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Preston, Chris (2009) *Parental Influence upon Children's Diet: The Issue of Category*. In: Consumer 09: 4th International Consumer Sciences Research Conference, 24 - 26 June 2009 , Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh.

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Parental Influence upon Children's Diet: The Issue of Category

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Abstract

Food and Drink are distributed via corporate institutions in categories, such as ready meals or carbonated drinks. Within these categories a minority of brands advertise, capitalising upon the popularity of the categories. The issue of childhood obesity and health has led to a focus upon these advertised brands in terms of their being targeted at children, but nothing has been done about the categories they represent. Furthermore, parents have an influence upon their children's diet, as their expenditure accounts for the majority of their children's consumption.

This paper accounts for UK children's perceptions of the effect of advertising and marketing of food and drink upon their parents, and concludes that they see advertising as having very little influence. Rather they see their parents involvement with certain categories, that have become over time their norm. They do not see that the regulation of advertising of food and drink to children will have any significant effect upon their diet, as their parents will continue to consume from within the categories supplied by the retail sector, which in their view constitutes the most influential aspect of food and drink marketing.

Given international focus upon the advertising of food brands, this paper draws attention to other, potentially more influential issues.

Keywords

Children and marketing, category management, parental influence, advertising regulation, food marketing

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Introduction

Interest in children's diet of late has been driven by social and financial concerns about the ill effects of an overweight sedentary population of young people becoming older and costlier to maintain. The long term health costs of an overweight population (Gibson 1997) outweigh those of smokers (King, 2009). Interest in children's nutritional intake is also linked to concerns about the effect of food processing upon children's development (Bellisle 2004) and upon their behaviour (Tuormaa 1994). Concern about the influence of diet upon children's wellbeing is therefore wide ranging (Dalmenny et al 2003) The food industry is dominated by corporate retail giants (Mintel 2008)) the majority of domestic expenditure on food being transacted therein. The extent to which this sector represents food consumption in the UK permits focus upon it in consideration of the nation's diet.

The remainder of the market is many and varied, but includes a substantial non corporate fast food industry promoting fat and salt based products, such as the popular British fish and chip shop, specialising in a variety of deep fried food. Within EU guidelines it is possible to offer consumers a great many nutritionally questionable choices which may combine into an unbalanced diet.

Given the distribution and promotion of food as widespread, and the extent to which food and drink brands are marketed, focus has fallen upon the regulation of advertising of food and drink towards children as instrumental in

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their dietary choices. (ASA, 2006) This is considered as an ill advised initiative within this paper, and through discussion and focus upon a tight data set, it will concentrate upon the role of parents on children's diets, within the wider context of marketing communication.

The targeting of food and drink advertising

General principles apply to the targeting of advertised brands that apply equally to food and drink. The definition of advertising reception outlined by Crosier (1999) provides a formal account of advertising audiences. The micro audience are the deliberate target upon which advertising messages are intended to have a positive effect. The macro audience are those who have not been primarily targeted, yet whose brand attitudes have been taken into account by the advertiser. The meta audience is everyone else who have not been prevented from encountering the advertising.

Food and drink advertising is then targeted at children when they represent the micro or the macro audience. It is held not to be aimed at them when they represent the meta audience regardless of their receiving such advertising, or whether or not they interacted positively with it. We should ask not then whether they are being targeted or not, but the extent to which they are being targeted.

The planning of message strategy gives consideration to the macro audience, dependent upon their level of involvement in purchase decision making.

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Audience segments may be involved in purchase or influence purchase decisions to various extents. The majority of food advertising is for family brands (Buss, 1999), which is to say brands that do not target on the basis of age.

Adult orientated advertising can therefore be devised with children in mind, and conversely child orientated advertising may be devised with adults in mind. (The latter perspective is not covered herein, yet is deserving of attention given the assumptions generally made about who is being targeted by ostensibly child orientated advertising)

Never the less, children certainly receive advertising that is directly intended for them as the micro audience. The bulk of academic research into children and advertising concerns this (John 1999).

When we consider the media landscape it transpires that virtually all ten year old children in the UK have televisions in their own rooms. (Mintel 2004), so there is ample opportunity for them to receive a variety of advertisements that has been ostensibly aimed at adults, with seven out of ten UK advertising impacts upon children taking place out with children's airtime. (Nielson, 2003). It is children's reception of a various advertising types that represent their interaction with this aspect of marketing communication.

Distinctions between adult and child orientated advertising are blurred given children's influence upon family expenditure, and parental influence upon their own consumption opportunities. The distinction is further blurred by the established practice of sub targeting secondary or macro audiences which

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must by their very nature involve children as significant influencers and decision makers (Crosier, 1999). All one can therefore say about the targeting of children with food and drink advertising is that it happens to varying extents, sometimes overtly, sometimes not.

Parental interaction with food and drink marketing

Adults come into contact with food and drink marketing perpetually, and the grocery and fast food sectors are high profile and extensive. In the UK in 2008, the four largest retail grocery multiple chains accounted for 75% of the grocery market (TNS, 2008). These operators are therefore in complete dominance of the market, and moreover are representative of the market.

Parents therefore have a great deal of choice when it comes to providing food for the family home, as the multiple grocers do offer substantial choice.

Even the most disadvantaged families in the UK have access to healthy food, as all social classifications are catered for. Supermarket chains that service poorer neighbourhoods provide the potential for a healthy and balanced diet, as do those that supply the more prosperous, if in more variety and abundance. Whilst food and drink marketing has been criticised widely it has, at the level of distribution, provided all with the means to eat healthily.

That therefore many people are choosing to eat too much food heavy in salt fat and sugar represents a choice to do so. That choice is held to be

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influenced however by other marketing activity to which parents in households where these substances are heavily consumed appear to be susceptible. If people are eating too much of these substances, then perhaps they are being persuaded to by advertising. Which is to say, that without the advertising of problematic food and drink people might not eat so much of these things. In regard to children's diet this has resulted in focus upon advertising directed at them, but not upon their parents.

The importance of category

How then should we expect parents to interact with food and drink advertising, and what effects upon family diet are to be expected? That question unfortunately belies the problem with the issue. Advertising is but one aspect of the marketing of food and drink, and is a coordinated communication in support of otherwise often heavily marketed brands that have been created, packaged, priced and distributed so as to be convenient to purchase and consume. We cannot therefore separate the advertising of food and drink from these major influences.

Parental interaction with advertising is symptomatic of their interaction with heavily marketed brands. These brands exist within categories wherein characteristics are shared. A leading sugary soft drink that is advertised is but one of many products that are nutritionally identical within a category. The same can be said for virtually all advertised food and drink brands.

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Parental interaction with food and drink advertising, as indeed it is for children, represents advocated choice within set categories, the most recognisable and image laden choices being naturally popular. By no means are all the options within average food and drink categories advertised. Those that are will be attempting to capitalise upon a popular mode of consumption and will be investing to increase their market share.

Own label food and drink represent a sizeable market share in many categories, on the basis of price, as with alcohol for instance, or weight of distribution as with ready meals, yet individual products are not advertised. For example UK figures for 2007 show 43% of the confectionary market as being retailer own label (Nielsen 2008)

In the mass market parental food and drink choice is most heavily influenced by the categories on offer. That there is an entire aisle in a large hypermarket devoted to crisps is more influential upon crisp consumption than the advertising of the leading brand. Food and drink advertising is therefore offering parents choice within existing categories, and their health is affected by involvement with the category, not specifically with the leading brands within it.

Children's interaction with categories

The same can be said of children: advertised brands are choices within categories (Jason et. al 2006) However the regulation of food and drink

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advertising to children applies itself to brands, not categories. If the aim is to reduce children's exposure to 'junk' food advertising to when they represent a significant minority, then children will see fewer such advertisements. Will that have an effect upon involvement with an established category?

What effect should we expect from this, given opportunities to see by their parents remain unaltered? Can a slight reduction in children's exposure to food and drink advertising influence consumption patterns away from established categories. And what, as has been stressed here, of parent's influence upon food and drink choices?

Research method and objectives

Children's attitudes and opinions about their parents interaction with food and drink advertising were elicited 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.

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. Of 164 respondents, 57% were male, 144 were twelve years of age with 6 eleven year olds and 14 thirteen year olds.

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Questionnaires were presented as part of the children's academic curriculum. A self reporting facility in the questionnaire allowed for a more detailed account of their attitudes and beliefs. 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 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 and Discussion

Some 70% of respondents felt that their parent's purchasing decision about food products was not influenced by food advertisements. They did not see advertising as being an influence, many claiming to believe that their parents did not like advertising, did not watch much television and that they would naturally eat what they liked. Moreover they saw their parents as attempting to provide a balanced diet for the family, which tended to represent established

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patterns, and as being resistant to children's requests for foods out with these established patterns. Respondents were asked whether they thought their parents/guardians food choices would be different if there were no food advertisements. Some 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 consequently less knowledge of what was available.

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 (Keane 1994) 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? Some 60% of respondents did not think it would alter their food consumption patterns. They 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% themselves. Only 15% of respondents reported that television advertising was an influence upon their diet.

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Only a small percentage of children felt that television advertising had an influence on what they themselves eat. Some 85% percent did not feel television advertising influenced what they eat. This is of course their perceptions of whether or not they believe advertising is influential in this respect. 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.

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 such advertising as the main cause of rising levels of obesity. Can it be that the government has been advised that advertising is equivalent to marketing?

In our study 58% felt that their parents were the biggest influence to what they eat. If parents are targeted by food advertisers, and they buy the food, then what end does regulating advertising to children serve, even within the general strategic weakness of focusing upon advertising communication.

Herein 60% of respondents did not feel there would be a difference to what they eat if food and drink advertising were regulated. The children gave some interesting reasons to support their view. One of the main arguments went something like "I would keep buying the same food because I like it". This shows that there is nothing to stop these 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,

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which correspond with the categories on offer in the marketplace. The availability of categories will remain unaltered by advertising regulation.

Conclusion

As parents are the main influence upon what their children eat, 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. Merely attempting to reduce children's reception of such advertising is as we have seen is fraught with uncertainty.

There is very little evidence to support those saying that a food advertising regulation would improve 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. These tendencies are not surprising when one factors in the influence of parents, and the dominance of distributed categories.

Moreover there is the issue of lifestyle wherein children are expending less energy in their lives and are therefore unable to burn off calories equivalent to the degree to which they are ingested. The sedentary childhood of screen-time makes children vulnerable to weight gain. Once again sedentary lifestyles are subject to parental consent.

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