

Women and Health Food Intake

A content analysis of televised commercials

Alejandra Lemus

SOCI 4309.001- Qualitative Research Methods

Dr. Rachel Romero

A04101701

Introduction

Television commercials tend to market certain foods towards women that are otherwise not marketed in the interest of gaining male consumers. The depiction of women in the media is widely studied throughout sociological research, but there is not much research on the ways in which diet and healthy snack food marketing is carried out to entice women on certain television commercials. The media, especially ads and commercials have become increasingly influential in affecting our simple everyday choices such as picking which foods are appropriate to eat and in which occasion they are appropriate to eat. Food consumption is a widely social activity that also considers our well-being, both physically and mentally. Being aware of what we consume is as important as considering how it is that we come to make those choices. It is important to look at the social factors that influence our food intake more closely.

We watch television commercials whether we want to or don't want to, so it is important to study commercials thoroughly in determining how influential they tend to be in determining our choices in food intake. In society, we have a sense of what types of foods are appropriate to eat according to our gender but answering the question "how are health and diet foods marketed to women in television commercials" will create a deeper understanding in the meaning of the social cues placed on women for when it is time for them to try to start dieting and eating healthier. A deep understanding of issues that society places onto one particular group of people helps in diminishing those high standards from being placed onto those groups of people.

Literature Review

The topic of intended gender targets in food marketing is as important to social research as it is for advertising and marketing companies. In both contexts, knowing what types of foods are generally targeted in accordance to gender can help in understanding the preconceived

notions society has on food choices of individuals based on gender perceptions. It is evident through watching commercials that there tend to be targeted demographic groups when advertising specific types of foods. Various social research points the perceptions of dieting and food intake as being affected by social action (Heiman & Lowengart, 2014; Mooney & Lorenz, 1997; Beaton et. al, 2013). Contemporary research instates the influence of social food consumption on individual food choices.

Social research should further instate the way that certain food consumption stereotypes are enacted by gender structured marketing. Although these studies are indeed growing, much more needs to be studied about the way these health foods are marketed to women inside of the media, such as in television commercials where we see the majority of food commercials. How are health and diet foods, which have been increasingly used to entice a female audience, marketed to this particular group? This research question will answer more than that of what we already know; healthy snack foods are primarily marketed to women, but the following research will explore the portrayal of these types of foods to a female audience.

Food commercials in the media vary in stereotypes when trying to entice either a male audience or a female audience. Food consumption is undoubtedly a socially constructed everyday occurrence (Mooney & Lorenz, 1997; Beaton et. al, 2013). The reason that we consume certain foods is because we have constructed food taboos and prohibitions in accordance to socially constructed meanings of what constitutes food items as either feminine or masculine. These identifications of the masculine and feminine aspects of foods are what create the “two-track marketing strategy for food providers” (Todd et. al, 2009). There are some foods

that are primarily aimed for women to enjoy and some that are masculine or manly foods primarily for the enjoyment of a male audience. The foods considered to be feminine and structured as socially acceptable for women to consume are those foods that contain less fat, low-fat dairy products, fruits, vegetables, herbs, salads, etc. Masculine foods are viewed as being high in fat and proteins, primarily for the function of satisfying hunger, while feminine foods are more for taste and quality (Heiman & Lowengart, 2014; Beaton et. al, 2013).

It is almost as if these foods are objectively viewed as either feminine or masculine because we label these foods in accordance to what others think is more acceptable for either a man or a woman to want to eat. This leads to the impression management that is carried out by individuals in order to adhere to these standards of food consumption. Women are more likely to use impression management in restraining their food intake, especially around males while men have been found to eat rather similar portions when consuming foods around either women or men, yet men still tend to pick the rich-fat, protein, meaty, and hearty diet (Beaton et. al, 2013). Mooney and Lorenz (1997) also found that women are viewed less favorably than men when consuming food, meaning that women are held to higher standards when making food choices.

Women have been particularly targeted in ads and commercials to change or develop certain eating regimens in accordance to what is widely believed to be preferable for women to consume by the basis of body image standards (Anschutz et. al, 2009). This is because women tend to be more susceptible to norms on food intake and advertisements and commercials use this fact to target women primarily, for the most part, in food commercials (Anschutz et. al, 2011). Since women have also been found to be more conscious in selecting food according to

caloric information, commercials tend to advertise caloric information about the food being marketed primarily to women (Heiman & Lowengart, 2014). In the Anschutz's et. al 2009 study on television commercials affecting body image for women, there was found to be an undoubtedly large amount of advertising aimed to promote women to choose products in order to improve her own body image. Body image is particularly a main topic when considering the foods that either men or women choose. Todd et. al (2009) also mention the fact that research has consistently shown that "high involvement in food decisions is largely a feminine activity". This is also consistent with the reason that ads and commercials tend to market healthier food options to women. Health and dieting is primarily targeted to women when it comes to advertising because men show to be uninterested in reading health and nutrition labels on food (Todd et. al, 2009).

These findings in themselves explain the growing number of research studies considering gender perceptions on food intake along with the intended targeting of women to more health conscious foods. Certain foods are more acceptable for men, while others are more acceptable for women and these standards can highly affect body image, appetites, food intake, and food choices, especially for women. Further examination of the relationships that women develop around food will contribute to understanding and diminishing the stigma that women face when they are not restraining themselves in food intake. That is why it is important to put a particular focus on the way healthy snack and diet foods are marketed to women when considering carrying out this research.

Data/Methods

For my analysis on how healthy snack and diet foods are marketed towards women I will look at television commercials and evaluate the intended target group for the food product being sold while observing the ways in which the marketing is carried out. I used an unobtrusive method of content analysis with a sample of forty randomized food television commercials found on YouTube and Google. Using content analysis is beneficial when conducting a study like this because this type of analysis doesn't require direct interaction and the data is attainable quickly.

I observed the women within those commercials and looked for how the food was being marketed by the women themselves. I also looked at the social cues used as to when it was the time for the women in the commercials to start looking for healthier options. I wrote down various phrases from the commercials that could potentially answer how healthy snack and diet foods are marketed towards women. Hearing phrases from women in the commercials in regards to their diets will help in interpreting how these foods are used to get a wide selection of a female audience. I watched each commercial at least twice to catch anything important that might have been missed the first time in order to interpret the data more accurately.

I used twenty commercials from Kellogg's Special K, which by just watching these commercials, you only see women in those commercials so this brand is a good brand to observe since it is a health food primarily targeted at women. I also used ten commercials from Activia because yogurt is a health food marketed on television. I used ten commercials from Skinny Cow and although Skinny Cow products are chocolate, ice cream, candy, and iced coffee, these products try to market "healthy" sweets to women. I chose cereal and yogurt commercials because these foods generally advocate health plus diet and just by watching these commercials, women were overwhelmingly the ones consuming the food being marketed. The sample to the

study shows a potential limit. Although the sample is large, it is not very representative of all commercials that market health and diet foods because the majority of commercials that were readily available happened to be the Kellogg's Special K cereal commercials. Nonetheless, this is a brand of health breakfast food that evidently markets to women and has no other intended target group. Using these three groups of television commercials allows for an understanding of how healthy snack and diet foods are marketed towards women.

Analysis

Three themes that were overwhelmingly found within the analysis on how healthy snack and diet foods are marketed towards women were; advertising light eating/small portions of food, advertising "healthy" sweets to women, and the concept of a woman's looks being related to her overall health.

Light Eating

Most of these commercials centered on the idea of eating less while also becoming full from consuming smaller amounts. This may seem like a good marketing strategy but what it is doing to women when it gives the impression that you can eat small amounts of a cereal or yogurt cup while remaining full, is that it is advertising eating lightly. The majority of commercials I observed supported eating few calories with phrases like "only one-hundred calories" in most of their advertising. This adds to the impression that one-hundred or few calories are enough per serving to support a healthy diet. Since women like to be aware of the calories they are consuming, these commercials succeed in advertising light eating.

There was a Skinny Cow commercial that advertised their "caramel chocolate bites" and it repeatedly used the phrase "only one-hundred and thirty calories per serving". Lighter food

options are consistently marketed to women in commercials which can cause a sense of prohibition for women from heavy-set foods. One Activia commercial emphasized the importance of eating light after the holidays because according to the commercial, “after all the shopping, cooking, and heavy foods I feel bloated....and less motivated.” Many of the Activia commercials gave a notion of bloating as being related to only to women by having only women in the commercials analyzed.

Advertising light choices to women further limits food choices for women. Women, while watching commercials like these will feel the need to go for smaller calorie intake, while there are still varieties of hearty, heavy, and healthy foods that give more nutrition per serving.

Sweets are for women

A Special K commercial for their “chocolatey delights” showed a woman sitting on her couch in the middle of the night craving sweets and started with the phrase, “it is 9 PM and chocolate cravings begin again.... You can get your chocolate fix without undoing your whole day...” This commercial shows a standard that society has when it comes to chocolate cravings; they are usually viewed as cravings that women possess. Kellogg’s Special K commercials and especially the Skinny Cow commercials, give a sense of chocolate being a kind of forbidden fruit that women indulge in and later feel guilty about eating. Not only does this create a barrier to women for feeling guilt when craving sweets, but it also is sending a message that you can include various sweets as part of your diet and health food plan. Sweets are marketed to women with the intent of coming across as healthy enough to eat.

A number of the Skinny Cow commercials also showed that their line of sweets is intended to be for women since their commercials only comprise of women consuming the

product. One commercial showed a reporter, Fallon Mercedes, going around Hollywood Boulevard asking people to try a new Skinny Cow Candy and the only people she interviewed were women. Over half of the Skinny Cow commercials showed women “indulging” in the products whilst day dreaming. Skinny Cow commercials tend to market their sweets to women by showing them eating the chocolate seductively, showing them choosing chocolate over men in three of the ten commercials that I had found. One of the commercials showed a woman stopping an elevator with a man in there with her while she ate a Skinny Cow chocolate bar. She was seductively rubbing her own hair while eating the chocolate.

Television commercials generally advertise sweets to women since they are viewed as a sort of indulging kind of audience to market to. Women are also seen as trapped by the guilt of consuming chocolate or other sweets, while trying to maintain their health. This helps these commercials create a notion that eating sweets as a woman is nothing to be ashamed of, but as long as they are “healthy sweets”. Advertising sweets primarily to women doesn’t help women in making more health-conscious decisions in regards to food intake.

Looking good = Healthy

The commercials I looked at overwhelmingly had a notion of healthy living as being related to how good you look. More specifically, many of the Kellogg’s Special K commercials mentioned fitting into a pair of jeans with phrases such as, “how great you look is in your jeans...jeans don’t lie...”; this commercial from 2012 showed women throwing out scales through their windows as a way of showing that it is all about what your body looks like in jeans that determines a health success. Other phrases I coded as to the relation between looking good as being a way of being healthy were, “look good, feel fabulous”. One Activia commercial asked “Do you know what happens when you eat Activia?” and it featured the singer Shakira showing

off her abs while belly dancing. All the Activia commercials zoomed into women's flat stomachs and said phrases like "dare to feel good" and "feeling good starts from the inside". They advocated for internal health but ironically showed women feeling good with a flat stomach as the focus. Another Activia commercial from Canada, showed a woman consuming Activia while her belly was dancing, and then showed another woman eating a burger, while her belly was not dancing. Most of the Activia commercials feature flat stomachs in relation to solving bloating problems.

There were two Special K commercials that sounded very similar with phrases like, "looking good never tasted so great" and "great taste never looked so good". This relates to body image standards imposed on women and emphasizes the fact that being healthy is all in how slimming the woman looks. This doesn't do much for women because it is advocating health choices based on looks. Instead of advocating feeling and living healthier, these commercials advocate a sense of style in relation to a woman's health.

Another aspect of looking good in relation to being healthy was being able to fit into clothes. In a Special K commercial a woman was getting ready fast for her day while one of her buttons on her blouse popped, then she considered skipping breakfast. A button popping out of a woman's shirt was used to illustrate that once clothes starts to not fit that it is time to start dieting to fit into clothes. The concept with the commercial was to show that skipping breakfast is a thing of the past with Special K cereals but the button was a symbol of representation for the way clothing should fit as being related to starting a new diet. Many of the Special K commercials showed women slipping into jeans after eating Special K products. Jeans were widely used in these commercials to show that fitting into jeans is a staple for women when dieting or trying to lose weight.

Health and diet foods are increasingly used to relate to a woman's physical appearance, especially in the way that clothes fits. Women are subtly taught to engage in health practices to fit into a new pair of slimming jeans, rather than being focused on health itself. Health foods are marketed to women in a way that only increases concerns about how an ideal woman's body should look like. In the eyes of the commercials analyzed, once you can fit into that new dress or those new pair of jeans, you can reach health and diet satisfaction.

Conclusion

Overall, the television commercials that were analyzed answered the question on how healthy snack and diet foods are marketed to women by advertising eating lightly, eating "healthy sweets", and relating health to physical appearance. All three themes that were discovered could potentially only lead to more body-image issues plus heightened concerns for women in their food intake. Food commercials try to ease the guilt of over-eating by associating healthy eating with lighter choices. There is also a large amount of guilt associated with eating sweets, so food companies try to ease the guilt by reducing calories. Lastly, once health is advertised in relation to a woman's physical appearance, her physical body becomes the main focus with health which could be misleading for actual and realistic goals for attaining an overall stable health.

Women are misled by commercials on how to obtain a healthy and stable diet by focusing on reducing calories and enhancing physical appearance. This is problematic for women who find it harder to lose weight, because while watching these commercials with thin women eating chocolate and slipping into jeans after eating products labeled "chocolatey delights", it makes it harder to go for a well-rounded diet that can help in obtaining health satisfaction without being restrained.

A limitation to answering the research question was the sample that was used because it was not a balanced sample. Most commercials used were from Kellogg's Special K cereal. Regardless of the limited sample, all three product brands used showed only women eating the health food being marketed. This study shows the various standards imposed on women when making healthier food selections based on what they are seeing in television commercials. There are still many types of food commercials that could be analyzed for a deeper meaning of the tactics used to entice women to eat certain kinds of healthy snack and diet foods. There is also still a good amount of research that could be done to compare these types of tactics to the kinds of foods that are targeted at men in comparison to those targeted at women. Perhaps with a comparison study there could be further evaluations on how gender constructed food choices are affected by these kinds of television commercials.

Works Cited

Anschutz, D., Engels, R., Becker, E., Strein, T. 2009. "The Effects of TV Commercials using Less Thin Models on Young Women's Mood, Body Image, and Actual Food Intake." *Body Image* 6: 270-276.

Anschutz, D., Engels, R., Zwaluw, C., and Strein, T. 2011. "Sex Differences in Young Adult's Snack Food Intake after Food Commercial Exposure." *Appetite* 56: 255-260.

Beaton, S., Craig, J., Ferguson, S., Jeffries, A., and Turner, K. 2013. "Gendered Identity Negotiations through Food Consumption." *Young Consumers* 14 (3): 280-288.

Heiman, Amir, and Lowengart, Oded. 2014. "Calorie Information Effects on Consumer's Food Choices: Sources of Observed Gender Heterogeneity." *Journal of Business Research* 67 (5): 964-973.

Mooney, Kim, and Lorenz, Erica. 1997. "The Effects of Food and Gender on Interpersonal Perceptions." *Sex Roles* 36 (9/10): 639-653.

Lone, T., Pence, D., Levi, A., Chan, K., and Bianco-Simeral, S. 2009. "Marketing Health Food to the Least Interested Consumers." *Journal of Food Service* 20: 90-99.

Commercials

"Skinny Cow Candy presents 'Elevator'" by www.YouTube.com subscriber: TheSkinnyCowUS

"Skinny Cow Creamy Iced Coffee presents, 'Conference Call'." By www.YouTube.com subscriber: TheSkinnyCowUS

"Skinny Cow Creamy Iced Coffee Commercial" by www.YouTube.com subscriber: TheSkinnyCowUS

“Skinny Cow- Dreamier Than This?” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: EvanescentEffulgence

“Skinny Cow Candy- the Decadent Designer Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:

TheSkinnyCowUS

“Skinny Cow Divine Filled Chocolates Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:

TheSkinnyCowUS

“My Skinny Cow Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: LaCora Stephens

“Introducing the ALL NEW The Skinny Cow TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com

subscriber: Pubky1734

“Skinny Cow Dreamy Clusters TV Commercial- Annoying Kid on Airplane by

www.YouTube.com subscriber: AdCommercial

“Skinny Cow Candy Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Fallon Mercedes

“1985 Kellogg’s Special K commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:

RetroTimeMachine50s,60s,70s,80s,90s, Early 2000s

“Special K Challenge ‘Size Sassy’ Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Commercial

Tunage

“Special K More than a Number” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: SpecialKUS

“Kellogg’s Special K cereals 1995 commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:

CAMELPROD

“Special K Commercial 2012 – Original Morning Deliciousness” by www.YouTube.com

subscriber: Natalia

“My Special K- 2011 commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Fixels

“Special K Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Johnklin

“Be Flavorful- Special K Snack Bars TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
24hoursofAds

“Special K Commercial 2004 – with Actress Dawn Lewis” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
Alfred Cawthon

“Special K commercial 2012, Closet Like a Candy Store” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
Lynnae P

“Shhhut Down Fat Talk- Special K” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: SpecialKUS

“Kellogg’s Special K chocolatey delight cereal commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
newtestube

“Special K Silver Platter” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: SpecialKUS

“TV Commercial Kellogg’s Special K Multi Grain Cereal- What Will You Gain When You
Lose” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: TVCommercials

“1984- Commercial- Kellogg’s Special K Cereal- Thanks to the K, you can’t pinch an inch!” by
www.YouTube.com subscriber: videoarcheology3

“1990 Kellogg’s Special K Commercial by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
RetroTimeMachine50s,60s,70s,80s,90s,Early200s

“Kellogg’s Special K- Debate Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: ladymattyjane

“Special K Commercial (2010)- Lady of Red” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Jamie Gee

“Liz Henderson Special K Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: profanatory

“Own It – Special K” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Special K Canada

“Activia 2014 Shakira Commercial- ‘Dare to Feel Good’” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
ShakiraWorldFans

“Post-Holiday Activia Challenge TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Activia
US

“Activia Challenge TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com www.YouTube.com subscriber:
Activia US

“Women Talking About Activia- TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Activia
US

“Dannon Activia Commercial-2014” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Jamie Gee

“The ‘real’ Jamie Lee Curtis ACTIVIA TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
Jacob Ennis

“Danone- Activia Commercial Canada” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: Michaela Coman

“Activia Commercial w/ Jamie Lee Curtis-Elizabeth Triplett” by www.YouTube.com subscriber:
Elizabeth Triplett

“Activia Greek TV Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: ActiviaUS

“Danone ‘Activia’ Commercial” by www.YouTube.com subscriber: tgrate’s channel

