



A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW WOMEN MAKE MEANING OF CONTRADICTIONARY MEDIA MESSAGES ABOUT THE RISKS OF EATING FISH

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Study Purpose


- **Funding:** Joint Institute for Food Safety & Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN) grant
- **Purpose:** To explore women's behaviors regarding conflicting media information about mercury in fish
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- Acknowledgement: Dr. David Lineback (former JIFSAN director) and Dr. Marjorie Davidson (of the FDA)

Context of Study

- 2001 and 2004 EPA-FDA news releases, warning about fish contamination and suggesting limited fish consumption to particular audiences
- News media highlighted conflicts in advisories
 - Farm-raised salmon contained contaminants exceeding FDA guidelines for safe consumption, but that “in contrast, the FDA has said that the levels of contaminants detected in the sampled fish are not high enough to justify the limit on consumption” (*News & Record*, Mayer & Ramsey, 2004, p. D2)
- News media cast skepticism on advisories
 - “Despite singling out albacore tuna as moderately high in mercury, the [FDA] guidelines were praised by the canned-tuna industry for emphasizing the health benefits of eating fish” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Kay, 2004, p. A1)



Literature Reviewed


- MEDIA EFFECTS: Contradictory health messages
 - Affective and cognitive responses
 - TARGET AUDIENCE: Women and Food Safety Risk
 - COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR: Situational Theory of Publics
 - IVs
 - Problem recognition
 - Level of involvement
 - Constraint recognition
 - DV – extent of active information-seeking
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Research Questions (RQs)

- **RQ1:** How do women recognize the risk (problem) of eating unsafe fish when presented with contradictory media messages about eating fish?
- **RQ2:** What are the dimensions of women's level of involvement in the context of a contradictory media environment?
- **RQ3:** What constraints do women perceive about eating fish safely after being presented with contradictory media messages about eating fish?



Pilot Study

- Women recognized inconsistencies in media reporting about the safety of fish consumption
 - Women believed the advisories & media about fish safety to be vague
 - Women's involvement varied according to their motherhood and pregnancy status
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Methods

- Exploratory study → qualitative methods
- Method: Focus groups
- Six focus groups, consisting of between 8 and 12 women in each group
- Locations:
 - Calverton, Maryland
 - Rohobeth Beach, Delaware
 - Richmond, Virginia
- Trained moderators similar to participants
- Semi-structured interview guide
- Data analysis: Grounded theory & constant comparison

Sample

- **Participants:** 59 women of childbearing age, pregnant women, nursing women, or women with children for whom they feed and care for
 - Self-identified race & ethnicity: 31 White, 25 Black/African American, 2 Latina, 1 Asian American
 - Income: median \$50,001 to \$75,000
 - Education: 23 with bachelor's degree, 11 with HS diploma or G.E.D.
 - Fish consumption: varied
- Participants received \$40 for their time, help

Sample articles

- Purpose: To elicit real-time reactions to conflicting news about risk
- Asked participants to pretend they are fish eaters
- Provided real stories about fish safety
- After determining whether women perceived conflicting information in the stories themselves, we explained that:
 - “These news stories present conflicting information to you about the safety of eating fish. One says it is perfectly fine to eat fish. Another says fish should be avoided. Another says that even though tuna is high in mercury, fish is still good for you.”

Results: Problem

recognition

- **Confusion:** “Why is it so controversial? Either mercury is okay for you or it’s not. It should be fairly black and white.”
- **Skepticism:** “Everything is bad for you these days.”
- **Cognitive negotiations**
 - Some information is better than no information
 - Confirmatory information
 - Comparisons to experiences: “My grandmother ate fish her whole life and there isn’t anything wrong with her.”

Results: Level of involvement

- Geographical proximity
- Maternal identity
 - “I’m more protective of my kids since they’re so young, you know, they’re still developing...I try to limit or protect them as much as possible. So, if somebody tells me something might hurt them, I’m definitely not going to use it or buy it or wear it or eat it.”
- Fish consumption habits

Results: Level of involvement, cont'd


- ↑ LOI, ↑ emotions: anger, fear, confusion, anxiety, guilt
 - **Anger:** "I get angry because I want to do what's best and you don't know what's driving the [news] article."
 - **Fear:** "It really has me scared, you know, what if something happens to my sons and it's because I ate food that I wasn't aware—I should have been more aware of what was going on...so I'm probably not going to buy any fish any more ever."

Results: Perceived constraints

- Availability of realistic options to eating fish
- Other health threats
- Low self-efficacy
 - “Fish is healthy, but my maternal instinct takes over because I’m caring for a child, and I don’t know that as a result it could get defects or deformed...So anything that I hear while I’m pregnant, I’m going to take it to a higher level.”
- Lack of enabling resources
 - “How are we to know when we go to the store which fish come from waters that are subject to a mercury advisory?”



Conclusions

- Reveals the range of cognitive and emotional effects of contradictory information
 - Provides in-depth insight into how women make decisions when faced with fish safety threats
 - Offers an important step to risk communicators in developing a more clear, organized, & useful process of rolling out scientific information using the media
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Next Steps

- Women who eat fish often
 - For health reasons (e.g., weight)
 - For financial reasons (e.g., fishing families)
 - For cultural/traditional reasons
- Fathers' perceptions
- Racial, ethnic, and class differences
- Pilot testing of preliminary messaging addressing conflicting information



THANK YOU!!!

Please email me with any questions or requests for slides:
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