

Failing to Engage: Parents' Acceptance of the Promotion of Unhealthy Foods to Children

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Abstract

Six focus groups were conducted with parents and children to explore issues relating to the promotion of unhealthy foods to children. While general discontent with food advertising was expressed by parents and children, none of the parents reported ever making a formal complaint and most exhibited a begrudging acceptance of the current rates of advertising of unhealthy foods and the manner in which these foods are promoted. The primary reasons for this acceptance were found to be (i) an understanding that businesses need to promote their products to ensure their survival, (ii) an assumption that parents should be capable of overcoming the negative effects of advertising, (iii) the perceived value of competitions, toys, and other give-aways, and (iv) the increasing availability of healthy product variations.

Introduction

Around two in three adults and one in four children in Australia are overweight or obese (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Given the numerous adverse health outcomes associated with overweight and obesity, this state of affairs has been described as an obesity epidemic (Swinburn, 2003). Weight problems among children are particularly troublesome because overweight children experience adverse physical and psychological consequences (World Health Organisation, 2000) and they are more likely to become overweight adults and be at risk of chronic diseases (Serdula *et al.*, 1993). They are thus susceptible to both the short and long term consequences of being overweight.

Numerous factors have been identified as contributing to child obesity. These include a wide range of individual (including genetic), social, cultural, and environmental factors (Ebbeling, Pawlak, and Ludwig, 2002). An environmental factor of particular consequence to the marketing discipline is food advertising (Desrochers and Holt, 2007). In the Australian context, child-targeted food advertising has been found to be far removed from the recommended diet for children (Roberts and Pettigrew, 2007). In recent times there have been renewed calls for increased regulation of child-targeted food advertising (Kerr, 2011; National Preventative Health Taskforce, 2008). Such calls can be seen as an attempt to create an environment in which informed consumerism can flourish because novice consumers' interests are protected while they become socialised into the consumer society. This follows Buskirk and Rothe's (1970) definition of consumerism as organised efforts to redress problems in the marketplace.

While voluntary industry codes that aim to limit the advertising of unhealthy foods to children are currently in place, the constraints of these codes are confined to those companies that have elected to be signatories and therefore the introduction of these codes has not greatly reduced children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising (King *et al.*, 2010). In addition, there are documented instances of signatories contravening the codes (e.g., Advertising

Standards Bureau (ASB), 2010). As community attitudes are an important factor influencing government policy in Australia (Reddel, 2002), consumers' attitudes towards child-targeted advertising could be expected to be a key consideration in decisions relating to future regulatory decisions. Previous research has indicated that a majority of Australian parents would favour mandatory restrictions or bans on the advertising of unhealthy foods to children (Kelly *et al.*, 2009; Morley *et al.*, 2008). However, this level of discontent with food advertising is not reflected in current rates of complaint to the ASB – less than 4% of the 3,526 complaints received in 2010 related to food advertising targeted at children (ASB, 2011). It is thus of interest to explore the factors that may be preventing consumers from being more vocal about unhealthy food advertising that is targeted at children. There is little existing knowledge on this topic, especially in the Australian context.

Method

Given the lack of information available relating to the community's views on food advertising to children, an exploratory approach was adopted to investigate consumers' reactions to child-targeted food advertisements and the extent to which such advertisements are considered undesirable. Six focus groups were conducted with parents (n=28) and children (n=28). A social research agency was employed to recruit participants using random digit dialling. Potential interviewees were advised that they were invited to participate in a study relating to advertising, that the interviews would be held on a University campus located close to the city, and that they and their children would be each remunerated \$50 for their time and effort. This process achieved a diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic status.

Two groups were comprised only of parents (one group of fathers and the other of mothers), two groups were comprised of 7-12 year old children (one group of boys and the other of girls), and two mixed gender, mixed age groups were comprised of parents and their 7-12 year old children to allow parent-child interaction as would often occur during shopping trips or exposure to promotional messages. The selection of the age range of 7-12 years for the children was based on three considerations: (1) children's taste preferences are largely determined by age 12 (American Dietetic Association, 2004), so influences on their food choices prior to this age are likely to have long term impacts on their diets; (2) children younger than 12 are recognised to be more susceptible to the effects of advertising (John 1999; McGinnis *et al.* 2005); and (3) participants needed to be old enough to understand the questions posed to them and interact effectively in a focus group environment (Piaget, 1976).

During the semi-structured focus groups, parents and children were asked to discuss their thoughts and feelings in relation to food advertising. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis involved importing the transcripts into NVivo9 for coding and analysis. Theoretical nodes were constructed from the extant literature prior to coding, and inductive codes were added during the coding process to allow emergent concepts to be incorporated.

Findings

General Views on Food Advertising

Both the parents and children listed numerous unfavourable aspects of food advertising. The sheer ubiquity of food advertisements, especially television advertisements for unhealthy foods, was noted as being annoying. For the children, annoyance typically stemmed from

having their programs interrupted. Parents also resented the intrusion, and in addition some noted that food advertisements seemed more apparent in children's viewing times:

Sometimes when you are trying to watch a show, the ads take forever (girl).

On the weekend when the kids are home they also put on a lot of ads, that's what I think. And on school holidays (mother).

A second issue raised was that food advertisements, especially those for unhealthy foods, can be misleading. Even some of the children recognised that what is shown in the advertisement is not necessarily what will be received upon purchase:

In the ads they present it so good, but when you buy it it's not really set up really good.

Like when I went to McDonald's - on the menu it looks so neat and stuff, and when I got it, it was all messy (boy).

For parents, deception concerns related primarily to the use of health appeals that were considered inappropriate given the nutrient profiles of the foods:

Mother 1: The Nutri-Grain ad – if you don't eat Nutri-Grain, you don't be an Iron Man.

Mother 2: Very misleading isn't it? I don't think they give enough factual information. It would probably go straight over a child's head, but you know the children see an advert and think that's wonderful, and we know that it's loaded with salt and sugar or whatever. I just feel that it's a shame that they are trying to suck the children in to a bad product.

A third concern, expressed only by parents, was that advertisements for unhealthy foods can cause children to engage in pestering behaviours, especially for unhealthy foods that are promoted by associating them with popular movies and toy give-aways:

Some of the campaigns are getting pretty sophisticated. They are aligning with other products they know they'll want to do, and I don't think that's quite so fair. If it's just around food, it's fine. But it's now like Transformers the movie and suddenly everyone aligned. Two or three of them (fast food companies) are aligned with Transformer toys (father).

Reaction Inhibitors

Despite their generally negative views of food advertising and their dislike of the obvious attempts of advertisers of unhealthy food to target children, none of the parents reported ever attempting to make a complaint about the extent and nature of such advertising or joining campaigns in to influence the government's regulatory stance in relation to food advertising to children. They seemed resigned to the current situation where the majority of advertised foods are unhealthy, and they could not appear to conceive of an alternative reality in which children were not the targets for unhealthy foods. Numerous explanations were provided for why parents accept the status quo. In the first instance, the profit imperative was raised as a valid reason to tolerate unhealthy food advertising. This view was more frequently expressed by the fathers:

Father 1: I've got no problem because at the end of the day if I want my kids to have McDonald's they can have it, and if I don't want them to they are not going to have it. So it's as simple as that. So if I was a franchisee owner, I would be doing exactly what they are doing to increase profits.

Father 2: They have to make money somehow. I mean, they are a business after all. At the end of the day, they have to do what they have to do to make money

As alluded to by the first father above, a second explanation for a lack perceived need to react to unhealthy food advertising was the assumption that parents are the ultimate controllers of their children's diets, and as such they should be capable of overcoming any adverse effects of exposure to advertising. Where responsibility is taken by the individual, the actions of corporations can be seen to be beyond reproach:

I don't feel the need to complain to anyone because if I end up feeding my kids McDonald's every day and they end up being obese, the onus isn't on the McDonald's. It's actually, you know, the onus is on me (father).

However, as shown by the interaction below between two participants in the mothers' focus group when discussing the effectiveness of McDonald's advertising, this point was contentious. Some parents described situations where they felt vulnerable to the call of unhealthy convenience foods, even though they considered them to be suboptimal, while others perceived themselves immune to such persuasion:

Mother 1: You can't always go out there and have your full cooked dinner. You know you can't always go out there and have your roast and your three vegetables... Sometimes you just have to, 'Oh, let's just go and get McDonald's'. You can't say you don't.

Mother 2: Well, I can say I don't.

A third explanation related to a perception that some of the promoted premiums, or 'add-ons', were of real value, hence justifying the advertisement in terms of its role in advising children and parents of the opportunity to get a 'good deal'. In such cases, the perceived value of the premium was greater than the irritation caused by the advertising:

I won't buy a product that I don't normally have, so products that we never eat I don't get. But the products that I do eat, you know, if there is a competition running I might buy three of them and put them in the larder (mother).

They make their ads like really persuasive sometimes, like they do really good expositions and that to persuade you into buying the food...sometimes McDonald's when they advertise their toys (boy).

Finally, parents seemed somewhat appeased by the increasing availability of healthy food options within food advertisers' product ranges. However, it was recognised that this was probably a marketing ploy to get parents to view the company more favourably and that their children would still prefer the unhealthy options once they got their parents to the store:

I actually think the healthy food range, from an observation point of view, was more around getting the adults in there than of the kids. The kids will go and get their cheeseburgers and all the rest of it and the adults will sit down and have the salad or the wrap or something like that. I think that's more a change in McDonald's style - if they continued the same way, parents won't go in because they'll go and buy something else (father).

While the focus group participants appeared resigned to current levels and types of child-targeted food advertising, there was some concern that children's exposure to such advertising may be increasing in undesirable ways. Existing levels of acceptance may change as food promotion continues to infiltrate other aspects of children's lives as described by the mother below:

My concern I can see here is we can control TV usage to some extent, we just turn it off. But they are off doing their homework and you think they are doing homework because no one there is controlled and that medium is directly advertising print media.

The Internet I find at times devious, particularly on the kids' game sites...And Facebook are particularly targeting the teens group. They've got their iPhone linked to their Facebook - they can do it on there, sending it directly in on their phones now and on their iPads. It's changing and it's far faster than and far less controlled, and the parents are far less aware of what's just started. My daughter was in with Domino's, Burger King, McDonald's (mother).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Public Health Association of Australia, Australian Medical Association, Cancer Council, and other independent public health organisations continue to lobby the Australian Government for greater regulation of food advertising to children. Similar organisations are active elsewhere in the world (e.g., Consumers International and the International Obesity Taskforce). Knowledge of community members' attitudes and potential barriers to their desire for greater regulatory control of food advertising is important for such organisations when determining their lobbying priorities and for the Government in its policy responses. In addition, this information is of value to those companies engaging in such advertising so they can monitor the mood of the community and adapt accordingly.

The findings of the present study support previous research that found parents to be generally unhappy with the advertising of unhealthy foods to children (Ip *et al.*, 2007; Kelly *et al.*, 2009; Morley *et al.*, 2008). The findings also suggest that children can view such advertising as irritating (as per Mehta *et al.*, 2010). Current low levels of complaint to the advertising regulator may thus not accurately reflect community attitudes in relation to this issue. Several barriers appear to exist that prevent parents from taking a stand against child-targeted food advertising. These include an appreciation of the need for businesses to promote their products to ensure their survival; an assumption that parents should be capable of overcoming the negative effects of advertising; the perceived value of competitions, toys, and other give-aways; and the increasing availability of healthy product variations. Although not mentioned by parents, previous research suggests that other barriers are likely to include a lack of knowledge about the complaint process and a perception that there is unlikely to be a positive outcome which would make the effort futile (Ip *et al.*, 2007; Morley *et al.*, 2008). In addition, potential complainants are likely to be discouraged by the small proportion of complaints upheld by the ASB - fewer than one in seven complaints achieve this outcome (ASB, 2009).

Of note were the frequent mentions of McDonald's as a source of advertising for unhealthy children's food. As the largest food producing advertiser in Australia (Nielsen, 2010), it is unsurprising that they have achieved such top of mind status. However, McDonald's are unlikely to desire the negative connotations that this status appears to have generated among many of the participants in this study. Where parents feel that their control over their children's diets is being adversely influenced by food advertising, they are likely to harbour negative feelings towards the companies contributing most to the advertising landscape (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2007). With growing media attention being given to the child obesity crisis and a growing trend towards active consumerism, these companies would be wise to consider the long-term implications of blatantly targeting the child market. Future research should monitor consumer attitudes to such issues to inform (i) governments and health agencies in their efforts to protect children and (ii) organisations in their efforts to comply with prevailing community standards to enhance their long-term survival.

Acknowledgement: This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (project number LP0991615). Funding was also provided by Cancer Council New South Wales and Cancer Council South Australia.

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