

Characteristics of healthy weight advertisements in three countries

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Despite agreement that effective policies and programs designed to assist people maintain a healthy weight are multi-component and include macro-environmental elements, there remains a focus on strategies that encourage individuals to modify their behaviours.¹ This focus is likely due to a range of factors relating to the high costs associated with broader structural change, the difficulties associated with influencing the food industry's activities, and the receptiveness of the general public and industry to individual responsibility approaches.^{2,3} While mass media campaigns with an individual responsibility focus can be effective in promoting behaviour change, they need to be developed using evidence-based approaches to optimise their outcomes.⁴

The well-established advertising literature lists numerous considerations for campaign design.^{5,6} Key elements are overall approach, valence, and message frame. The overall approach can be cognitive or affective: cognitive approaches apply a rational argument for the recommended behaviour; while affective approaches use emotional arousal by invoking responses such as surprise, humour, shock or fear. The primary valence of the message can be positive or negative, depending on the feelings depicted. Finally, the message frame can focus on what can be gained or lost, both of which can be expressed positively or negatively. For example, negative gain can be shown in the form of unhealthy weight gain, and positive gain in attaining a higher quality

Abstract

Objective: High rates of population obesity have resulted in the dissemination of mass media campaigns that focus on achieving and maintaining a healthy weight. The aim of the present study was to analyse advertising techniques used in such campaigns to identify common and differential approaches in three countries with similar cultures and rates of obesity (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States).

Methods: An Internet search was conducted to identify healthy weight television advertisements aired in the three countries. Seventy-two advertisements were located and coded according to the advertising techniques employed.

Results: Despite the cultural similarity and comparable obesity rates of the three countries, there were few consistencies in advertising techniques employed. A main focus of the ads was diet, but disparate approaches were used to convey the message in each country.

Conclusions: The identified wide variation in advertising techniques may suggest that campaign managers would benefit from greater certainty about which advertising approaches are most effective in encouraging lifestyle behaviours associated with a healthy weight.

Implications for public health: A more robust evidence base would be useful to guide the development of healthy weight campaigns.

Key words: mass media campaigns, advertising, obesity, nutrition, physical activity

of life; negative loss can be shown in terms of lost years of life, and positive loss in the form of weight loss.

There is no single recommended approach in advertising theory. While the marketing literature notes that message recall and product evaluations can be enhanced by producing positive emotional responses in audiences,⁷ the results are mixed in the context of health messages. For example, some previous research suggests positive, gain-framed messages are more effective than loss-framed messages in many health contexts,⁸ although in Australia negative affect messages have been found to be effective in influencing attitudes and intentions relating

to alcohol and tobacco consumption and obesity.⁹⁻¹¹ Given this lack of consensus, further research is needed into the types of approaches being used in specific behavioural and cultural contexts to provide insight into current advertising practices. This information can constitute the starting point for subsequent analyses focused on identifying which commonly used advertising techniques are most effective in encouraging changes in relevant lifestyle behaviours.

The aim of the present study was to analyse mass media advertisements promoting healthy weight in Australia, the UK and the US to identify the most commonly employed techniques in these national

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contexts. Reflecting their shared ancestral heritage, these countries have high rates of cultural similarity, comparable rates of overweight and obesity (roughly two-thirds of adults¹²) and stated commitments to reduce population-level obesity via public education campaigns. They thus represent useful locations for an exploratory analysis of the approaches used in healthy weight advertising campaigns.

Methods

The advertisements included in the study were sourced from the Internet via searches conducted using Google Videos and YouTube. The search terms were combinations of the following words/phrases: television advertisement/advertising, campaign, obesity, weight, health, nutrition, healthy eating, physical activity, and exercise. This search process generated 72 ads, representing 39 discrete campaigns aired between 2004 and 2015. Most were dated 2010–2015 ($n=59$, 82%), which is consistent with the observation that campaigns relating to obesity prevention were rare prior to the early 2000s.¹³

The ads were initially coded by two authors. Each ad was watched twice and then assessed according to codes reflecting campaign design elements listed in Table 1.^{5,6} On occasion where there were coding discrepancies, discussions were held with a third coder until consensus was achieved. Frequencies by country of origin were calculated to permit comparisons because the relatively small numbers of ads in each ad element category precluded more complex statistical analysis.

Results

As evident in Table 1, the only observable similarity across the ads from the three countries was a general prioritising of diet. The typical Australian ad adopted a negatively valenced cognitive approach and a negative gain message frame, and fear was the most commonly used executional element. The US ads most commonly exhibited a negatively valenced affective approach and a positive gain message frame, with fear and humour appeals used with equal frequency. The typical ad from the UK focused on both diet and physical activity, usually using a positively valenced cognitive

approach and a positive gain message frame. The UK ads were somewhat different from those of the other two countries in their frequent use of children as protagonists in the depicted scenes. This was reflected in the relatively frequent use of animation and storylines that included moving forwards and backwards in time to demonstrate the consequences of current behaviours for children's future lives.

Discussion

This examination of a sample of healthy weight ads aired in three English-speaking countries indicates there are notable differences in campaign approaches despite the comparable obesity rates and cultural similarity of these countries. Other than a general prioritising of diet (consistent with Dixon et al.¹⁴), there were no identifiable trends in the results by country. While some variation between countries is to be expected, the results of this study reflect the lack of consensus in the immature body of literature relating to the most effective and acceptable advertising techniques for encouraging individuals to make the behavioural changes necessary to prevent obesity and other health-related problems.^{4,15} This outcome is particularly important in comparison to anti-smoking campaigns where there is more apparent similarity in techniques and behaviour change efficacy has been demonstrated.⁴

This study appears to represent the largest comparison of healthy weight advertisements, thus providing an important starting point for future research designed to inform more effective campaigns. Such future research can address the limitations of the present study by: (i) including a larger number of ads from a more diverse range of countries; and (ii) assessing target audience responses to determine whether the specific ad characteristics had an effect on attitudinal or behavioural outcomes. Accessing audience responses would also facilitate assessment of the extent to which the executional elements achieve their objectives (e.g. whether the use of a fear appeal actually elicited fear). In addition, given the increasing trend towards documenting campaign objectives and evaluation results, future research focusing on more recent campaigns could use the coding framework used in the present study to investigate the impact of specific ad attributes on campaign effectiveness.

Table 1: Ad analysis results by country (n = 72 ads).^a

	UK n (%)	US n (%)	Australia n (%)
Ads identified	19 (100)	38 (100)	15 (100)
Ad attributes			
Message focus:			
Awareness	1 (5)	7 (18)	5 (33)
Diet	8 (42)	20 (53)	7 (47)
Physical activity	8 (42)	7 (18)	2 (13)
Combination	2 (11)	4 (11)	1 (7)
Approach:			
Affective	4 (21)	26 (68)	5 (33)
Cognitive	14 (74)	12 (32)	10 (67)
Valence:			
Negative	3 (16)	21 (55)	9 (60)
Positive	11 (58)	11 (29)	4 (27)
Neutral	5 (26)	6 (16)	2 (13)
Message frame:			
Negative gain	8 (42)	14 (37)	8 (53)
Negative loss	1 (5)	3 (8)	1 (7)
Positive gain	10 (53)	16 (42)	4 (27)
Positive loss	0 (0)	4 (11)	2 (13)
Execution elements:			
Animation	7 (37)	2 (5)	5 (33)
Child protagonist/spokesperson	8 (42)	7 (18)	0 (0)
Fear	5 (26)	9 (24)	7 (47)
Graphic imagery	0 (0)	5 (13)	3 (20)
Humour	1 (5)	9 (24)	1 (7)
Time displacement	6 (32)	3 (8)	0 (0)

a: Not all ads featured all ad elements, resulting in some missing values. Percentages are calculated based on total number of ads per country. Bolding indicates most common approach(es) for each country for each ad attribute.

A final consideration is the potential for such messages to reinforce the assumption that obesity is an individual issue that is most appropriately addressed via efforts to change individuals' behaviours,¹⁵ making this aspect of ad response an additional important area of future research.

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