

Behavioral Themes
Credibility / Endorsements

Sector
Health

Project Type
Lab experiment

Sample Size
763 participants



Promoting healthy eating through a return to traditional food

Photo credit: Marvin Meyer





Photo credit: Food Photographer Jennifer Pallian

How can we promote healthy eating habits using behavioral science?

Pacific Island Nations are facing a crisis of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) - chronic diseases which are the result of a combination of genetic, physiological, environmental and behavioral factors. NCDs are the leading cause of mortality in the region, accounting for 75% of deaths¹. Unhealthy diets in particular have been recognized as a risk factor for high rates of obesity^{2,3,4}. Residents of the Pacific Island Nations have some of the highest rates of obesity in the world, with 92.9% and 80.7% of adults in Nauru and Kiribati regions being overweight, respectively.

Social Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) is a powerful tool that can be used to increase consumption of indigenous foods. Moreover, studies have shown that television and other edutainment work well as tools for SBCC^{5,6,7}. Armed with this knowledge, several health awareness programs have been conducted in the Pacific but have not had the desired effect on changing eating habits. AECOM's Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR) intends to use a unique approach to nudge viewers to eat healthier. In contrast to health message-related initiatives, PIFR is a celebration of Pacific Island cuisine, culture and people in a spirit of kindness presented in the format of a reality cooking show.

1 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/07/11/pacific-islands-non-communicable-disease-roadmap>

2 <https://www.who.int/topics/diet/en/>

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/19/world/asia/junk-food-ban-vanuatu.html>

4 <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/01/health/pacific-islands-obesity/index.html>

5 La Ferrara, Eliana, Alberto Chong, and Suzanne Duryea. 2012. "Soap Operas and Fertility: Evidence from Brazil." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4 (4): 1-31.

6 Robert Jensen & Emily Oster, 2009. "The Power of TV: Cable Television and Women's Status in India," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, MIT Press, vol. 124(3), pages 1057-1094, August.

7 Abhijit Banerjee & Eliana La Ferrara & Victor Orozco, 2019. "Entertainment, Education, and Attitudes Toward Domestic Violence," *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, American Economic Association, vol. 109, pages 133-137, May.

Design and Results

Intervention



Half of the participants were assigned to the control condition and watched a compilation of clips from a Pacific TV program unrelated to food, specifically on effects of climate change in Kiribati.



The other half of the participants were assigned to the treatment condition and watched a compilation of clips from the PIFR TV program. The clip was a cooking competition on the preparation of healthy, traditional food, which aimed to motivate viewers to shifting their eating habits towards healthier local food.

Increased healthy eating habits in the Pacific within treatment and control conditions (N=763)

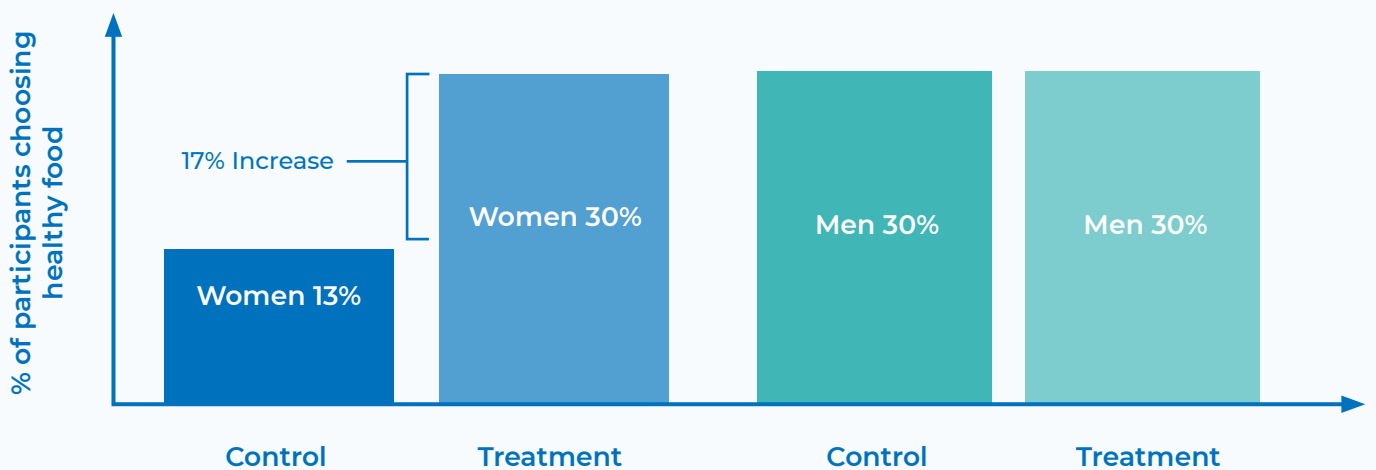




Photo credit: Lotte Lohr

Discussion



Edutainment can have meaningful effects, but more can be done

In general, participants who were exposed to the treatment intervention had a statistically significant shift towards preference for healthy traditional food although the percentage preferring unhealthy food still dominated across the participants.



Gender gap in healthy eating behavior

There was no effect of the intervention on men, which could be attributed to the fact that men in the Pacific generally eat healthier. Women in the treatment group were significantly more responsive to the treatment; they were 17 percentage points more likely to choose the healthier meal option than those in the control group. This may be attributed to the fact that women in the Pacific have more unhealthy eating behaviors, and more room for change.

Innovative and engaging SBCC interventions like PIFR TV show can help to close the gender gap and lead to healthier eating behavior. Future work should build on complementary interventions to change eating behaviors of men and women at a broader level.