video game time more selectively. The intervention significantly decreased students' television viewing and video game use, and significantly reduced the frequency of meals eaten in a room with the television turned on; and, in comparison to the control group, students participating in the intervention showed significant decreases in BMI (Robinson, 1999).

More recently, researchers studied the effects of a nutrition and media literacy pilot intervention on fourth and fifth grade students and their parents. The intervention, which was implemented in an after-school setting at a South Carolina elementary school, consisted of two nutrition education sessions, two media literacy and health communication sessions, and eight sessions during which students developed a media campaign for their parents which advocated for greater consumption of fruits and vegetables. Media products included table toppers, refrigerator magnets, a web site, a commercial, and a rap song. The researchers found that participating students reported greater motivation to consume fruits and vegetables (compared to a control group), and parents made more fruits and vegetables available in the home (Evans et.al, 2005).

Other recent research reveals that the food eaten by families who eat meals together while watching television tend to be less nutritious than those eaten by families who eat meals together without watching television (Feldman. S., et al., 2007). Clearly, there is a relationship between family food environments, television viewing and the eating habits of children, and critical viewing of television in the home may be at least as important for the development of healthy eating habits as media literacy and nutrition programs at school.

You'll find more information on parental strategies for media literacy in the home at the CML Reading Room, available at www.medialit.org

Critical Thinking About Food Choices

If student engagement is used as the measure for evaluation, implementations of media literacy and nutrition curricula which utilize CML's framework for media literacy have certainly been successful. In the 2009-2010 academic year, Donna Landin, e-Learning Coordintor at the West Virginia Department of Education's Office of Instructional Technology, piloted Breakfast with Nooview, a CML curriculum which integrated media literacy, educational technology and health communication competencies. Working in a lab classroom, middle school students visited the mypyramid.gov website to analyze and evaluate their diet and exercise habits, and used CML's Key Questions to evaluate the reliability and usefulness of the site. They used the Key Questions to deconstruct advertisements, and debated whether their breakfast choices were influenced by advertising. Moving from analysis to reflection, they used journals and charts to reflect on the challenges they faced if they wished to change their diet and exercise habits.

The integration of new media technologies into this curriculum represents a new direction in nutrition and media literacy programs. Students are not only asked to reflect on their health choices, but are also asked to reflect on the media that they most frequently turn to for information, including health information. Landin noted that asking middle school students to rate the reliability of a website was one of the best features of the curriculum: "When they're researching quotes, they tend to just take anything that pops up on Google. That part of the curriculum opened up a whole discussion of what made one site reliable and valid, and others not. . .it was really a good use of the technology."

And from Landin's point of view, the CML Empowerment Spiral, with its emphasis on reflection and action, was a very valuable component of the curriculum: "Middle school students are a tough nut to crack. You've got kids choosing not to eat breakfast. The curriculum opened up a conversation about why they weren't doing that. When they used the journals to write down what they did have for breakfast, they found out that it wasn't so nutritious." In addition, Landin and others at the pilot site were able to observe positive changes in student's diets. Most were enrolled in free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs. According to Landin, students from the pilot classes were not only observed eating full breakfasts at the cafeteria, but counts of participation in both programs increased as well.

In 2006, Ann Cohen, a nutrition specialist at the University of Missouri, Columbia, produced Media Wise, a nutrition and media literacy curriculum, with the assistance of Tessa Jolls at CML, and implemented the curriculum with fifth grade students at three local elementary schools in spring 2007. The first lessons helped students build a foundational understanding of media as product (Key Question #1); one even utilized an unedited DVD segment of production notes and commentary for a McDonald's advertisement. With this foundation, students not only learned how to think critically about the media they consume, but also to make more conscious choices about the media which they create.

In the final stages of the program, students learned about both food and media as a constructed product. Students worked side by side, writing storyboards for PSAs which issued a 'call to action' for better food choices, while others prepared healthy meals from a selection of recipes. Says Cohen, "They were excited about filming commercials and prepping food—for them it was two great activities at once." Students saw what construction means first-hand.

Parent and community involvement were also integrated into the curriculum. Students completed logs of food advertisements they saw on television, often with their families. A staff member at the local NBC affiliate provided training and assistance to students in producing videos of their PSAs, which were later broadcast from the station.

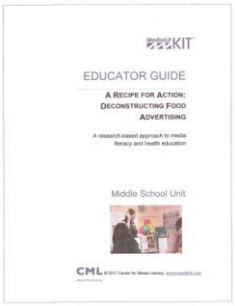
Cohen felt that the capacity of the CML framework to involve students in a process of inquiry was one of the greatest assets of the curriculum: "It wasn't a preachy thing for kids, because they were learning how media is created, and they got excited about that, and then in the midst of the excitement, attention turned on specific messaging about food. . . . It was a discovery

process for students, and a much more effective way for them to learn."

One of the first media literacy and nutrition programs to make use of the CML framework was "Media Literacy: A Recipe for Action." In this three-week program, students in a leadership class at Sepulveda Middle School in Los Angeles used the Five Key Questions to deconstruct an advertisement for a fruit snack, and were moved to create a 10 minute instructional video to help students in another class understand the differences between media images of food and their actual nutritional values. As one of the leadership students marveled, "Everything that you see on TV is all an image! The advertiser only wants you to see the good and exciting part, not the boring and messy ones. I learned more and understood more about the nutrition facts." The program was implemented in 2005 by CML and the Nutrition Network at Los Angeles Unified School District; pre-post tests showed an average increase of understanding of nutrition facts and media literacy of 22%.

For more information on nutrition implementations which have made use of the CML framework for media literacy, visit us at www.medialit.org

CML News



Now Available…

A Recipe for Action: Deconstructing Food Advertising

An intervention program for teaching nutrition to middle school students which ties the critical thinking skills of media literacy with a nutrition theme.

Educator Guide with 10 lessons, Student Workbook and Media DVD. For more information or to order online visit: www.medialit.com/store

CONSORTIUM for MEDIA LITERACY

Uniting for Development

About Us…

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

www.consortiumformedialiteracy.org

Resources for Media Literacy

Teaching Tip: Teaching about nutrition offers an excellent opportunity to reinforce the idea of "construction" (KQ1). An ideal program incorporates constructing recipes, preparing food, deconstructing depictions of food in advertising, and constructing media products about food. Invite parents to participate in the cooking or take a field trip to a grocery store to see how food is merchandised.

Media Literacy and Nutrition

Kaiser Family Foundation (2007). *Food for Thought: Television Advertising to Children in the United States.*
Original research on children's exposure to television food advertising.
United States Accessible at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/7618.pdf

Kaiser Family Foundation (2006). *It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children.*
Descriptive analysis of online marketing of food brands to children.
Accessible at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/7536.pdf

Kaiser Family Foundation (2004). *The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity*.
In–depth discussion of associations between media use and child obesity which includes a substantial research review.
Accessible at:
http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/The-Role-Of-Media-in-Childhood-Obesity.pdf

UK Office of Communications (2010). HFSS advertising restrictions: final review.
Document reviews results of restrictions to television advertisements for high fat, salt and sugar foods targeted towards children. Implemented in 2008. Annex includes full text of content and scheduling rules. Accessible at:
http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/tv-research/hfss-review-final.pdf

References cited in this issue:

Batada., A., et al. (2008). Nine of ten advertisements shown during Saturday morning children's television programming are for foods high in fat, sodium, or added sugars, or low in nutrients. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 108 (4), 673-678.

Batada, A., and Borzekowski, D. (2008). Snap! Crackle! *What? Journal of Children and Media* 2 (1), 19-36.

Evans, A., et al. (2005). Changing the home nutrition environment: effects of a nutrition and media literacy pilot intervention. *Family and Community Health* 29 (1), 43-54.

Felman, S., et al. (2007). Associations between watching TV during family meals and dietary intake among adolescents. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 39 (5), 257-263.

Folta, S.C., Bourbeau, J., & Kaiser, J.P. (2008). Watching children watch food advertisements

on TV. *Preventive Medicine* 46 (2), 177-178.

Halford, J.C.G. et al. (2008). Children's food preferences: effects of weight status, food type, branding and television food advertisements. *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity* 3 (1), 31-38.

Halford, J.C.G. et al. (2008). Children's food preferences: effects of weight status, food type, branding and television food advertisements. *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity* 3 (1), 31-38.

Harris, J.L., and Bargh, J.A. (2009). The relationship between television viewing and unhealthy eating: implications for children and media interventions. *Health Communication* 24 (7), 660-673.

Jordan, A. (2007). Heavy television viewing and childhood obesity. *Journal of Children and Media* 1 (1), 45-54.

Robinson, T., et al. (2007). Effects of fast food branding on young children's taste preferences. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine* 161 (8), 792-797.

Robinson, T. (1999). Reducing children's television viewing to prevent obesity: a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282 (16), 1561-1567.

Thomson, M., et al. (2008). The association of television viewing with snacking behavior and body weight of young adults. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 22 (5), 329-335.

Warren, R., et al. (2008). Food and beverage advertising on U.S. Television: a comparison of child-targeted versus general audience commercials. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 52(2), 231-246.

Med!aLit Moments

Street Art Smart

Say the word "graffiti," and most people think of young men tagging their territory in the middle of the night, and of thousands of dollars spent to cover the tags over. Yet artists from Jean Michel Basquiat to Banksy (of the 2010 movie "Exit Through the Gift Shop") practiced their craft on the street before their work was exhibited at any major museum. "Street art" might best describe art that is painted in a public space rather than on a piece of canvas. Moreover, a simple written message which appears in a public space (such as a stencil) might not always be considered graffiti.

Here's a good example:
http://boingboing.net/2010/08/26/snapshot-bike-lane-i.html

Really, this is a piece of street art which delivers a message which nearly anyone in any community in the United States would be willing to rally around.

In this Media Lit Moment, your students will be challenged to re-think their conceptions of art which appears in public spaces, and they'll also have the opportunity to work on the initial stages of a piece of street art which could grace the wall of their own school.

Ask students to write or illustrate a concept for a piece of street art which delivers a public service message.

AHA!: I can create art in public spaces that makes a positive difference in my community!

Key Question #1 for Producers: What am I authoring?
Core Concept #1: All media messages are constructed.

Key Question #4 for Producers: Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?
Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view

Grade Level: 7-9

Materials: pencil, paper, imagination

Activity: Start a discussion with students about the differences between tagging and street art. As you do so, you may want to share additional examples:

A mural with a message in Milwaukee:
http://scaryideas.com/content/9108

A somewhat more traditional mural in a New York City middle school: http://www.groundswellmural.org/Public_Art_Projects/2008/2008_Nonviolence.html

After you finish this discussion, ask students to write a creative concept for a piece of street art which is also conceived of as a service to the public. This could be as simple as coming up with some creative lettering for a message, or it could involve sketching out a piece of representational art (like a mural). Also, their concepts don't necessarily have to call for the use of permanent materials. Chalk art on a playground with an anti-bullying message could also fit the bill.