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**CHILDREN'S REFLECTION UPON THE REGULATION OF FOOD
ADVERTISING IN THE UK**

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CHILDREN'S REFLECTION UPON THE REGULATION OF FOOD ADVERTISING IN THE UK

ABSTRACT

The UK is commencing with the regulation of nutritionally problematic food advertising in respect to child audiences. This applies to foods that are deemed to be excessive in salt, fat and/or sugar. The assumption is that reduced exposure to such advertising by children will reduce demand and subsequently consumption, in a bid to reduce obesity

This paper concerns twelve year old children's reflection upon the regulation of food advertising. Parents emerge as the major influence upon their diet, advertising a minor influence. Moreover, children's food preferences appear to be driven by taste, and therefore by product development rather than advertising.

INTRODUCTION

So called Junk Foods are processed food products that are high in fat, salt and sugars. It is deemed that these substances, when consumed in immoderation are injurious to health and in particular to the propensity to obesity which has emerged in the UK and elsewhere as a mainstream public health/medical cost issue. That the advertising of such foods is being regulated equates to a belief that the advertising is culpable in leading to harm from an excess of body fat, and other associated disorders. Processed food brands have been highlighted as they tend to be advertised on television whereas a multitude of foods high in these ingredients are merely distributed. The distribution of brands is mistakenly unrecognised as an integral aspect of their marketing

There has however been very little evidence that food advertising has direct consequence to children's diets. The Food Standard's Agency (Hastings 2003) reported that food advertising was associated with consumption of advertised brands, but could not draw consequential conclusion in regard to the relationship between advertising and other marketing and non-marketing influences. Advertised food brands tend to be holistically marketed so advertising must be considered as part of a wider marketing mix. Family and peer influence add further complexity to food purchase decision making. Whilst therefore advertising doubtlessly informs as to the utility and persona of food brands, it is overly simplistic to merely regulate advertising if wishing to moderate demand.

Moreover regulating food advertising to children will be difficult and complicated to assess as child audiences will still be able to access advertising ostensibly aimed at their parents, and will remain subject to the influence of distribution, merchandising, consumer research and product development, which in themselves encourage consumption irrespective of advertising. As most food consumed by children is provided by their parents, perhaps regulation should apply to advertising received by them.

Solomon (1996) states “children learn about consumption by watching their parents’ behaviour and imitating it.” Samson (2005) shows “as an epidemic of childhood obesity increases, governments, pressure groups and other stakeholders are increasing the pressure on those marketing foods to children”, yet that “now diets are becoming poor is due to many families being cash rich but time poor. These two factors have led to an increased demand for convenience foods, lunchbox items, takeaways and children’s restaurants.”

Of late food marketers have been responding to the debate, stating they will not advertise their food products towards children, to prevent a poor reputation, and to deflect government intervention. The debate does not compel food marketers to discuss marketing their foodstuffs to families.

McNeal and Ji (2003) comment that “marketers who target children should present their messages in a credible manner in order to gain trust from parents and children alike.” The dual targeting of parents and children then makes it difficult to be clear on whom advertising designs to influence. Occam (2004) report that 70% of children’s advertising impacts take place outside officially-defined children’s airtime. Findings also revealed that an average child sees only five ads every day for any food product out of a possible 28 ads for any product, and that only two of these are viewed in children’s airtime.

O’Sullivan (2005) reminds us that, children can observe advertising in many different ways, that “their experience of advertising and consumption extends far beyond products and services aimed explicitly at them.”

Occam, the UK broadcast regulator (2006) however stated that “we would welcome any such option capable of commanding broad support and of making positive and substantive contribution to changing children’s preference, behaviour and consumption of food and drink.” The food advertising regulation debate is high

profile in the UK press, however there is a lack of information about children's attitude towards the regulation of food advertising. O'Sullivan (2004) advances that; "...the case for research with children themselves, potentially giving them a voice which – to date – has been relatively under-represented in the debate."

As children are the focus of advertising regulation in respect to food, this paper investigates the perceived outcomes of such intervention through the lens of children's involvement in family food purchase. How does food advertising intervene upon family food purchasing behaviour, and does the influence of parents upon food shopping for the family appear to their children to be related to advertising? What do children see as the likely outcomes of the regulation of food advertising?

RESEARCH

Children's attitudes and opinions about family food orientated advertising were acquired through allocation of questionnaires in a Central Scottish School. The demographic of the school is C1C2, and children are described by their teacher as being of average ability. They are of a typical UK mid market socio-economic and educational background.

"The child market by definition encompasses all children up to the age of 12 years" (Harper *et al*, 2003). The older children become, the more likely they are to make choices about food purchases. Mayo (2005). Thus eleven to thirteen year old children were chosen to be respondents

Questionnaires were presented as part of the children's academic curriculum. This comprised a combination of open and closed questions with a self reporting facility allowing for an account of their attitudes and beliefs. Thus in regard to food advertising and regulation they were required to state what they thought and why they thought it. The deputy head was able to go over it to check the degree of difficulty of the questions. She helped to alter the wording of a couple of questions to make it easier for the children to understand. Using self completion questionnaires allowed the respondents to be able to feel anonymous, as they were referring to their families, thus encouraging candidness.

In the classroom setting the briefed teacher explained what respondents were required to do. The children were handed out the questionnaires in their Home Economics period in class. The questionnaires were being used as part of the curriculum for what

the children were currently doing in that semester. The children were given plenty of time to complete the questionnaire.

Results have been limited to frequencies as there are only a few broad measurements within the questionnaire, and the qualitative free expression has been grouped into themes which illuminate the measurements. The method sought quantification of key questions combined with qualification of response by explanation and elaboration.

RESULTS

Of 164 respondents, 57% were male, 144 were twelve years of age with 6 eleven year olds and 14 thirteen year olds. Only 4% of respondents believed that levels of junk food advertising were not too high, the remainder split evenly between thinking it is too high sometimes and all the time. It is not evident why they have this attitude. 70% of respondents however felt their parent's purchasing decision of food products was not influenced by food advertisements.

The minority who did observe influence opined that advertising makes food more attractive looking, presents it as a treat, and simply assumed that because it was being promoted, that their parents would be interested in it, particularly as these respondents reported their parents as liking advertising, and tended to buy branded produce

The majority of respondents who did not see advertising as being an influence believed that their parents did not like advertising, didn't watch much TV and that they would naturally eat what they liked. Moreover they saw their parents as providing a balanced diet for the family, which tended to represent established patterns, and who were resistant to children's requests for foods they did not see as being healthy.

Respondents reported the most popular way their parents would see or hear about a food advertisement would be on television; the next most popular was within supermarkets; then in magazines.

Respondents were asked whether they thought their parents/guardians food choices would be different if there were no food advertisements. 68% of respondents felt that their parents' choices would not be different under these circumstances.

Those who believed there would be a difference cited that the lack of advertising would equate to a lack of information, and subsequently less knowledge of what was available. Some saw that no advertising would lead to less involvement in branded processed foods.

The majority of respondents who did not believe that their parents food purchasing habits would be altered by a lack of food advertising saw that they would see the foods being marketed in supermarkets anyway, and that they have established food buying patterns as they know what they want to eat, and are not influenced by or do not pay attention to food advertising.

Respondents were asked whether if there was a food advertising ban towards children/teenagers whether they thought this would change what foods they eat?

60% of respondents did not think it would alter their food consumption patterns.

Those who did believe there would be a change thought they would not eat so much nutritionally questionable food, and that perhaps they would not eat so much and that their parents would become more of an influence.

The majority however saw no effective outcome of a ban as they would eat what they liked regardless of advertising which was not really an influence anyway, and that their parents had control of food that was purchased and served up.

When respondents were asked what or who influences what they eat, 60% cited their parents and 20% their selves. Only 15% of respondents reported that television advertising was an influence upon their diet.

DISCUSSION

Findings raise several issues. Respondents thought there can be high levels of food advertising. However they did not generally feel these high levels of advertising influence their parents/guardians purchasing decision. The themes that were highlighted from the children's reasoning for this are that; they (the parents) are not basing their food purchasing behaviour upon the advocacy of advertising.

Ofcom (2006) reported that food promotion, especially television advertising, contributes to the unhealthy food preferences, poor diet and, consequently, growing obesity among children in Western Societies". Our respondents did not see it this way.

That 85% percent of respondents did not feel television advertising influenced what they eat is worthy of some scrutiny given that this necessitates their own perceptions of whether or not they believe advertising intervenes upon their diet. This represents a wider debate upon consumer self awareness of how advertising may influence attitudes and behaviours. Within the context of this however, there is a strong body of evidence that illustrates children of this age are sophisticated consumers of

advertising communication (John 1999) and as such their self awareness in this instance is credible. Moreover the co-creation of meaning paradigm (Ritson and Elliot 1995) presents consumers of advertising as being active participants in the construction of advertising meaning, as opposed to a passive absorber of promotional communication. It is credible therefore that respondents have some self awareness about the role of advertising in their decision making.

Preston and Paterson's (2004) study found that television advertising had only a minimal impact upon food choice, yet there has been a disproportionate focus on TV advertising as the main cause of rising levels of obesity." Branded food products that are high in fat, salt and sugar are distributed widely and have been created to be appealing.. Preston and Patterson concluded that the Hasting Report (2003) provided no proof that food promotion had a direct effect on children – although their own judgement was that it did. It did not however question whether the marketing and development of a food product did or did not influence the children in what they choose to eat. Promotion of food needs to be differentiated from the wider marketing activities that take place to produce a food product that will find acceptance.

In our study 58% felt that their parents were the biggest influence to what they eat. Would educating parents with better knowledge of how to give their children a healthy diet be helpful?

After all if parents are able to be targeted by food advertisers, and they buy the food, then what end does regulating advertising to children serve?

The UK Consumers Association (2003) shows some attention has been paid towards the marketing of food products. It reported that "parents find that marketing (not just advertising) of foodstuffs makes it difficult for parents to provide a healthy diet for their children." Overall it is remarkable that there has been little focus on the marketing activity that goes on in the development of new products. This illuminates a fundamental lack of appreciation of the role of advertising within the context of marketing planning.

Herein 60% of respondents did not feel there would be a difference to what they eat if there was a food advertising ban. The children gave some interesting reasons to support their view. One of the main themes was "I would keep buying the same food because I like it" this shows that there is nothing to stop the children from buying what they want as they have responsibility from a young age over their purchasing decisions. Children have developed eating habits and tastes for certain foods.

Regulating the promotion of foods children have already become accustomed to may not influence behaviour.

The advertising audiences proposed by Crosier (1999) remind us that adult orientated advertising can be devised with children in mind, and that conversely child orientated advertising may be devised with adults in mind. Marketers have begun to treat children as influential in the purchase process of adult-orientated products, for example selecting food products for the household. Children are now consuming a high number of foods directed towards adults. Adult brands are also seen as appealing by children. Buss (1999) shows that the most successful food and beverage brands consumed by children are adult brands with a wide appeal.” Martensen and Hansen (1999)“found that 8-12 year old children watch more adult orientated advertising than child orientated advertising and that most children by the age of eight do not find advertising to be believable. Children are able to make up their own mind on food advertisements. They also relate that children are also very interested in the food products that adults consume. “Children certainly fall within this category, and from eight years of age children encounter more adult-orientated advertising than aimed at themselves”. This again highlights that children are consuming and interested in food products directed towards adults.

There is very little evidence to support those saying that a food advertising ban would improve the children’s diets. Laver (2006) shows conversely that levels of advertising to children have fallen in the US, while childhood obesity continues to rise. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) data show that advertising during children’s programming in the US has fallen by 34% since 1977.”

Respondents have reported that they themselves are the second biggest influence to what they eat indicates the need for further enquiry. To what extent does food product development influence what children perceive as being their own preferences?

As food advertising regulation towards children takes place food advertisers and marketers will still be able to direct their food products in a more roundabout way to children through other marketing means. It will also prove difficult to prevent children from seeing advertisements supposedly aimed at adults.

As parents are the main influence to what children eat it would seem logical more focus was aimed on them. If advertising regulation is to be the extent of government intervention into the marketing of food brands, then regulate the marketing of nutritionally problematic food regardless of audience composition rather than merely

attempting to reduce children's reception of such advertising, which as we have seen is fraught with uncertainty.

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