

Food-Focused Advertising Literacy Can Increase Nutrition Knowledge in Elementary School Students

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising is recognized as part of the obesity problem because of the emphasis on energy-dense foods in advertising.^{1,2} Research has shown, however, that countermarketing (advertising strategies to promote healthier diets³) can help children to like the healthier foods.⁴ Nevertheless, these efforts do not teach children how to evaluate, be critical of, or create advertising. The curriculum, *Making Media for a Healthier U* (MMHU), described in this GEM teaches children principles of advertising literacy (ie, analyzing, evaluating, and creating persuasive messages across a variety of contexts and media⁵) to counteract unhealthy food advertising, encourage favorable evaluations of healthier foods, and improve nutrition knowledge. *Making Media for a Healthier U* was initially created for 7- to 8-year-olds because they are just developing a more sophisticated understanding of advertising.⁶ *Making Media for a Healthier U* is the first of its kind to integrate theory-based principles of advertising literacy and nutrition into core curriculum. *Making Media for a Healthier U* is presented along with results of its efficacy for increasing

students' nutrition knowledge. Results related to advertising literacy are reported elsewhere.⁷

CURRICULUM

Developed by a Cooperative Extension nutrition educator and an advertising literacy expert, MMHU was designed to be 9 hours (3 hours of nutrition and 6 hours of food-focused advertising literacy). Learning objectives related to the key concepts (eg, food groups,⁸ advertising literacy⁹) were created and then existing curriculum¹⁰⁻¹² was consulted first to assess fit and then to adjust the content with teacher feedback. For nutrition, MMHU addressed a common goal for elementary schoolchildren: to identify the major food groups and the benefits of eating a variety of foods.¹³ Each of the 6 lessons required 90 minutes with teacher-led information and activities. For example, in 1 lesson children learned the nutritional benefits of eating carrots, common persuasion tactics used in advertising, and language arts principles such as fact claims, opinions, and personification. They then made their own carrot advertisements (Figure). The MMHU materials included student workbooks,

sample activities, fully scripted lesson plans, PowerPoint files, and ancillary materials. Concepts in language arts as well as math principles (eg, decoding the nutrition label, computing calorie counts) were included (Table).

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the MMHU curriculum for improving nutrition knowledge was tested in a quasi-experimental field study with a pretest-posttest, control group-experimental group design. School board approval, parental consent, and children's informed consent were obtained. Ten third-grade classes (6 receiving MMHU and 4 as control groups) from a low-income school district in a suburb of Chicago, IL participated. Assessments were completed at baseline and at a 3-week after the test immediately after the MMHU intervention. Survey items included knowledge of the 5 food groups and the types of food within each group. Children wrote in the food groups on the My-Plate graphic.¹⁴ A continuous scale ranging from 0 to 5 was created based on the number of correct responses. Measures of knowledge of the types

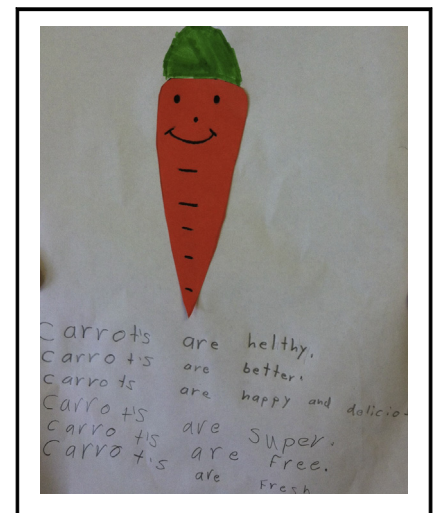


Figure. Carrot advertising example.

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Table. *Making Media for a Healthier U Curriculum*

Component	Lesson	Curriculum
Dietary Guidelines for Americans	1, 2	MyPlate curriculum ¹⁵
Food groups	1–6	MyPlate curriculum
Recommended physical activity	1, 2	MyPlate curriculum
Portion sizes	2–6	MyPlate curriculum
Recognition of advertising	3–5	Definition: The purpose of advertising is to provide information, persuade us to do something (usually to buy something), and promote a point of view or opinion. Identify what is/is not advertising, brainstorm where they see it in their own lives.
Understanding selling intent	3–5	Discuss advertising in general and evaluate ads for the purpose and what they are selling.
Recognition of advertising's source	4	Identify source or sponsor of the ad. Discuss reasons for their thinking and how the source may influence the ad's meaning.
Perception of intended audience	4–6	Identify the target audience of the ad. Discuss reasons for their thinking. Activity to create ads for different target audiences.
Understanding persuasive intent	4, 6	Talk about how advertising works or persuades. Solicit their ideas and then introduce persuasion models.
Understanding persuasive tactics (analyze ads)	4, 5	Provide print ad examples of common tactics used for children and analyze the ads (eg, celebrity, characters, exaggeration, product as hero). Ask children if they like the ads and who the target audience is, and identify the main message). Ask children to create ads for the same product using different tactics.
Understanding advertising's bias	3, 4	Sometimes ads do not present the truth (eg, exaggeration). Identify facts and opinions in advertising. Compare product claims with nutrition labels for the featured food.
Attitudinal advertising literacy (like/dislike; evaluate ads)	3, 4	For ad examples, ask students if they like the ads and discuss reasons why people may like or dislike advertising in general and specific ads.
Production (create ads)	3–6	Each lesson provides an opportunity for students to create advertising for a featured product. Review language arts principles (eg, fact, opinion, personification, adjectives).
Identify main message	3–5	When analyzing ads, identifying the main message is a key question asked.
Advertising process (research/analysis; strategy; creative; evaluation)	5, 6	Introduce the process by which advertising is made. Students learn to analyze secondary research, conduct simple primary research, and analyze the data. Students then learn what a creative brief is and talk about different strategies for a target audience. When students decide on a strategy and complete a brief, they brainstorm creative ideas and produce rough ads for their product. If time allows, the students polish the ads and show them in class.

of food in each food group were created based on the MyPlate curriculum¹⁵ with 6 multiple-choice questions (eg, which of these is not a vegetable?

Options: green beans, spinach, carrots, and eggs). A continuous scale ranging from 0 to 6 was created. The total time spent on nutrition and advertising

literacy was actually 360 minutes (ie, lessons 1–4 were taught). One of the 6 MMHU classes did not complete the posttest. Final analyses were based

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