

A Content Analysis of Food References in Television Programming Specifically Targeting Viewing Audiences Aged 11 to 14 Years

Mary G. Roseman, PhD, RD, LD¹; Morgan Poor, PhD²; Tammy J. Stephenson, PhD³

ABSTRACT

Objective: Examine food in cable television programming specifically targeting 11- to 14-year-olds (“tweens”).

Design: Content analysis of food-related scenes (FRS)—in which food was shown, mentioned, and/or consumed—in 880 minutes of programming was conducted.

Setting: Five days of afternoon/early evening television programs on the Disney Channel.

Main Outcome Measures and Analysis: Food references were compared with USDA MyPlate and classified according to modified Ratio of Recommended to Restricted Food Components.

Results: The authors found 331 FRS, averaging 16.6 scenes/h. Preponderance of FRS was physiological needs (40.7%), followed by display (10%), party (8.5%), social event (8%), and retail store (6.6%). Snacks dominated 41% of FRS, and breakfast, lunch, and dinner were much lower in frequency. Half of FRS was visual only, followed by verbal only. Food references were not congruent with MyPlate recommendations; 42% of food items did not fit into MyPlate food groups. Only 24% of food items were fruit or vegetables, which is considerably less than recommended by MyPlate guidelines. Using modified Ratio of Recommended to Restricted Food Components, 66% of food items scored < 1.0, signifying less nutritious.

Conclusions and Implications: Tween television programming regularly includes non-nutritious food, which likely influences tweens’ attitudes and behaviors. Television programming may consider past approaches to tobacco smoking and health messages on television. More attention is warranted regarding television programming by nutrition educators, researchers, health professionals, and industry specialists.

Key Words: food, television, content analysis, MyPlate, adolescents (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:20–25.)

INTRODUCTION

The average child spends more time consuming television content than being engaged in any other media activity, and watches nearly 40 minutes more than 5 years ago.¹ Research shows that during television viewing, children and adolescents are exposed to an average of 11–13 food advertisements a day, the vast majority of which are for food items high in sugar, fat, and sodium.² Recent studies also suggest that exposure to food

advertising can influence children's and adolescents' behavior, leading to increased consumption of snack food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and fast food.^{3–5}

Researchers agree that television food advertisements frequently target children and often promote non-nutritious food. However, research regarding food references in television programs targeting children is limited and dated, whereas, at the same time, the amount of time children spend viewing television programs is

increasing and viewing behaviors continue to change. Few studies have looked at food references and television programming,^{6–12} and only 2 have been published in the past decade.^{11,12} All but 1 of these studies focused on prime-time television shows,^{6–10,12} whereas only 1 examined television programs specifically targeting children.¹¹ Findings across these studies are similar to studies of food advertising; references to food in television programs are common, and most references are toward non-nutritious food. Thirty-five thousand appearances were found in a study of 2008 prime-time television programs; these appearances were primarily for regular soft drinks, traditional restaurants, and energy/sports drinks.¹² In past studies, the average number of food references ranged from 4.8 to 17 per hour,^{6,10} and more than half of the food references were for non-nutritious food items.^{6–10} Researchers in the only study of

¹Department of Nutrition and Hospitality Management, School of Applied Sciences, University of Mississippi, University, MS

²School of Business, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA

³Department of Dietetics and Human Nutrition, School of Human Environmental Sciences, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Address for correspondence: Mary G. Roseman, PhD, RD, LD, Department of Nutrition and Hospitality Management, University of Mississippi, 210 Lenoir Hall, Sorority Row, University, MS 38677; Phone: (859) 333-8807; Fax: (662) 915-7039; E-mail: mroseman@olemiss.edu

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children found that compared with healthy food items, unhealthy food items received nearly twice the total airtime.¹¹

Children can develop strong connections to television characters, so seeing these characters show enthusiasm for certain food items could arguably have more influence than food advertising.¹¹ Indeed, research has shown that a child is more likely to imitate another person if that person is liked or admired by the child¹³ and is the same age or slightly older.¹⁴ Furthermore, several studies have found an impact of modeling on children's food preferences and consumption patterns¹⁵⁻¹⁸; most notably, a study found that modeling of healthy eating by television characters led to an increase in children's fruit and vegetable consumption.¹⁹ Thus, it is critical to gain a better understanding of what food references children are exposed to while watching television programming that is specifically directed at them.

This study focuses on food references in television programming targeted at 11- to 14-year-olds, or the age group marketers have labeled "tweens." This is an especially important audience to consider; television viewing is at its highest among this age group, as this group averages more than 5 hours of television watching every day.¹ The number of children with a television in their bedroom increases from 54% among 8- to 10-year-olds to 76% among 11- to 18-year-olds,¹ which suggests that tweens are more likely to be watching television without adult supervision. Additionally, children's viewing of television programs extends beyond television and includes the Internet and DVD.¹

Therefore, the objective of this study was to build upon the literature by identifying, analyzing, and describing food references in television programming specifically targeted at tween viewing audiences. This study expands previous research⁶⁻¹² by examining a cable channel specifically targeting children.

METHODS

Content analysis was used to examine food references in 6 television

programs broadcast on the Disney Channel, an increasingly popular station among 9- to 14-year-olds.²⁰ Scenes were compared to the USDA MyPlate guidelines²¹ and analyzed according to a modified Scheidt's Ratio of Recommended to Restricted Food Components (RRR).²² The equation for RRR is as follows: $RRR = [(\%DV \text{ protein} + \%DV \text{ fiber} + \%DV \text{ calcium} + \%DV \text{ iron} + \%DV \text{ vitamin A} + \%DV \text{ vitamin C})/6] / [(\%DV \text{ calories} + \%DV \text{ sugars} + \%DV \text{ cholesterol} + \%DV \text{ saturated fat} + \%DV \text{ sodium})/5]$.

Sample

Five days of weekday afternoon and early evening cable television programming was recorded to construct the research sample. The sample focused on day parts known as early fringe and prime access, since it is during these time periods that tweens are more likely to be viewing television,²³ often alone and without parental influence. Comparable to methods of previous studies,^{6,9,10} a total of 20 hours of Disney Channel programming broadcast between the hours of 4:00 PM and 7:59 PM was recorded from Monday, January 22, 2007 to Friday, January 26, 2007, excluding commercial breaks and opening and ending credits. Programs were recorded in a digital content analysis lab that is housed on a university campus. Since this study did not involve human subjects in any aspect, approval by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board was determined to be unnecessary as per US Department of Health and Human Services guidelines.²⁴

Cable television programming was an appropriate sample for the study, since almost all American households have cable or an alternate delivery system,²⁵ and programming can be specifically targeted to reach certain audience segments. Specifically, the Disney Channel has 24-hour television programming and is available in more than 99 million US homes.²⁶ For 2011, the Disney Channel reported an 11th consecutive year as the number one television network among tweens 9-14 years old.²⁶ The 6 programs collected in 2007 ("Hannah Montana," "Kim Possible," "Life with Derek," "Sister Sister," "Suite Life of Zach and Cody," and "That's So

Raven") are still shown in syndication and are available on DVD, YouTube, and/or the Internet in 2013. Availability through alternative media is important, since recent research shows that 2 of the 5 hours tweens spend watching television daily are watched on alternative media (eg, DVDs, Internet, and DVR) vs live television.¹

Data Analysis Instrument

The data analysis instrument used for this study was adapted from the 1 developed by Kurman²⁷ and has been used by other researchers in analyzing food-related messages in television programming.^{6,7,9} The data analysis sheet included 8 components: (1) basic information: program name, date, and hour; (2) character identification; (3) character demographics; (4) scene location; (5) eating environment; (6) food-related reference: verbal, visual, consumptive, or a combination of these 3; (7) food: name of food, food group, brand name; and (8) transcription of in-program food-related comments. For the purpose of this study, components 5 and 6 and the food group in component 7 were analyzed. Eating environment consisted of 2 parts: (1) apparent reason for eating/showing/mentioning food (eg, party, physiological need, food display, cooking, groceries, gift); and (2) the meal occasion, if identifiable (breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack).

The primary unit of analysis used in this study was any food-related scene (FRS) in which food was shown, mentioned, or consumed. Any alteration in the continuity of action or a disruption in character interaction caused by other characters or events constituted a change in scene.¹⁰ A secondary unit of analysis was various food items within a scene, such as individual food items shown, mentioned, and/or consumed, to capture the relation of the food to the scene.¹⁰ Food was defined as "any article used for food or drink by humans, including chewing gum."⁶ Visual references were defined as those in which food was shown but not eaten, whereas consumptive references involved food that was eaten. If food was mentioned or talked about, it was recorded as a verbal reference. It was

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