

LESSON PLAN

Junk Food Jungle

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grades 4 to 6

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MediaSmarts

Overview

This lesson familiarizes children with how and why “junk food” is advertised to kids. The lesson starts with an introduction to advertising and a discussion of the gimmicks involved in food advertising to kids. Students discuss the various foods they see advertised in their daily lives versus the ones they don’t see, drawing important points from this data. With this information in mind, students complete an advertising log and also choose an advertisement and analyzing its subject matter in relation to what they have just learned.

Learning outcomes

BIG IDEAS:

- The purpose of advertising is to get you to buy or like something
- Advertising uses particular techniques and appeals to persuade you

LEARNING GOALS:

Students will learn:

- That food advertising is big business and that kids are one of its main targets
- Which kinds of foods are advertised more than others and the effects of this on overall health
- Techniques used by advertisers to appeal to kids
- About *Canada’s Food Guide* and the types of foods needed to maintain a healthy lifestyle

Students will be able to:

- Identify advertising techniques
- Create a media work
- Use advertising techniques in their own work

Preparation and Materials

- For reference, use [Canada's Food Guide](#)
- Prepare to project or distribute the handouts *Food Advertising Strategies* and *Junk Food Ads*
- Prepare to project the handout *Healthy Food Ad*
- Prepare to distribute the assignment *My Healthy Food Ad*

Procedure

GUIDED DISCUSSION

Begin by asking your students:

- What is meant by a “healthy” diet? (*A balanced diet made up of a variety of foods from the categories in Canada's Food Guide. Moderation in the amounts of foods eaten.*)
- What are the four food groups that make up the healthy plate in Canada's Food Guide? (*Vegetables and fruits, protein foods, whole grain foods, and water.*)
- Where do junk foods fit into our diets? (*If you have a balanced diet, a few treats are all right.*)
- Why is too much junk food not good for us? (*They do not provide any real nourishment; they make us less hungry for healthier foods; too much salt, sugar and fat from junk foods can lead to health problems.*)

Now ask students to think of the last advertisement they saw for any kind of food. Remind them to include not just TV commercials or video ads but ads they heard on the radio, sponsored posts by food companies, mentions of a food by a YouTuber or influencer, or even a food package on a TV show, movie or video game. Ask a few students to volunteer which ads they remember.

Now ask: How many of those ads are for foods on the Canada's Food Guide healthy plate? How many were for junk or snack foods?

Point out that most kids see many more ads for junk food than for healthful food, and that advertising is a BIG business: US food companies spend more than ten billion dollars a year on advertising. Not only do kids see more ads for junk food than for healthful food, they see more ads for junk food than for almost anything else: around four in ten ads that kids see on TV are for unhealthy snacks.

Ask students: Why do they think there are so many more ads for unhealthy food than for healthy food?

Let students discuss this for a few minutes, then explain to students:

- healthy foods are more similar to one another than unhealthy ones (for example, all bananas are basically the same)
- unhealthy foods have a higher **profit margin** than healthy ones because they travel better and keep longer. (This is one reason that milk is one of the only healthy foods that gets advertised heavily.)
- unhealthy foods can be **engineered** more than healthy ones (for example there are people who work just on making sure the sound Doritos make when you crunch into them is as satisfying as possible)

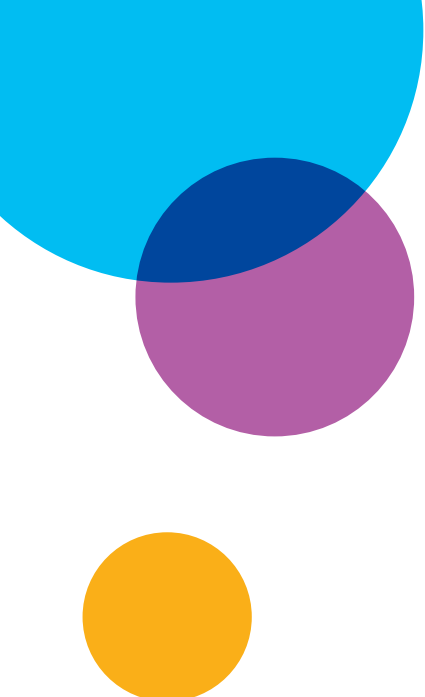
Distribute the handout *Food Advertising Strategies* and go through it with the class. For each technique, ask students if they can think of an example in an ad they've seen recently (not necessarily a food ad.)

Next, project or distribute the handout *Junk Food Ads* and have students identify what techniques are used in each one:

- Top left: Endorsement by popular YouTuber JoJo Siwa
- Top right: Weasel Words (Aren't all hamburgers hot? And how do you measure "juiciness"?)
- Bottom left: Mascot, Colour (brown background, lots of green) Health Halo (images of grass and trees, and claims like "gluten free" - but it still has 6 grams of sugar, around the same amount as a bowl of Corn Pops or Froot Loops.)
- Bottom right: Mascot, Feel-Good (Doesn't the boy running with Tony the Tiger look like he's having fun?) and Tell a Story (There's got to be a story there.)

Now ask students: We've already talked about *why* healthy foods don't get advertised as much as unhealthy foods, but what would it be like if they were? Ask students to name some healthy foods they like, then some that they don't like. How might they advertise the ones they like? How might advertisers try to get them to buy the ones they don't like?

Project the handout *Healthy Food Ad* and ask students what ad technique it uses (Humour—it plays on the "ugly face" on the broccoli stalk and the idea that kids don't like vegetables. You could also say that the ugly broccoli is a kind of mascot.)



Distribute the assignment sheet *Your Healthy Food Ad* and have students complete the assignment individually or in pairs, at your discretion.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

For younger students, you may consider supplementing this lesson with the TVOntario Original Series Wacky Media Songs. These short videos explore a variety of digital media literacy topics, including advertising and marketing. Here are a few suggested videos and discussion topics:

Create the Hype! There's a whole marketing machine behind movies and they start to create the hype way before the movie even opens by selling us hoodies, toys, t-shirts and more! Guess what? We help create that hype when we wear or use their merchandise!

Before the video, ask: Do you have any clothes or toys that were made to promote a movie, a TV show or a video game? Have you first ever heard about a game, movie or show that way?

After the video, ask: Why do you think marketers use things like toys and clothes to build hype for games, movies or TV shows? How do you feel about giving them free advertising by wearing those clothes? (It's okay if they do! Kids love media and sometimes like being "brand ambassadors." But they should understand that's what they're doing.)

Creating a Brand! From packaging to creating a cool mascot, everything about a brand should give us good feelings. Ava creates her own brand of cereal. Plus, she plays a wacky, singing llama!

Before the video, ask: What does it mean when we talk about a "brand" in ads?

After the video, ask: Can you think of any ads that try to make you like the brand instead of telling you what's good about the product? What are some ways that they do that?

Hiding in Plain Sight! Advertisers know that our emotions have a big impact on our buying decisions. They hit us in the feels with ads that make us feel good so that when we shop, we'll remember those good feelings and buy their stuff!

Before the video, ask: Have you ever seen an ad that made you feel sad, or happy, or excited?



After the video, ask: What are some ways that ads make us feel a certain way? How can advertisers make something look like it's good for us when it really isn't? (They highlight one healthful thing about it without telling us about other things that make it less healthful. That's called a "health halo.") Why might advertisers want to make us feel a certain way, instead of saying something about the thing they're selling? feelings when you're shopping.)

Words That Sell! Risk-free! Virtually unbreakable! Once-in-a-lifetime! Marketers use words to sell us products and sometimes those words don't even mean anything, but they can still have the power to persuade us!

Before the video, ask: Do you think ads have to tell the truth about what they're selling? How might they say something misleading without actually lying?

After the video, ask: Can you think of any other examples of "weasel words" that make something sound good without actually saying something?

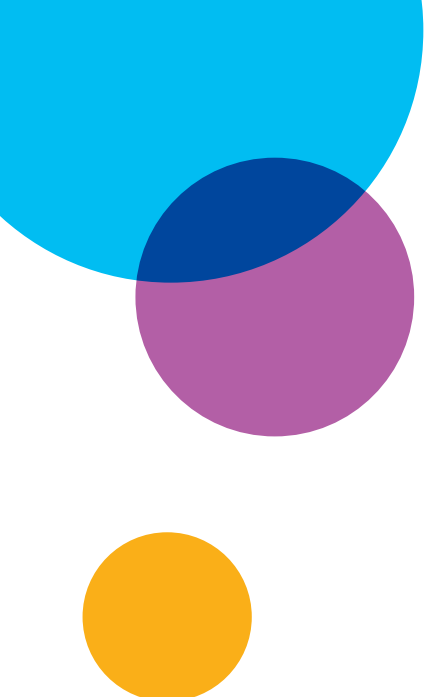
Why could an ad say a product is "the best" but not say it's "better" than another product? (A lot of products are basically the same. So any of them could say they're the "best" but none of them can say they're "better" than any other.)

Just Another Influencer Ava sings a duet with Vava, her favorite influencer! An influencer can feel like a friend, but we should always keep in mind that they're not necessarily authorities and it's okay to question what they say.

Before the video, ask: Do you or your friends follow any influencers online? (Make sure to include streamers and YouTubers.)

After the video, ask: What are some things that make us feel like influencers are our friends? How does that make us want to buy things they talk about? What are some differences between influencers and real friends?

Hop on the Bandwagon! The goal of bandwagon advertising is to convince us that if we buy a product, we'll be part of a special group. Advertisers want us to think we'll be left out if we don't jump on the bandwagon. But you can hop on this bandwagon with Ava and her catchy song!



Before the video, ask: Has it ever felt to you like everybody was buying or doing something?

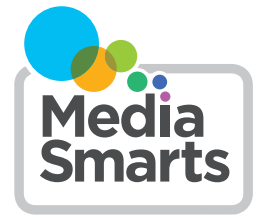
After the video, ask: Why do you think advertisers want you to feel that something is really popular? Can you think of anything that was super popular for a little while but nobody likes anymore?

They Really Like Us! Marketers like kids because we spend lots of money buying their stuff. Ava sings about some of the tricks marketers use to target kids.

Before the video, ask: Why do you think marketers aim their ads at kids? What makes kids such a valuable audience?

After the video, ask: What are some of the ways that marketers target kids? (Cute characters, video games that feature their brand, putting products at kids' eye-level.)

Why do they sometimes show you ads for things you won't be ready to buy for a long time, like cars? (So that you'll have good feelings about the brand by the time you're old enough to buy it.)



JUNK FOOD JUNGLE

Food Advertising Strategies

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Advertisers have many methods to try and get you to buy their products. Lots of times, what they are selling is a lifestyle, or an image, rather than the product. Here are some tricks of the trade.

Best is better - Advertisers don't like to say that one product is "better" than another, because that's something that can be measured and might be false advertising. But most of the products in a category are basically the same, so it's actually safer to say that a product is "the best"!

Endorsement - your favourites sports star, celebrity or influencer telling you that their product is the best! Kids listen, not realizing that the star is being paid to promote the product.

Bandwagon - join the crowd! Don't be left out! Everyone is buying the latest snack food: aren't you?

Health Halo - using things like brown paper packaging, images of fruit, added vitamins, or words like "natural" to make something seem healthful when it isn't. Some ads or packaging may point out what a product doesn't have to make it seem healthy, like saying potato chips are "sugar free." Some brands are built entirely around giving a health halo to junk food, such as Peatos (Cheetos made from peas) that are overall no more healthful than their corner-store equivalents

Repetition - advertisers hope that if you see a product, or hear it's name over and over again, you will be more likely to buy it. Sometimes the same commercial will be repeated over and over again.

Tell a story - If advertisers don't have anything good to say about their product, they can tell a story that shows it instead. For example, an ad could show how a product would be useful in a particular situation without saying anything outright about its quality.

Mascots - Cartoon characters — either from cartoons kids already like or ones invented for the product— make kids remember and ask for a product.

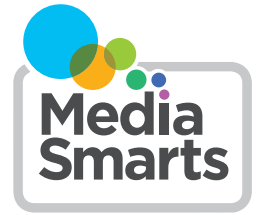
Weasel Words - advertisers can't just lie, but they can use words to mislead you:

- words like "improved," "premium" and "natural" sound good but don't actually mean anything.
- words like "crunchy" or "juicy" make a product sound good but can't be proven or disproven (how do you measure crunchiness?)
- saying that a product "fights" something only means that it affects it in some way.
- some ads will also use weasel phrases as well. A sugary cereal can be "part of a balanced breakfast" (if you have it with milk, fruit, and peanut butter bread) while a gum could stop bad breath for "up to" six hours (or possibly a lot less).

Emotional appeals - a lot of ads don't tell you anything about the product, but try to make you feel a certain way about it.

- Colour: Bright, vivid colours can make a product seem more memorable and exciting, while brown or other dull colours can make it seem healthful or environmentally friendly.
- Feel-good ads: Make you feel good, or feel good about yourself. An ad for a restaurant might show a family or friends all having fun together, or an ad for dog food might show a dog running happily to greet its owner.
- Humour: Making an ad that's funny is a way to make it memorable, to have it go viral, and to make us connect the brand or product with good feelings.
- Music: Whether it's a pop song that makes us think a product is cool, a jingle that we can't get out of our heads, or sappy strings that make us cry, music has a powerful emotional effect on us. It works even when we know it's happening!

JUNK FOOD JUNGLE



Junk Food Ads

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Can you name the techniques used in each of these ads?



STUDENT HANDOUT

JUNK FOOD JUNGLE

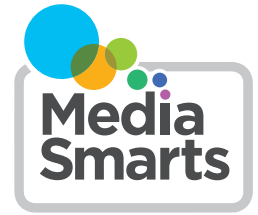


Healthy Food Ad

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JUNK FOOD JUNGLE



My Healthy Food Ad

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Pick a healthy food. It can be a kind of food you like or a kind you don't like. It should not be a food that is already advertised a lot, like milk.

Make an ad for your food. You can make a print ad like the ones we've studied, a video ad, or another kind of ad of your choice.

Make sure to use at least two of the advertising techniques we learned about in class.

Talk to me if you have any questions.

You will be marked on how well you show me:

- That you understand that ads are made to get you to buy or like something

- That you understand that ads are different from other kinds of media and have their own ways of sending a message or getting you to pay attention
- That you know the difference between healthy and unhealthy foods
- That you know how food ads appeal to kids
- That you can use at least two advertising techniques when making your own ad