



## A Mythical Battle: ‘Good’ Foods Versus ‘Bad’ Foods

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### Introduction

Unicorns, dragons, mermaids and other mythical beasts have recently captured the imagination of a generation, permeating pop and food cultures. In medieval times, the unicorn has been associated with Jesus Christ, divinity, purity, and all things good while the dragon came to be associated with the Christian devil and wickedness (Conway, 2001). Today, unicorns are connected with joy, bright colors, rainbows and playfulness and the food industry is using this symbolism to create new and fantastical products (“My Little Pony and tech giants,” n.d.). Magical recipes now abound on the internet for unicorn cupcakes, unicorn grilled cheese sandwiches, unicorn toast, vegan unicorn smoothies, and even unicorn sushi, all of which are made with swirls of pinks, blues, purples, and oranges (Szewczyk, 2017). As a dietitian, and self-admitted fantasy geek, I am not immune to this cultural trend that has been suggested to be a counter to the complexities of modern life and more somber political institutions, evoking childhood nostalgia and a joy for life (“My Little Pony and tech giants,” n.d.).

Like the unicorn and the dragon, food is laden with cultural meanings. The words and language used to describe food have hidden moral undertones. Food is labelled as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ and such meanings can influence the experiences of people, how they feel about themselves, and ultimately their identities.

### My Battle with the Unicorn

A personal experience<sup>1</sup> in the Spring of 2017 inspired this work. Starbucks released its limited-edition Unicorn Frappuccino® Blended Crème. I was captivated with the whimsical description from the company’s website. This new drink was a

*“flavor-changing, color-changing, totally not-made-up Unicorn Frappuccino. Magical flavors start off sweet and fruity transforming to pleasantly sour. Swirl it to reveal a color-changing spectacle of purple and pink. It’s finished with whipped cream-sprinkled pink and blue fairy powders (“Unicorn Frappuccino® Blended Crème”, n.d.).*

It became my mission to have one. On the first day of its limited run, I gathered my friends and went to the nearest Starbucks only to be filled with disappointment as the barista explained they had just run out of ingredients. The second Starbucks was also out of the mystical blue crystals. My fear of not being able to taste this magical unicorn elixir deepened. At the third Starbucks, however, the barista happily informed us that she still had all the enchanted elements necessary to make unicorn drinks for us, although her three-day supply would likely be gone by the end of the night. We considered ourselves among of the privileged few. Overflowing with excitement our

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<sup>1</sup> The following story involving the Unicorn Frappuccino® was experienced by the first author of this paper. Associated artwork was designed and produced collaboratively between Joy and Jackson. Numer provided guidance and expertise in theoretical positioning of this reflective work.

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Unicorn Frappuccinos® finally arrived. We admired the beauty of our drinks, snapped our photos, and shared our success.

However, this moment of pure indulgence flamed a fiery debate on my Facebook feed. I was inundated with messages about the sugar content and forwarded reviews to support the 'unhealthy' claims made against the Unicorn Frappuccinos®. Many of my friends said they would never even consider putting such a drink into their bodies. I tentatively read the reviews sent to me. Leading celebrity chefs informed me that the drink was not "nutritionally" good and there was "absolutely no reason" for me to drink it (Spence, 2017). Another reviewer described her need to apologize to her body for the sugar sickness she forced upon it by drinking this "bile" concoction (Puchko, 2017). She continued saying that, "there's no way any self-respecting not completely self-loathing adult could barrel through a beverage this unrelentingly sweet" (Puchko, 2017). I began to question myself. Was this "bile" and "disgusting" drink that bad for me? Why was the Unicorn Frappuccino® Blended Crème so much worse for my body than other drinks? According to the Starbucks website the Unicorn Frappuccino had the same amount of fat and less sugar than the Starbucks Green Tea Crème Frappuccino® Blended Crème ("Unicorn Frappuccino® Blended Crème," n.d.), yet no one was writing reviews on the "evils" of the Green Tea Crème Frappuccino®. Had my good standing as a 'healthy' individual been jeopardized? Had my professional qualifications as a dietitian been compromised by telling people I enjoyed the Unicorn Frappuccino® Blended Crème? Was I ultimately a 'bad' person for drinking it?

These questions swirled in my mind like the blue sugar syrup swirled in my drink. Where did this idea of a 'bad' food come from? Were the drinks innately bad or just something deemed culturally unacceptable? The origins of today's language and meanings to food can be traced back to the merger of food discourses within spiritual and scientific institutions. Historically, food has been used as a means of worshipping the divinity of the body, as well as a method for religious discipline. Certain foods inflamed the spirit, fueled carnal desires, or represented the sin of gluttony (Coveney, 1998, 1999). Coveney (1999) noted that animal products were to be avoided by the faithful as such food was considered to be "the cause of the decline of the human race" (p. 27). Consuming such foods became indicative of a moral lacking.

Coveney (1999) also observed a connection between religion and scientific development, stating "both belong to the same system of thought" (p. 29). It has been theorized that during the 17th and 18th centuries, Protestant values and freedoms from various forms of censorship facilitated the development of new knowledge. This contributed to a changed view of the world and subsequently of scientific research and principles (Becker, 1992; Coveney, 1999). God was in Nature and Man could understand Him by understanding how things worked. The disciplined teachings and work ethics of the Protestants also aligned with the spirit of capitalism that was taking place during the Industrial Revolution (Becker, 1992; Coveney, 1999). Nutritional science became necessary to support the needs of the growing multitudes of workers. Food became something for nourishment, energy, and maintaining the body's systems. Nutritional policies were developed to facilitate the uptake of 'healthy' eating behaviors within the population to prevent disease, improve quality of life, and to reduce healthcare costs (Coveney, 1998). Dietary guidelines and recommendations formed the foundation of our nutritional knowledge and discourses of 'healthy' food choices started to permeate Western culture. The ethical and spiritual undertones, however, were never truly lost from these discourses and were incorporated in the scientific views of nutrition. As a result, food is now viewed as both a source of fuel for the body and as a reflection of a person's moral character (Coveney, 1998, 1999).

But what did all this mean for me and my Unicorn Frappuccinos®? My identity and experiences are shaped by the cultural and moral meanings ascribed to foods. If the food I eat is labelled as 'unhealthy' than ultimately am I not also labelled as 'unhealthy'? Classifying foods this way may do more harm than actually eating a 'bad' food. Perhaps it is more useful to disrupt the cultural discourses that label foods as either 'good' or 'bad' than it is to determine which foods are 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' to eat. In the end, I am realizing that the labels we give foods are social constructions within a health, beauty and body-conscious culture. I say it's time to ride the dragon, freely admit that I enjoyed my Unicorn Frappuccinos®, and find peace with my sinful nature.

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## Author Biographies

Phillip Joy is a registered dietitian in Nova Scotia, Canada and is currently pursuing his PhD in Health at Dalhousie University. His research interests include gay men's nutritional health, obesity, and the use of arts-based and poststructural methodologies.

Roberta Jackson is currently studying Applied Human Nutrition/Dietetics at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax. Her professional work ranges from being a chef in the Vancouver Film Industry to studying Fine Art and Fashion Design at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and Alberta School of Art and Design. Roberta appreciates the juxtaposition of art and science and enjoys applying creativity to nutrition.

Dr. Matthew Numer is an Assistant Professor within Health Promotion in the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University. His research interests include HIV prevention, gay men's sexual health, poststructural methodologies and health promotion frameworks.