

COVID Comfort: Food Advertising, Family, and Unity During a Pandemic

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We may not be able to gather together but we can grill together.
-Oscar Mayer

Your country needs you to stay on your couch and order in.
-Burger King

As the COVID-19 virus swept through state by state and nation by nation, US Americans were forced into quarantine. With daily lives disrupted and eating outside of homes drastically curtailed, food producers increased their advertising to remind consumers about the ways in which they offered unity, service, and family ties as evidenced by lines from those commercials mentioned previously, both of which aired during the COVID-19 lockdown. Not only were these advertisements designed to promote products as most are, but they were also used to offer hope to frightened U.S. Americans fearful of doing even the most routine activities such as grocery shopping or eating in restaurants. Studying food advertisements during this time reveals “deep-rooted beliefs and values that characterize a culture and endorse a particular worldview” (Kelso 120). As Kelso points out, “the media in general, through the messages and themes they present, tend to convey dominant ideology” that “contribute to symbolically reinforcing our current way of life” and “indirectly function[ing] as an educational force” (122).

The majority of COVID-19 research related to food focuses on food consumption changes during the pandemic, most with the goal of determining the healthiness of these changes. There also exists a body of advertising research

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focusing on the themes, images, and content of advertisements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, however, there is little research about the themes used in food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus leaving a void in not only this food advertising research but also in the understanding of the cultural ideology during this unprecedented time in history.

The current study will help fill the void in COVID-19 pandemic-related research by analyzing twelve food advertisements that were broadcast during the pandemic to determine the themes present in each. This study will draw upon the thematic analysis process outlined by Herzog and colleagues, based on Braun and Clarke's guide (Herzog et al. 385-401). In conjunction with this, the use of textual analysis combined with case study methodology as outlined by Beetham in her study of women's magazines will also be used.

Literature Review

While there is a large body of food research related to the COVID-19 pandemic, much of it focuses on consumption changes to determine the healthiness or diet changes occurring during the pandemic (Coulthard et al.; Das et al.; Fiorella et al.; Harrison et al.; Marty et al.; Özenoğlu et al.; Palmer et al.; Ruggiero et al.; Sosna; Tribst et al.). This amount of food-related research is important to note in relation to the study of food advertisements as it points to the importance placed on food analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic. The international scope of consumption research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the emphasis on food in both the United States and across the world, demonstrate the importance of this research. People placed even greater importance on food during the pandemic due to stress and thus sought comfort from and used food as a coping strategy (Coulthard et al.). This makes researching the themes present in US food advertisements during this time valuable in understanding the role these advertisements and food portrayals played during a national pandemic.

Advertising research focusing on the themes, images, and content about COVID-19 as well as messaging about the pandemic (Andreu-Sánchez and Martín-Pascual; Arthur; Banker and Park; Hussian et al.) has recently been published. At this time, however, specific themes used in food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic is lacking. Currently, there is a void in COVID-19 food advertising research and in the understanding of the cultural ideology during this unprecedented time in history.

Food Advertising Themes. In general, the study of content in food advertisements is common and a great majority of the research focuses on advertisements targeted at children, the nutritional content of the food advertised, and the food choices made after viewing the advertisements (Batada et al.; Castonguay and Bakir; Castonguay et al.; Egberts and Riley; Emond et al. “Exposure to Child-Directed TV”; Emond et al. “Children’s Food and Beverage Promotion). Some research exists which examines language and themes in food advertising. Griffin and Berry point out in their study of religious language and food advertising, the importance of researching and understanding messaging in advertisements. They note, “Advertising plays a crucial role in this culture of consumption and is both a reflection of culture and a participant in the creation of culture” (Griffin & Berry 46). These ideas of “reflection of culture” and “participant in the creation of culture” are pertinent to the current study. The analysis of themes in COVID-19 food advertisements provides a reflection of the current mindset at a specific time and helps further understand the creation of the cultural behaviors present during this period. Thematic analysis points to the societal feelings, values, and culture during an extraordinary national crisis, which helps researchers to further understand US American society through food advertisements.

Food and Culture. Among the research regarding food as a reflection of culture and a means of understanding different civilizations and nations, Guerlain notes, “Even for something so basic as fast-food the way it is consumed and the rituals around fast food outlets are quite different in New York and Paris...” and that “[i]n Moscow it is rather chic to eat out at McDonald’s, which obviously is not the case on Chicago’s South side” (30). Expanding on this, Crowther notes that, “life histories constructed around food” help to track traditions across generations and draw meaning from “the social life of food” in various cultures (xxii) and that the “activities surrounding food acquisition, preparation, and consumption lend themselves to cross-cultural comparison” that provides insight into the lives of others “through a shared everyday experience of eating” (xxi). It’s easy to transfer this “cross-cultural comparison” to traumatic periods within a society, such as a national pandemic, as in the current study.

The study of food and culinary practices “is a complex set of power relations that involve race, class, and gender identities in a dynamic system of production and consumption” (Davis 365). “More critics are coming to regard food as a cultural form analogous to literature or music, as a repository for social meaning, and as a means for studying and understanding human civilization” (Davis 374).

It's important to note that included in the "production and consumption" to which Davis refers is the promotion of food and the ways in which different cultures advertise food products. The advertising practices used to promote food are also a reflection of culture and society in the same way that the study of food provides insight into other cultures. The study of these promotional practices during a national crisis is especially important in understanding the culture and "the social life of food" during a specific time.

Williams-Forson notes the role food plays for Black women as a societal power structure. Rather than examine typical stereotypes of Black women and chicken in popular media, Williams-Forson's study expanded to include the stories surrounding those foods typically identified as being "Black" (2). She points to the story of Booker T. Washington's mother walking for miles with a stolen chicken to feed her family (3). As in the current study, Williams-Forson also analyzes food advertisements as a means of reflecting American culture. She points to a 1999 KFC commercial that attempted to create an animated version of the company's spokesperson, Colonel Sanders, in an attempt to "make the Colonel 'cool'" (5). She describes her experience viewing the commercial as seeing "a dancing Colonel bouncing basketballs, and buckets of fried chicken" which "was the suggestion of age-old stereotypes that linked African American men to playing basketball and eating chicken" (5). Observations such as this, illustrate the importance of studying food advertisements as a means of identifying cultural attitudes and behaviors and, as in the case of the current study, the themes used to express them.

Food Advertisements in Current Study

The food advertisements used in the current study are a mix of several different types of food companies, which include fast-food and traditional restaurants, food manufacturers, and a grocery store. It's important to note that during the pandemic, grocery stores and food manufacturers did not need to advertise as urgently as restaurants which experienced significant changes in sales and operating procedures due to the pandemic (USDA). For example, most restaurants were closed for in-person dining and forced to create take-out procedures if not already in place (USDA). Advertising the availability of these foods became vital to the financial viability of these establishments. On the other hand, food manufacturers and grocery stores experienced dramatic increases in sales and did not have as great a need to advertise their availability during the pandemic. The increased number of

restaurant advertisements is reflected in the variety of advertisements included in this study.

Advertisements from fast-food restaurants in the current study include Burger King “Stay Home of the Whopper,” McDonald’s “Most Important Meals,” Jersey Mike’s Subs “Feeding America,” and Popeyes “Contactless Pickup.” Those from restaurants include Denny’s “Waived Delivery Fees,” and Olive Garden “Buy One Take One.” Those from food manufacturers include Doritos “The Last Dorito,” Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout,” Post Cereal “Keep Breakfast On The Family Table, Grape-nuts “Love You Too,” and Kraft Heinz “We Got You America.” An advertisement from one grocery store, Save A Lot “We’re Here For You,” is also included. All of these advertisements aired during 2020 with the exception of the “Grape-nuts Love You Too” one which was posted on Facebook on February 10, 2021.

Materials and Methods

Thematic Analysis. The foundation of this study is based on a thematic analysis process by Herzog and colleagues, in which they adapted the six phases of thematic analysis, originally outlined by Braun and Clarke in their guide, for media scholars, which includes the following steps: 1) Familiarize yourself with your data; 2) Generate initial code; 3) Search for themes; 4) Review themes; 5) Define and name themes; and 6) Produce the report (Herzog, et al. 385-401). The Herzog adaptation will be used in the current study.

Textual Analysis. Additionally, textual analysis combined with case study methodology will be used. This process is outlined by Beetham in her study of women’s magazines and is a relevant research methodology for analyzing media texts. As Beetham notes, case study methodology allows for research about “expressions of ideas and ideology” in media texts as well as study about representations of “particular moments” (6). Though she refers to women’s magazines, it’s not difficult to translate these ideas for use in advertising texts considering the similarities.

The importance of analyzing media texts also has been reinforced by public health professionals. “Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts. Researchers can then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of surrounding the

text” (Columbia Public Health). Once again, it is not difficult to translate these ideas for use in analyzing food advertisements due to the similarities.

COVID-19 Food Advertising Themes

This study creates a list of themes from an initial viewing of twelve pandemic-related food commercials to form a representative case study. These commercials were found through a Google search using the words “COVID-19,” “coronavirus,” and “food advertisements” with the goal of representing restaurants, grocery stores, and food products as equally as possible. Though there were many advertisements during each period, only those ads that made specific reference to the pandemic were included in this study.

The list of themes created included the following: anger, community, family/friends, fear, generosity, gratitude, love, loyalty, patriotism, safety, service, and unity. Though each of the commercials viewed presented comfort in one way or another, it was decided that the concept was too abstract and could be better focused using other themes such as safety, service, and unity thus allowing for a more accurate and narrow analysis of the themes present. Definitions for each of the themes were created based on initial viewing of the food advertisements, see Table 1.

To distinguish similar themes from each other, specific definitions were created. For example, the “Family/Friends” theme is similar to the “Love” theme. Arguably, images of family and friends together could easily encompass the theme of love though the focus of the commercial may not be on family and friends. To allow for this, the researcher recorded the “Love” theme only when directed solely at consumers of the product and not shown or spoken of in the commercials by actors. Similarly, the “Unity” and “Community” themes were recorded only when specific words of “together” and “community” were used in the advertisement, thus helping to focus on the true spirit of each theme. This is also the case with the “Generosity” and “Service” themes which are differentiated by specific definitions and wording.

Anger	uses words “angry,” “upset,” and/or images of anger
Community	uses word “community”
Family/Friends	uses words or images of people in same living space or connecting online
Fear	uses words or images of missing out, losing something, not having enough, getting sick
Generosity	uses words “donate,” “give away,” “free” and/or offers sales/discounts, donations, giveaways, free products, free delivery and sales or discounts on products themselves directly to consumers
Gratitude	uses words “thank you” and/or gives product away to essential workers
Love	uses word “love” directed towards customers
Loyalty	uses words “always there for you,” and/or images of continued product production
Patriotism	uses words “America” and/or “country” or images of flag, patriotic symbols
Safety	uses words “contactless pickup,” “free delivery,” and/or anything related to cleanliness
Service	uses the words “help,” “helping,” “doing our part,” and offers discounts, giveaways, donations to charitable groups or shows images of workers in their companies showing up for work to keep food available for others
Unity	uses word “together,” and/or images of people together online or in person

Table 1. Definitions of themes

Thematic Analysis Chart

A thematic analysis chart was created, which included the following categories Product/Ad, Visual, Audio, Themes, and Link. The name of the product advertised was listed under the Product/Ad heading. The visual action in the advertisement was listed under the Visual heading. The audio elements of the advertisement were listed under the Audio heading. The themes present in the advertisement from the researcher-created definitions were listed under the Themes heading. The online link to the ad was listed under the Link heading.

An entry in the chart was created for every ad. Each ad was viewed a minimum of six times. The first viewing was to record initial data in the Product, Visual, and Audio columns of the thematic analysis chart. The second viewing was used to, as outlined by Herzog and colleagues, search for the presence of themes, while the third and fourth viewings were used to confirm the listed themes. The fifth and sixth viewings were to confirm the accuracy of the data entered into the chart and to review the themes with a second coder. The results were tabulated by using the find

tool in Microsoft Word to determine the number and types of occurrences for each advertisement.

Results

Fifty-seven themes were noted in the twelve COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements studied. One theme, “Unity,” occurred in every commercial studied for a total of twelve occurrences. The “Service” theme was next with nine incidents in all but Doritos “The Last Dorito,” Denny’s “Waived Delivery Fees,” and Grape-nuts, “Love You Too” commercials. This was followed by “Family/Friends” with eight occurrences, “Safety” with seven, “Generosity” with six and “Loyalty” with five occurrences. On the lower end, the themes of “Anger” and “Love” were represented only once, both were in the Grape-nuts “Love You Too” commercial broadcast on Facebook during a shortage of the cereal due to the pandemic. The theme of “Community” was shown in two commercials, Oscar Mayer’s “Front Yard Cookout” and Jersey Mike’s Subs “Feeding America.” There were also two occurrences of the themes “Fear” (Doritos “Last Dorito” and Grape-nuts “Love You Too”), “Gratitude” (“Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper” and McDonald’s “Most Important Meals”) and “Patriotism” (“Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper” and Kraft-Heinze “We Got You America”). These occurrences are represented in table 2.

The average number of themes in all twelve advertisements was 4.75 with four commercials (“Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper,” Olive Garden “Buy One Take One,” Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout” and Kraft-Heinz “We Got You America”) containing a high of six each and Doritos “Last Dorito” including a low of three thematic occurrences.

Anger	Community	Friends/ Family	Fear	Generosity	Gratitude	Love	Loyalty	Patriotism	Safety	Service	Unity
				BK	BK			BK	BK	BK	BK
		SAL					SAL			SAL	SAL
		DS	DS								DS
		DY		DY					DY		DY
		OG		OG			OG		OG	OG	OG
	OM	OM		OM					OM	OM	OM
		PC					PC		PC	PC	PC
GN			GN			GN					GN
		KH					KH	KH	KH	KH	KH
				MD	MD					MD	MD
	JMS			JMS			JMS			JMS	JMS
		PE							PE	PE	PE

BK = "Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper," SAL = Save A Lot "We're Here For You," DS = Doritos "The Last Dorito," DY = Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees," OG = Olive Garden "Buy One Take One," OM = Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout," PC = Post Cereal "Keep Breakfast On Family Table," GN = Grape-nuts "Love You Too," KH = Kraft-Heinze "We Got You America," MD = McDonald's "Most Important Meals," JMS = Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America," PE = Popeyes "Contactless Pickup"

Table 2. Themes in COVID-19 advertisements

Discussion

Due to the isolation of quarantine during the pandemic, it is not surprising that the theme of "Unity" is present in all twelve of the commercials since there was a great need for food advertisers to connect with their customers on as many levels as possible during a national lockdown. This connection was especially necessary for restaurants, most of which were not allowed to have in-person dining. Not only was a theme of "Unity" a comforting thought for their patrons, but it was also a survival technique for businesses and food companies needing to remind customers of their support as they got through the pandemic together. This encouraged bonding which, in turn, the businesses hoped would result in sales. Similarly, the "Service" theme as shown by the large majority of companies offering discounts, giveaways or "doing their part" to help is also not surprising as a promotional technique to encourage loyalty and in a different way, unity. The actual surprise is in those companies not including the "Service" theme in their COVID-19 pandemic advertising since this theme is the easiest way to promote connection during a

national crisis since the inability of many to leave their homes to get food during the pandemic provided a ready-made method for food advertisers to show customers how service-orientated they were by offering contactless pickup and delivery of their products.

Doritos “The Last Dorito.” The Doritos “The Last Dorito” did not include the “Service” theme and it included the fewest number of themes with a low of three occurrences. In this commercial, a young man is shown quarantined in his apartment. He pulls the last Dorito out of the bag while an announcer says, “Down to your last Dorito and the delivery is two weeks away? Consider your steps wisely.” As music begins and continues, the man is shown watching television, lying in bed, working out, on the computer talking to family, then lying on the floor. During each activity, he takes a very small bite of the same Dorito even sleeping next to it until in the near final shot his hand is shown with a very small piece left which he puts in his mouth as the doorbell rings and a voice announces, “Groceries.” In this commercial, the themes of “Family/Friends,” “Fear” and “Unity” are shown with the “Fear” theme being the most prevalent. The “Family/Friends” and “Unity” themes are represented by the images of an online family chat, which is a small portion of the entire commercial and during which time the young man is focused on the one remaining Dorito.

The themes recorded match the outlined definitions for this study, however, there are often subtle subtexts in each commercial that are difficult to categorize based on specific definitions, which is where the case study approach adds further depth to the current research. In the case of “The Last Dorito” commercial, the technique of humor is used to promote unity with others who are most likely in similar situations and missing, if not Doritos, some other food they aren’t able to easily get without putting their health at risk by breaking quarantine. The unity portrayed in this commercial and others can be an important way of comforting a nation through the advertisement of food by reminding customers that they are not alone.

Denny’s “Waived Delivery Fees.” The Denny’s “Waived Delivery Fees” commercial did not include the “Service” theme, however, this commercial can best be described as utilitarian, working to provide information about waived delivery fees and encouraging customers to order Denny’s food delivered to their door. Though focused and short, this commercial contained the themes of “Family/Friends,” “Generosity,” “Safety,” and “Unity.” The themes of “Family/Friends” and “Unity” were represented by images of family and friends

eating Denny's food together while laughing and/or watching television, as well as in the announcer's words, "If you're staying home with friends and family, you can still order all your favorites because right now Denny's is waiving delivery fees..." The acknowledgement of people staying home in words and images as well as the free delivery fees represent the themes of "Safety" and "Generosity" respectively.

In this advertisement, it is understandable that the theme of "Service" is not present and is replaced by the similar theme of "Generosity" due to the utilitarian nature of the commercial. The differences in the themes of "Generosity" and "Service" are subtle. "Generosity" is used for donations, giveaways, free products, free delivery and sales or discounts on products themselves directly to consumers while "the theme of "Service" uses the words "help," "helping," "doing our part," and offers discounts, giveaways, donations to charitable groups or shows images of workers in their companies showing up for work to keep food available for others.

Grape-nuts "Love You Too." The Grape-nuts "Love You Too" Facebook advertisement did not include either the "Generosity" or the "Service" themes. This was also the only commercial to include the themes of "Anger" and "Love." The advertisement opens with a shot of a hand on a screen over an article about the pandemic triggering a Grape-nuts shortage. Following this, there are various Tweets over images of unhappy, even pouting people, some of which include a Tweet from Martin H.: "This is becoming super serious and more frightening" and a Tweet from Marianne F.: "Before I go to the ends of the earth, have Grape Nuts been discontinued?" Other Tweets include, "Post has halted production of @grapenutscereal and I want to know the @WhiteHouse is going to do about it" from Ana S. a Tweet from Jeanne G., "WHERE ARE THE GRAPE-NUTS?????," and lastly, a Tweet from Cbo55, "Never worried about our home being targeted for a burglary until I found a large box of #Grapnuts in our pantry." The next to the last shot is an image of a little girl whose hands are being held by adults swinging her. Her face is covered by a box of Grape-nuts. The last shot is Grape-nuts with the words, "Love You, Too."

In addition to the "Anger and "Love" themes, the "Fear" and "Unity" themes were also present. Though there is an image of what appears to be parents swinging their child around in a circle, the researcher decided not to record this as an occurrence of the "Family/Friends" theme since the child's face was covered by a box of Grape-nuts and all of the other images were of only one person in each shot. The "Unity" theme was represented by the online Tweets shown in an electronic community, while the "Fear" theme was shown in the Tweets themselves where

Martin H. uses the word “frightening” to describe shortages. Of all the advertisements studied, this commercial is the only one which doesn’t offer support or encouragement about getting through the pandemic or providing service to help others do the same beyond the message of “Love You, Too.” The purpose of this advertisements seems to be to simply acknowledge consumers’ frustrations and remind them that the company loves them.

“Generosity” Theme. The theme of “Generosity” in the form of giving away free meals is present in five commercials (“Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper,” Olive Garden “Buy One Take One,” Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout,” McDonald’s “Most Important Meals,” and Jersey Mike’s Subs “Feeding America”) with three different methods. The first of these methods was to give away meals to first responders. In the Burger King commercial the company urges people to “do their part and Burger King will do their part by waiving the delivery fees” which makes everyone safer and “makes you a couchpopatriot.” At the end of the commercial, the announcer says that Burger King is donating Whoppers to nurses. Similarly, in the McDonald’s advertisement the announcer says, “After billions and billions, these are the most important meals we’ve ever served. Through May 5th we’ll be feeding first responders and healthcare workers thank you meals for free. It’s our honor to serve you” as a McDonald’s worker first polishes letters then hangs them on space below the logo outside to read, “FIRST RESPONDERS AND HEALTHCARE WORKERS ENJOY A THANK YOU MEAL FOR FREE.”

The second method used to express the theme of “Generosity” shown in the commercials studied was by giving customers a free meal as in the Olive Garden “Buy One Take One” advertisement. In this commercial, families are show eating Olive Garden food at home while laughing and having fun while an announcer says, “At Olive Garden, we’re all family here and we want to help you feed yours during this difficult time, so we brought back “Buy One Take One” for just \$12.99 available for car side pickup or delivery. Choose a classic favorite and get another one on us so you can take home two nights of comforting food and do it with peace of mind only at Olive Garden.” This type of generosity is designed to both provide meals for others and to sustain sales of the company’s food during a lockdown, which without car side pickup or delivery was not possible.

The third method of expressing the theme of “Generosity” among those food advertisements studied was to give away meals through a nonprofit organization. The Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout” commercial opens with empty streets in

neighborhoods then to a man wheeling a grill to his front yard. Images of neighbors bringing grills and iced tea while waving at each other from their front yards followed by images of hot dogs grilling ends with a high angle shot of a cul-de-sac with houses and neighbors outside at cookouts while an announcer says, “We may not be able to gather together but we can grill together. Oscar Mayer invites you to take your backyard cookouts to the front. On May 2 join us for the Oscar Mayer Front Yard Cookout. Enjoy sharing a meal together but safely apart while we share a million meals with Share America and every time you use the hashtag #FrontYardCookout Oscar Mayer will donate an additional meal up to a million more. Let’s head out front and give back.”

Similarly, the Jersey Mike’s Subs “Feeding America” advertisement expresses the theme of “Gratitude” through nonprofit giving. The commercial begins with a shot of the company’s founder, Peter Cancro dressed in a suit with both the Jersey Mike’s Subs company logo and the Feeding America logo to the left of the screen. He says, “Growing up in my hometown I watched two local businessmen give unconditionally to their local community and with that Jersey Mike’s mission statement was born, giving, making a difference in someone’s life, and in that spirit, we invite you for a special weekend this Saturday and Sunday. We will donate 20% of all sales to Feeding America from coast to coast. So, please, let’s give and make a difference in someone’s life.”

“Safety” Theme. As with the “Unity” theme, it’s not surprising that the topic of “Safety” is present in seven of the advertisements aired during the pandemic due to the need for customers to feel safe buying food during a national pandemic. These are “Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper,” Denny’s “Waived Delivery Fees,” Olive Garden “Buy One Take One,” Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout,” Post Cereal “Keep Breakfast On The Family Table,” Kraft-Heinz “We Got You America” and Popeyes “Contactless Pickup.” Though the majority of these involve advertising contactless pickup, delivery or curbside pickup or, as in the case of the previously mentioned Oscar Mayer “Front Yard Cookout” commercial a safe way of gathering, two of the advertisements (Post Cereal “Keep Breakfast On The Family Table” and Kraft-Heinz “We Got You America”) have a different focus. The Post Cereal uses the theme of “Safety” as it relates to their workers. The advertisement begins with words over cereal bowls. “A bowl of cereal. A bowl of something familiar. A bowl of ‘We’re going to be OK. At Post, we know what a full bowl can mean.” Next, shots of the factory producing cereal are shown with overlaid text stating, “That’s why we’re keeping the lines running. Our employees

are now provided with masks while at work. The warehouse is delivering the breakfast you love on the family table.” This is followed by shots of smiling workers and text that states, “None of us knows what the day will bring. But together, we can give it a good start.” Then, the Post and Malt O Meal logos are shown with the wording below stating, “Feeding families for over 100 years.”

Similarly, the Kraft-Heinz advertisement expresses the theme of “Safety” as a means of keeping US Americans safe by continuing production of their products. The commercial opens with a date – April 4, 2020 – and images of the outside of the Kraft-Heinz manufacturing plant followed by images of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and Heinz Ketchup being made and put into packages. Workers are wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. Some workers are making strong muscle signs and putting their thumbs up. While these images are shown, a female announcer says “Given the current situation, we are all affected by what is going on in America today. I was asking myself like what I could do. I feel that along with my colleagues I have been called to do what we can in this situation. I feel like I’m doing it for all the families in America who are not going anywhere, who are here. This is bigger than all of us but together we can get through this.” The last image is of the African American woman who is speaking. The commercial fades to white then wording appears: “Showing up every day for our families. And yours. We got you America.”

Conclusion

Based on the research in this study, it is concluded that food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic contained many themes with the overarching goal of providing comfort and solidarity to US Americans by using the main themes of “Unity,” “Service,” “Family/Friends,” and “Safety” during a stressful time. The presence of these themes may initially be considered “feel-good” advertisements to remind customers of the companies’ efforts during a difficult time. More likely, however, they are designed to create the image of deep family/friend like connections. In other words, from a psychological perspective, it is difficult for customers to abandon those who are serving in solidarity with them during a time of national crisis. The more these companies can convince customers of their loyalty, the greater the chances of building the post COVID-19 pandemic relationships that Balis considers “everything” to the survival of businesses. As she notes, the COVID-19 pandemic “has placed a new emphasis on relationships”

in a virtual sales environment where prior relationships must be maintained and capitalized on to “maintain revenue momentum” (Balis).

Balis goes on to note that “trust and integrity are fundamental” in marketing and that advertising is used to make promises to customers on which companies must deliver. The advertisements in this study reflect these ideas. To build successful, long-lasting relationships, companies, especially those that have a great number of competitors, must stand alongside of their customers during a national crisis. While it is true that many companies survived the pandemic without using thematic advertising as the food companies in this study did, it’s not difficult to imagine that they used these same concepts on a smaller scale without the use and expense of mediated communication. For example, the neighborhood shop owner who put aside scarce products for regular customers during supply chain difficulties reflects the “Service” and “Unity” themes without national advertising. Similarly, this shop owner may have also worked to promote feelings of “Safety” and “Family/Friends” by providing regular customers with these products in way that mimics what a family member or friend would do. The national food advertisements in this study reflect these practices on a much large scale while presenting consumers with the illusion of the familiarity found in smaller merchants. Mull notes, the presence of these themes serves an additional purpose. She notes that COVID-19 pandemic advertisements point to “pandemic dystopia with a particularly American twist” that ultimately is designed as a means of “disastertising” a catastrophe and persuading customers that spending money is “an act of solidarity” designed to allow them to remain solvent during a national pandemic (Mull). Drawing on this concept, national food advertisers were looking to capitalize on the same support offered to local businesses during a national crisis by using themes to reflect solidarity in their advertisements. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and ensuing lockdown, these national food companies were able to draw on a familiarity usually reserved for local businesses by using themes which promoted feelings of solidarity when purchasing these foods.

The importance of identifying themes used in food advertising should not be underestimated. Identification of these themes not only allows, as Davis points out, a look into the “social life of food” but into American culture during a time of great challenge. As evidenced from this study, themes that mimic those of family and friends were plentiful in food advertising during the pandemic. These findings help identify the cultural expectations US Americans have from food manufacturers as well as the importance these products play in their lives during lockdown.

Furthermore, it gives media historians a look into promotional techniques used as companies worked to navigate a challenging business environment. The “Unity,” “Service,” and “Safety” themes reminded customers that the companies they buy food from are working hard to help keep them safe and provide delicious food for them while the “Family/Friends” theme provides a familiarity necessary for long-term loyalty to the establishments as well as positive feelings about the companies. Overall, it can be concluded that the themes present in COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements clearly exemplify companies’ efforts to establish feelings of unity and family with their customers during an economically challenging time. Furthermore, the inclusion of the “Unity” and “Family/Friends” themes is a clear reflection of the ideas presented by Klein in her groundbreaking book. She points to legendary adman Bruce Barton’s words, noting that advertising was created to help corporations find their souls. Klein also notes that though companies produce products, consumers buy brands, and these brands need to have an identity (6). Relating this to the current study, the themes found in COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements reflect this idea and indicate companies working to establish identities to their customers as friends and protectors as well as to “find their souls.”

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