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Talking about food and nutrition: women and popular Australian women's magazines

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Talking about food and nutrition: women and popular Australian women's magazines.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

From

University of Wollongong

By

Danielle McVie, BSc (Nutrition), MPH.

Graduate School of Public Health

2005

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Danielle M McVie

Abstract

Review of the literature quite clearly indicates that there is need for a comprehensive review of nutrition messages presented to women. This is important given women's considerable and continuing influence on family food decisions and their reported use of magazines as a source of information in the media. Women frequently cite women's magazines to be an important source of nutrition information, however few studies have investigated this relationship in depth. It is important to understand how women use the information in women's magazines and to what extent they have the potential to influence the food decisions women make on a day to day basis.

The principle objective of this study was to gain insight into the food and nutrition issues considered to be of importance among women and in popular women's magazines. This project aimed to identify similarities and differences in the food and nutrition issues raised by women and those presented in women's magazines in order to provide insight into the role women's magazines have in the provision of food and nutrition information to women. This study was conducted in three parts.

The first study involved focus group discussions with three cohorts of women, that is, teenage girls aged 13-16 years, and women aged 25-34 years and 45-54 years. Nine focus groups were conducted. This study provided insight into women's use and perceptions of women's magazines and aided in the development of the content analysis instrument. Results indicated that participants in this study did not actively seek nutrition information from magazines. Rather, magazines primarily operated as an incidental source of information, and nutrition information acted as a feature that helped to sell one magazine over another. Learning about current nutrition issues was generally not the participants' motivation for buying women's magazines. Participants also

indicated that they did not place a high degree of trust in, and were skeptical of, the information presented in women's magazines.

The second study involved two semi-structured interviews with approximately half the women from each cohort who participated in the focus group discussions. Each woman participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview was conducted approximately five months after the focus groups and the second interview four months after the first interview. The interviews provided insight into the food and nutrition concerns of women. The results indicated that participants were not anxious about food and nutrition issues and did not think about food and nutrition in a risk framework. Weight concerns and the desire to lose weight were the most frequently discussed food and nutrition issue among all groups of women. Non-weight concerns were more likely to be raised by women who had current health concerns for themselves or someone in their family.

The third study consisted of a 12 month content analysis of eight popular women's magazines. This study was conducted concurrently with the semi-structured interviews. Magazines were analysed for the food and nutrition content of advertisements, editorial items and cover headlines. This study provided insight into the food and nutrition messages presented in women's magazines. The results of this study indicated that magazine advertising content is largely dominated by advertisements for non-core products (i.e. foods that were not listed as a part of the core food groups according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (Commonwealth of Australia 1998). Advertisements were also more likely to use consumer related statements as primary promotion messages. The majority of nutrition related statements were related to general nutrition. Results of the content analysis of editorial content highlighted that the predominant food and nutrition messages related to dieting and weight loss, followed by food or product specific articles. The dominance of dieting and weight loss messages was also reflected in magazine headlines. The content analysis

demonstrated clear inconsistencies in the food and nutrition messages they presented to women and were surprising in the limited presentation of food and nutrition issues that could be considered of direct interest to women such as osteoporosis, nutrition and aging or vegetarianism.

This thesis demonstrated a close alignment between the food and nutrition concerns of women and the issues presented to them via the content of women's magazines. Both the women who participated in focus groups and semi-structured interviews and the content of women's magazines content analysed have a very narrow focus regarding food and nutrition issues. Weight concern related to self identity (but not health) was the main concern raised by both the women and the magazines. This close alignment supports the findings of previous surveys where women have self reported that they consider magazines an important source of food and nutrition information. However it is not possible in this study to determine the direction of this alignment, that is, whether the magazines responded to or acted to lead women's food and nutrition concerns. In addition, it was evident from the content analysis that magazines were driven by the commercial imperative to sell products, including food and nutrition products, to women. Interestingly, the women who participated in the focus group discussions identified that women's magazines aimed to sell them products. Despite this, the women who participated in the semi-structured interviews indicated that magazines did raise their awareness of some food and nutrition issues.

This study has highlighted the potential for health professionals to utilise women's magazines to raise a broader range of food and nutrition issues, and to provide the necessary 'expert credence' sought by the women. However, this involvement of health professionals should be within the 'recreational' and entertainment context of the role of magazines in women's lives. The women in this study clearly identified that they primarily buy magazines for the entertainment they provide. It is therefore important that health professionals

learn to position broader food and nutrition issues within an entertainment framework.

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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used with in this thesis.

ADA:	American Dietetic Association
ANZFA:	Australia New Zealand Food Authority
AWW:	Australian Women's Weekly
BSE:	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CHO:	Carbohydrate
Cle:	Cleo
Cos:	Cosmopolitan
CSIRO:	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
Dol:	Dolly
GF:	Girlfriend
GM:	Genetically Modified
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NI:	New Idea
TL!:	That's Life
UK:	United Kingdom
USA:	United States of America
WD:	Woman's Day