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## Critical Consumption: Analyzing Food and Nutrition in Media Artifacts

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## **Critical Consumption: Analyzing Food and Nutrition in Media Artifacts**

### **Overview and Rationale**

According to the Nielson Company, “The average U.S. American spends twenty percent of their day watching television” (2011a), with adults watching 35.6 hours a week and children age 2-11 watching 25.8 hours a week (Nielsen, 2011b). There is a basic need for all audiences to become more media savvy and critically reflective about their media consumption, especially when that consumption may affect their health. During typical TV watching in the U.S., viewers are exposed to many messages about food that come from both the programs themselves and the food commercials broadcast each day. Often, these programs and commercials have overt messages about food and nutrition, while other times the messages are more covert and may even be unintentional. As U.S. Americans, and particularly American children, struggle with diet-related health issues, it is important to examine how exposure to media may be influencing how our communities think about food and nutrition.

One way to do this is to examine the messages of the media and to reflect on how these messages can potentially affect how different populations perceive food and nutrition. These perceptions may influence their food choices, which ultimately affect their health. Assigning a project to our students that helps them understand the influence media have on shaping ideas about food can ultimately help students become more critical media consumers in general and can also help break a cycle that may be contributing to health problems.

This assignment encourages students to: 1) think critically; 2) reflect on what they are learning in relation to popular culture and the media to which they are exposed on a regular basis; 3) identify and critically analyze messages influencing perceptions of food and nutrition; 4) demonstrate their increasing knowledge and media literacy of media depictions of food and nutrition; 5) apply communication theory; 6) become more critical media and food consumers.

Piloted in two semesters of a cross-listed, junior seminar course entitled *Food & Nutrition in the Media*. The assignment was well-received and recommended for future use in the course.

### **Timeline**

This assignment works best toward the end of the semester, after various units have been introduced and completed. For example, discussions on race, gender, socio-economic status need full development in relation to the media in combination with relevant course readings, in order for students to have the proper ‘tools’ for analysis of these messages within a particular media artifact.

The course in which this assignment was originally used covered the following units prior to the assignment due date: Media; Nutrition; Nutrition & Health Communication; Media Literacy; Increasing Media Literacy; TV Advertisements vs. Dietary Recommendations; Communicating Race through Media & Food; Gender; Marketing to Children & Adolescents; Nutrition

Perceptions; Advergaming; Consumption, Body Weight, Image, and Sex Appeal; and Media Interventions.

However, this assignment can “stand alone” as its own unit (or part of a specific unit), instead of functioning as an end-of-semester assignment. If desired, the instructor could have students focus on a specific unit-topic (e.g., advergaming) and complete the assignment as part of that specific unit.

## Assignment

### Description

This media analysis presentation and paper allows students to choose media relevant to their lives and discover the possible ways such media influence their food choices, perspectives, and thoughts. In a classroom presentation, students will deliver a critical analysis of a specific example of food/nutrition in the media connected to specific, student-selected themes such as race, gender, and socio-economic status. Students will link the analysis to class content (theory, ramifications, and alternative approaches), and present accurate food & nutritional information on the ‘food’ depicted in the chosen media artifact. In the accompanying assigned 6- to 8-page written paper, students address the same topics as they did in the presentation, in slightly more detail with a full reference list of their resources. This paper is due at the same time as the presentation, in part, to help students prepare for the oral presentation.

### Directions

This project can be an individual or group assignment or a smaller classroom activity, depending upon course needs. (If the classroom technology is available, instructors can pre-select and assign one media artifact to each group of students to be examined during class.)

Students are to start by identifying a media artifact such as a magazine advertisement, television commercial, scenes from a television show or film, public service announcement, or online media. The media artifact can be targeted at any audience, depending on how the professor would like to modify the assignment. Students register their media choices with the professor for approval and to limit overlapping selections. Students need to secure a copy of the artifact, such as a video of the selection (for repeated play) for analysis and to eventually show to their classmates. Students frequently find these artifacts in a number of places, from magazines and the internet, to videos on food product manufacturers’ websites, YouTube, or by recording a commercial themselves on a VHS tape or DVR. See the following as examples: [Manwich](#), [Tyson Chicken Nuggets](#), and [McDonald’s Frappe](#).

Students then analyze the artifact to identify target audience(s) and messages they believe are being relayed to those audiences. Students are also charged with determining more subtle messages embedded in the discourse of the media. They are also encouraged to identify other possible unintended audiences that may be influenced by the messages they may be receiving.

The messages are then critically analyzed by the students. Several communication- and media-related topics can be assigned at this point, depending upon the course in which this project is assigned. Some of these topics may include: 1) use of persuasion; 2) effectiveness of communication; 3) health communication principles; 4) media analysis; 5) food and communication; 6) actual nutrition content; 7) gender, race, age, and socio-economic-based messages. The students critically reflect upon these messages and how they might be influencing audiences. In addition, students must also consider what their reactions will be regarding media messages like these in the future.

The media artifact and accompanying analysis is organized into and illustrated to the class in an oral presentation, followed by a thorough class-discussion of the media artifact and analysis.

Students also write an accompanying paper, due with their presentation, detailing their project from start to finish, including: 1) why they selected the media artifact(s) they analyzed; 2) a description and justification of the target audience(s) and possible unintended audiences; 3) any corresponding overt, covert, and unintended messages; 4) how these messages may influence audiences; 5) and the resulting voice of their own critique.

## Teaching Materials

### Assignment Description Handout

**ASSIGNMENT:** Media Analysis Presentation & Paper    **POINT VALUE:** points total  
**DUE DATE:** All papers due on same posted date; presentations dates are assigned on a first-come-first-served basis.

**PURPOSE:**

- This assignment is designed to help you to think about what we are learning in relation to popular culture and the media to which you are exposed on a regular basis.
- This assignment will allow for you to demonstrate your increasing knowledge and critical eye toward media depictions of food and nutrition while identifying and evaluating diverse perspectives.

**DESCRIPTION:** In the classroom presentation, each student will critically examine a specific example of food/nutrition in the media on specific themes (race, gender, socio-economic status, nutrient value, etc.), connect the analysis to what we are learning (discuss ramifications and better possible approaches), and present accurate food & nutritional information on the ‘food’ depicted in the chosen media artifact. A 6- to 8-page paper is also required.

- Choose a media artifact (print ad, commercial, TV show scene, film scene, billboard, etc.) that you can show in class (bring in print ad, use online video source or bring it on portable media storage).
- Provide accurate information for original airing, publication, or release (date/channel/name of periodical/target audience).
- Analyze this artifact and accompanying message and how they might influence the audience.

- Include both a discussion of the intent of the artifact from a media perspective (marketing, entertainment, etc.) and the other messages communicated, as we have discussed throughout the semester.
- Connect this analysis to what we are learning in class through our readings and discussions as well as what you have learned in other coursework during your college career.
- Highlight the strengths of the messages and discuss weakness. Include possible better approaches:
  - How should this artifact be designed in order to benefit people’s health (physical/psychological/emotional, etc.)?
  - What information does the audience need to make healthy decisions?
- Identify and explain accurate food and nutritional information for the ‘food’ in each artifact.

You will provide this analysis/information to the class in a presentation that should be 8 to 10 minutes in length. The presentation should be extemporaneous and adhere to general public speaking guidelines.

In addition, you will write a 6- to 8-page paper reflecting this analysis and information. The paper should be academic in nature, contain no fewer than four credible sources (beyond our class material), and follow paper guidelines outlined in the syllabus. The paper is due with your presentation.

**Assignment Evaluation Form**

**Presenter’s Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Artifact:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Oral Presentation Skills:** 5 4 3 2 1  
 (Volume, eye contact, rate of speech, confidence, extemporaneous delivery)

**Comments:**

**Organization:** 5 4 3 2 1  
 (Introduction, transitions, conclusion, able to follow without getting lost)

**Comments:**

**Content:** 5 4 3 2 1  
 (Original airing, release, pub date/strengths & weaknesses/better design/other classes)

**Comments:**

**Themes discussed:** 5 4 3 2 1

**Comments:**

**Nutrition Information:** 5 4 3 2 1  
**Comments:**

**General Comments:**

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Total Score:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Key Readings**

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**Supplemental Readings**

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### Biography

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**Tara Schuwerk** holds a joint appointment at Stetson University as an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Media Studies and in the Integrative Health Science Department. She earned her interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Human Communication from the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University with specializations in health communication, intercultural communication, and qualitative research methods. She is interested in understanding how people perceive and construct ideas of health, specifically in the areas of food and nutrition. She is currently researching hunger relief, specifically the food banking system. She teaches a range of courses including: intercultural communication; qualitative theory and methodology; health communication; food and nutrition in the media; food, health, and controversy; and organizational communication.