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Exploring Baseline Food-Media Literacy of Adult Women

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Abstract

Many media education researchers have identified the importance of adult media literacy but few have studied it. Such literacy is becoming increasingly important with regard to the growing category of food media: advertisements, television programs, and print media among them. Using two focus groups and guided by Primack and Hobbs's (2009) AA, RR, and MM sub-domains, this study analyzes the baseline media literacy responses of adult women to food-media texts. Findings indicate that personal experience with food preparation and indirect experience with media production may be key components in adult food-media literacy.

Keywords: media literacy, food media, cooking, adults, women

In media education studies and curriculum evaluations in North America and around the world, most of the participants have one thing in common: youth. The vast majority of work on media literacy, past and present, has focused on children and teenagers. Yet we are aware—in our roles as educators, researchers, and policy-makers—that something is missing from this picture. Not only is adult media literacy a worthy goal in itself, but adults also play important roles in the media spheres of children and teens. They are the ones who may control, comment on, or co-view media with their families at home.

Concern is growing regarding a particular type of media message in the home, one that attracts the attention of children and adults alike. Marketers have long targeted children with advertisements for breakfast cereal and fast food. Scheibe (2008), Hindin (2001) and others have addressed the need for children's media education to help them respond critically to such food media texts. Now adults are seeing more food-oriented media designed for them. Such media have become incredibly popular during the last 15 years in the United States; *Publisher's Weekly* reported that 530 million books on food and wine were sold in 2000, and that number has climbed every year since then (O'Neill 2003). The number of cooking magazines has grown by one-third since 2003 (Ovide and Steel 2008). On an average night the Food Network attracts more viewers than CNN (Pollan 2009), and the network's parent company spun off the Cooking Channel in May 2010 (Salkin 2010).

Despite the growth of food-related content in the media sphere, little research exists on adult audiences' capacity to evaluate and critique such messages. But a connection clearly exists between an adult's media literacy and the capacity for a child to engage in critical thinking about media texts outside of school. Hindin (2001) identifies the importance of parents' or guardians' media literacy when responding to children's demands for advertised foods. In that study, adults were given a media education intervention to support their own critical responses to food media. However, the baseline media literacy competence of adults with regard to food media remains unexamined. Many researchers have identified a need for more work to be done on adult media literacy. Sargent (2004) poses specific research questions: "Do people understand how messages are constructed/may be manipulated? Is it necessary for people to know about production/engage in production themselves?" (30)

The question of whether production experience is a necessary component of adult media literacy is becoming even more important with regard to food media. This is because at the same time more people are reading, browsing, and tuning in to food media, they are cooking less and less, and overall food preparation skills are in decline (Cutler, Glaeser, and Shapiro 2003; U.S. Dept. of Labor 2008; U.S. Dept. of Agriculture 2009). In the context of food media, production experience may be two-fold: experience preparing food and cooking, and experience making an image or other media text about food.

A lack of cooking skills and general food preparation knowledge may make people more dependent on food media for nutritional information and norms such as healthy portion sizes (Lang et al. 1999). Most food media are highly influenced by sponsors and advertising support, which means that the information they provide is not necessarily in the interest of public health. This suggests that food-media literacy is increasingly important, to empower people to critically evaluate information provided by food media of all types—commercial, instructional, or entertainment-oriented.

In this paper I describe the process and findings of a pair of focus groups designed to investigate the capacity of adult women to engage critically with food media texts. These focus groups are the initial phase of a larger project to investigate how slick, attractive food media with high production values are interpreted by audiences, and whether media literacy skills can help audiences engage critically with such media and access their instructional messages. First, it is necessary to establish a baseline measure of how adults react to food media and what degree of critical thinking they engage in when responding to it.

Literature Review

Pollan (2009) attributes the paradox of the decline in cooking and the growing popularity of food media in part to certain qualities of today's food media compared with those of decades past. One example is Julia Child's program "The French Chef," which was broadcast on public television beginning in 1963 (29). In its early years, the program was not slick and highly edited like most of today's cooking shows on the Food Network and the Cooking Channel. The set of "The French Chef" felt like a real kitchen, welcoming and occasionally messy and disorganized. Many of the imperfect things Child did—which charmed her audience and made them feel as if they too could attempt French cooking—would today be considered outtakes to be edited from the final cut. Modern food styling and editing conventions tend to produce slick texts commonly referred to—derisively or with admiration—as "food porn." O'Neill (2003) describes such food media as "prose and recipes so removed from real life that they cannot be used except as vicarious experience" (39).

The unattainable, highly "produced" bodies in sexual pornography can be compared with the unattainable kitchens, ingredients and final dishes in food porn. Kaufman (2005) describes a taping of the

Food Network program "Sara's Secrets" with chef Sara Moulton. Moulton is not the only one made up and prepped for the camera; assistants are on the set to sculpt dishes of mustard and buff bread buns. Just like sex in pornography appears fun, aesthetically pleasing and effortless, so does food preparation when seen through the lens of the Food Network. In contrast with home cooking, "TV cooking builds to an unending succession of physical ecstasies, never a pile of dirty dishes" (56). When people do make mistakes cooking on television, such as in competition programs like "Top Chef," the errors are made spectacular just like the successes. Including mistakes may make the show seem more real, but their treatment as dramatic make-or-break moments for the contestants does little to improve the content's accessibility to the home viewer.

Like sexual pornography, most commercially successful "food porn" is intended to attract attention rather than provide instruction. The attention such media attract is foremost for the benefit of advertisers. The Food Network is a perfect storm of advertising and vicarious experience. The channel was specifically developed to mesh programming and ads in order to create a "seamless promotion of commodities and the fantasies that supported their use and consumption" (Ketchum 2005, 219). As far as advertising revenue is concerned, a viewer's fantasies are ultimately more important than any actual cooking or eating she might be prompted to do; as long as she continues to watch, the programs' ratings continue to attract advertisers.

This model applies to print food media as well. Advertiser-supported food magazines depend on subscriptions or regular newsstand purchases in order to maintain financial viability. The magazine's success is independent of the reader's actual behavior in the kitchen; as long as she keeps subscribing to the magazine or buying it on the newsstand, advertiser support will be sustained. From an economic perspective, the ultimate aim of such ad-supported media is to keep the reader's attention rather than encourage her to cook.

Given the commercial orientation of most food media, and the fact that fewer and fewer people now have first-hand experience with food gained by cooking, it is increasingly important for media education to address critical competencies regarding food media. Does the average person know, for example, that most photos of food have been professionally styled and airbrushed? Can they recognize that food media messages on TV are highly edited and that the cook's mistakes are often left out? Are food media lulling them

into passive consumption of images rather than critical thinking and learning? Because having cooking skills is positively associated with more healthful eating habits (Dowler and Calvert 1995), the instructional capacity of contemporary food media is important to understand. If slick, attractive food media provide entertainment at the cost of instruction, critical thinking skills may help “unlock” the educational content of food media.

Leaders in the field have defined media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide 1993). The application of these skills to food media or health-related messages has been explored by only a few. Scheibe (2008) used media literacy lessons to develop children’s critical thinking skills; the children applied these skills to evaluate claims made in television commercials for snack foods. Hindin (2001) found that a media education intervention for parents helped them to respond in more meaningful ways to their children’s requests for unhealthy foods they saw advertised on television. Poe (2007) explored elderly women’s “health-media literacy” in their interpretation of drug marketing messages. Few others have examined adult media literacy, though several have emphasized the importance of such work (Tisdell 2007 is one). The most comprehensive survey of adult media literacy to date was conducted in the UK; it focused on adults’ uses of, concerns about, and trust in different forms of media (Ofcom 2010).

Previous studies have incorporated media education interventions and evaluated the effects on participants’ interpretation and negotiation of media texts. The current study departs from these approaches in two ways: it measures the responses of participants to texts without a defined media education intervention, and it focuses exclusively on adults. This project includes only women because they spend the most time doing household food preparation across socioeconomic strata (Mancino and Newman 2007). The aim of this project is to begin to develop a baseline measure of adult women’s media literacy competence (including the role of media production experience in that competence) regarding food-related media texts. The specific media literacy measures applied here are those delineated by Primack and Hobbs (2009); their sub-domains of authors and audiences (AA), messages and meanings (MM), and representation and reality (RR) provide a good basic framework for introducing participants to the core concepts of media literacy.

Design

The larger project of which this paper is a component is meant to explore how food media literacy may be conceptualized, and what factors may impact an individual’s capacity for and activation of it. Because I am researching phenomena that have not yet been examined in media studies, it is appropriate and useful to use focus groups. This method is well suited for the preliminary stage of a new investigation, for focus groups are useful in “orienting oneself to a new field; generating hypotheses based on informants’ insights;...[and] developing interview schedules and questionnaires” (Morgan 1998, 11). Focus groups tend to generate emic or unstructured data, because they “allow individuals to respond in their own words, using their own categorizations and perceived associations” (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 13).

Sample

Two focus groups were conducted, one with seven participants (group one) and the other with six (group two). Participants were recruited from the administrative staff at a state university in the northeast using an e-mail announcement and flyers posted on campus, and they were compensated \$15 for one hour’s participation. All participants were screened to exclude those following a vegan diet and those with diabetes or pre-diabetes, because such factors may influence their interpretation of a food-related text. Most of the participants were Caucasian (one was Asian-American), and all were likely middle-class. No socioeconomic or demographic data were collected from the participants, so these observations are my own and based on the women’s appearance and speech patterns.

Participants in group two were screened to include those with experience using graphics software. The purpose of grouping participants in this way was to ascertain whether different levels of media production experience influenced their capacity for critical interpretation of the food texts. It is possible that including a question about graphics software experience in the recruitment e-mail may have introduced a mild priming effect on group two’s discussion. However, the questions that were asked during both sessions were the same, and graphics software was not mentioned to any participant after the initial recruitment correspondence. After the discussions, participants were debriefed on the full purpose of the project.

Method

Participants were shown a series of three print advertisements for food, one at a time. The ads were chosen based on several criteria, the first of which is the likely familiarity of the products to the participants.¹ The first is an ad for Pepperidge Farm soft baked cookies, the second is for Heinz ketchup, and the third is for Hershey's Kisses. The first was selected because it contains imagery of home baking and a highly styled photograph of food. The second ad depicts a bottle of ketchup seemingly made up of a stack of sliced tomatoes. The image was likely created using photo manipulation, and it was selected to elicit participants' reactions to such a text. The third ad was chosen because it contains a recipe for a familiar cookie that participants might have experience making. A later phase of my project includes measuring women's interpretations of particular recipes; the third ad provided an opportunity to listen to women's reactions to a similar instructional text.

The discussion was guided first by asking participants to share their initial thoughts about each ad, and then by asking three of the NAMLE's (2007) five core questions: Who created this and what is its purpose?; what techniques are used to get my attention?; and what is left out of the message? These questions address, respectively, the authors and audiences (AA), messages and meanings (MM), and representation and reality (RR) domains established by NAMLE (2007) and used by Primack and Hobbs (2009). The questions were meant to be conversation starters for the focus groups, to encourage participants to examine the food media texts and to use their own words to describe their interpretations. Three follow-up questions were asked to further elicit participants' responses: in the discussion of the Heinz ketchup ad, the question was "How do you think this image was created?" and in the discussion of the Hershey's Kisses ad the question was "What do you think its creator wants you to do after seeing it?" and "Would you attempt this recipe?"

Analysis

Video recordings of the focus group sessions were professionally transcribed. To aid analysis of the discussions, participants' individual utterances were color-coded according to which of several themes they

addressed. This method is recommended by Bertrand, Brown and Ward (1992) for identifying primary themes in a discussion. Three of these themes are loosely based on the AA, MM, and RR domains (Primack and Hobbs 2009) and the others are as follows:

- descriptive (describes element[s] in text)
- affective (states like/dislike of element[s])
- evaluative (describes element[s] as good or bad, or effective or not)
- knowledgeable (mentions personal knowledge or background)

Trends were observed throughout the color-coded transcriptions, to identify which types of utterances (themes) were mentioned most and where. Attention was paid to which types of utterances followed the moderator's questions. Disagreements and clarifying questions were noted. Finally, passages that were most representative of the overall discussion were marked for inclusion and analysis in the following section.

Results

In each group, participants first gave descriptive and affective responses to elements in the first ad. The amount of AA, RR, MM, evaluative and knowledgeable responses increased as the discussion progressed, likely because the moderator's questions communicated to participants that critical responses were expected and sanctioned. Participants in group one expressed a great deal of awareness regarding the producer's intent and the ads' target audience, which relate directly to the authors and audiences (AA) domain of media literacy. This topic was initiated by F1², who demonstrated the highest degree of media literacy in the group. In response to the prompt "Who created this and what is its purpose?" regarding the Pepperidge Farm ad, she said:

I'm just wondering what magazines it would have run in, if it was more like maybe—well, not *Gourmet* or *Bon Appétit*, but something that was targeting cooks to show, like there's these different steps. These are the good ingredients we put in, just like you put good ingredients in your cookies. Or something like that. Or maybe probably, I'm sure it's probably a women's magazine.

¹ During the first focus group, I realized that two of the products in the ads are made in the state in which the focus groups were held. This allowed participants to activate more personal knowledge about the manufacturers and the products themselves than may have been possible elsewhere.

² Notation designating the identity of the speaker follows the pattern used by the transcriber (e.g. F1 is female participant number one).

F7 elaborated on the target audience and the intent of the ad:

I completely agree that it's targeting probably people who come home from school or work and want something that looks like mother made it, but it's already there.

In a later discussion of the Heinz ad, two participants in group one articulated a core principle of media literacy, the fact that people respond to media messages differently:

F7: I don't want this to sound like a sexist remark, so I hope it doesn't. But who eats more ketchup? Men or women? Probably men. Who's more visual? Men or women? Probably men. [laughter] So I am thinking this is geared toward men...I think that if it were in a magazine that a guy happened to be flipping through, that might catch his eye.

F4: But I think going back to like stereotypes and stuff, who's more health conscious? Women. And the focus is tomato.

The second group included more participants with experience using Photoshop and other graphics software. Differences between these two groups were less significant than expected, given the conventional wisdom in media education that production experience cultivates media literacy. The participants in group two addressed authors slightly more, but the primary difference was that they used more technical terms to describe how they thought the ads were produced. Before they were asked how they thought the Heinz ad image was created, several mentioned that the product logo looked "superimposed," the slices appeared "laser cut," and one said the image looked "architectural" and "like abstract art." When prompted to discuss how it was created, several of them identified specific techniques they thought were used to create the tomato-stack ketchup bottle.

F3: I think probably logistically, I see that they could probably have used real slices, but yes, then taken the label separate and placed it over those slices individually.

F4: I think you can even matte them on in Photoshop.

One participant activated her personal knowledge and elaborated on her thought that the ad was created by "some Photoshop wizard":

F2: I'm a designer, so I tend to look at things that way. And so part of the way that I look at ads or magazines is to dissect how they put their pages together or how they put their photographs together. And for me, I think Photoshop is a brilliant thing. But I think the sorcery and the fakery that it does, really bothers me. I still think it's brilliant sometimes, but I feel like there's so much fiction in photographs and on television and in magazines that I don't – I feel like it's really hard to tell what's real. And I know that's not, but...

Participants in both groups identified many of the techniques that were used in the Pepperidge Farm ad to attract a viewer's attention; their observations fit within the messages and meanings (MM) domain of media literacy. Before they were asked "what techniques are used to attract your attention?" several participants described elements in the ad—crumbs, a cooling rack, a mess left on a table—that suggest the cookies have a homemade quality. A participant in group two demonstrated critical thinking in both the AA and MM domains by identifying the ad's creator, the techniques used, and the presumed intent of the message:

F2: I kind of thought it was interesting that they styled it to look a little messy and not perfect and not *Martha Stewart Living*, everything in its place. I thought...that sort of casualness was interesting to me.

Participants in both groups activated their personal knowledge frequently in their assessment of the ads' representational realism, or the RR domain of media literacy. When asked for their initial thoughts about the Heinz ad, participants in the first group described the ad as "clever" and "deceptive" and a discussion followed about the ingredients in ketchup. Photo manipulation was mentioned only after they were asked "How do you suppose this image was created?" Participants speculated as to whether the slices were real or not, and discussed how real tomatoes and their juice would behave if cut in such a way. One participant activated her own indirect knowledge of digital manipulation:

F1: Maybe I'm too jaded because I know with my kid what you can do with all of this. That's his major. It's just amazing what they can do on the computer. You have an image that's that—like that and then you take it and you start moving it back and forth. I've seen him create stuff in less than an hour. You just sit there and go, holy smokes. I had no idea. So now I'm very jaded when I'm looking at stuff. So maybe this isn't good. [laughter] Maybe it is really tomatoes. It'd be nice if it was really tomatoes.

As the discussion went on, several of the other participants began to defer to F1 and asked her about Photoshop when talking about how an image was created. F1 apologized several times for mentioning it.

F6: I guess we're just a little skeptical because like number one said, they can do so much with the computer. I mean, they can make entire movies out of computer-generated people. So...

F1: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up.

Many participants in group one activated their personal knowledge and focused on the lack of realism in the depiction of baking in the Pepperidge Farm ad. They demonstrated their knowledge of the ingredients in such cookies, and how they are made.

F4: It's interesting that the three ingredients that they show--cinnamon, raisins, and sugar. There's no, like, oatmeal. [laughter]

F6: I think there's some oats, but it's not prominent.

F4: Oh, yeah, I meant down here.

F6: It's not prominent. No, you're right. It's interesting that the oatmeal isn't prominent.

F4: And it sort of bothers me that the sugar is last, even after they show you the picture of the batter.

F6: Yeah, the steps aren't in order.

F4: Yeah, that really bothers me. [laughter]

They discussed the lack of realism in the ketchup ad as well. When asked for their initial thoughts, several participants identified elements missing from the ad.

F7: Ketchup is pretty much all sugar, and they make it seem like it's just homegrown tomatoes and that's it.

An exchange about the Heinz ad between two participants in group one illustrates the importance of background knowledge in being able to form a critical response. They were responding to another participant's observation that the ad implies ketchup contains only tomatoes.

F4: I pretend like in real life that there's only tomatoes in there. [laughter] Had you not said anything about sugar, I would have assumed that it was like tomatoes, and vinegar? I don't know. I don't even know what's in ketchup.

F7: There's a lot of sugar.

Participants in group one activated the most personal knowledge in their discussion of the third ad, for Hershey's Kisses. The ad contains a recipe for Peanut Butter Blossoms, cookies that have Kisses pushed into the middle. Several participants said they had made a version of these cookies before. F1 expressed reluctance to follow the recipe:

F1: Well, they're just so much work. To me, making cookies--I do cookies once a year. And these particular ones, I mean you have to roll them up, put them in the sugar, and then moosh them down, and then unwrap the Hershey's kisses, and put them in the--it's like, I'm all about bar cookies, okay? You slice them up and then...[laughter]

One of the most interesting responses came from a participant who identified the artificiality of the focus group setting, and asserted that the level of critical analysis she and the other participants were applying to the Heinz ad was not representative of her everyday interaction with media.

F3: Like if this is an ad, we don't tear them apart like that. You glance through a magazine, you see it quickly, oh cool, flip the page. That was the end of that. But it sticks with you. Those look like sliced--that's very cool advertising. I'll remember that because of the uniqueness of it. It works.

Later in the discussion another participant echoed this observation, saying she was only noticing small details because the group was "over-analyzing" the advertisement.

Discussion

In these exercises with adult women, three core questions of media literacy proved effective in guiding the discussion and encouraging participants to respond critically to the texts. Most participants expressed observations that went beyond descriptive or affective domains, more so as the discussion progressed. The increase in evaluative and media literate utterances suggests that the process of guided inquiry itself may have served as an intervention.

What proved especially noteworthy in the analysis of the transcripts was the unexpected role of second-hand production experience, and the importance of personal knowledge in the interpretation of food texts. The findings confirm what was stated in the introduction: with regard to food media, production experience has two facets. One concerns the production/preparation of food itself, and the other the production of media texts about it. A few participants activated both types of knowledge, and this breadth of production experience made their capacity for critical analysis especially strong.

Sargant (2004) questions whether personal experience with media production is necessary to develop media literacy, and Hobbs (1998) identifies this question as one of the ongoing debates in media literacy education. The critical responses given by F1 in the first group suggest that such experience need not be first-hand in order to increase an individual's capacity for critical thinking. She speaks about her son's work with Photoshop, and attributes her skepticism regarding the images to what she has learned by watching him. The data gathered in this study cannot reveal the extent of her observation, but the fact that she applied this knowledge to her analysis of the texts suggests that she actively processed what she saw him do. It is also noteworthy that her mention of Photoshop and image

manipulation continued to influence the discussion, as several other participants deferred to her and asked about Photoshop when examining the other texts. The participant's activation of second-hand knowledge suggests that indirect production experience may be useful in adult media education.

The influence of highly media literate participants on their peers also suggests that knowledge of media production need not be direct to be effective. Comments made about Photoshop by participant F1 in the first group occasionally galvanized the discussion around the possibilities of photo manipulation. Several of the other women looked to F1 for her evaluation of ads, and her presence seemed to encourage the others to express skepticism. In this case, the other participants' experience with Photoshop was third-hand—via F1 and her observations of her son's work—and yet it still influenced the interpretations some of them made of the texts. To reiterate, this may mean that hands-on production experience is not as necessary in media education for adults as it is for children and adolescents.

Many of the participants' critical responses to the texts were informed by personal knowledge—about the ingredients of a product, about how items really look in the package, or about how a recipe turned out when they followed it at home. While personal knowledge is an important resource to draw on when evaluating a media text, it is just as important to be able to transcend it and respond critically to a representation of an unfamiliar object. For example, a woman who has made chocolate chip cookies may be able to critically evaluate the realism in a photo of cookies by drawing on her personal experience. But when she sees a photo of sushi or another food she has never eaten nor made, can she activate her knowledge that photos of food do not necessarily represent reality? The transfer of critical thinking skills from one genre or media text to another is an important component of media literacy emphasized by Hobbs and Frost (2003) and The Center for Media Studies, Rutgers (2000). A participant in group one made a comment that spoke directly to the idea of transfer. When speculating about whether the tomato slices in the Heinz ad were real, she activated her knowledge that "they can make entire movies out of computer-generated people. So..."

The participants' critical responses to highly produced food advertisements suggest that they may be able to apply similar criticism to slick "food porn" on television. Several women commented that the photos showing preparation of oatmeal cookies were

unrealistic, and they may be able to identify such lack of realism in a video text as well. But again, such skills may be limited to depictions of subjects that are familiar to them. Transferability of these skills to media portrayals of “strange” foods and activities merits further examination.

Limitations, Contributions, and Further Work

An exploratory study using two homogeneous focus groups has many limitations. These results should not be construed as generalizable to all adult women, since all the participants are administrative staff at a large, semi-rural state university and are likely college-educated. Findings may be different with a sample in an urban community, or one with participants who have no more than a high-school education. Regardless of its small sample, this study is an important, exploratory step in building a knowledge base. Research on adult media literacy is in a discovery phase, and research on food-media literacy even more so. What this study’s findings contribute is an understanding of how personal knowledge and experience may inform a woman’s media literate response to a food media text.

Building on this work, further steps could be taken to examine adult women’s critical responses to a food media text that depicts an unfamiliar subject.

Many of the participants’ comments on the representational realism of the three ads were informed by their own personal experience with the advertised products. This suggests that personal knowledge is an important factor in food-media literacy, but more work must be done to determine whether these critical thinking skills can be activated elsewhere. Such transfer may become even more important as fewer adults participate in food preparation, for they may have a smaller knowledge base from which to draw.

The findings on personal knowledge and production experience contribute to the growing body of research on adult media education. This study may also inform future research in health communication, especially with regard to food marketing and nutrition literacy. Having personal knowledge (i.e., cooking skills) could make someone more able to critically interpret a fast food advertisement or an episode of “Man v. Food.” The flip side of this is that not having cooking skills could make people more likely to make the preferred reading of food media texts intended by advertisers and media producers. Food-media literacy may be a key skill in negotiating the growing and commercial-driven food media sphere, and in making food choices that are in the best interest of the individual.

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