



2020

Weighing the Effects of Food Marketing to Children

Serena Panos
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/buwell>



Part of the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), and the [Nutrition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Panos S. Weighing the Effects of Food Marketing to Children. *BU Well*. 2020; 5(1).

This Articles and Multimedia is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in BU Well by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.



Weighing the Effects of Food Marketing to Children

Serena Panos

Abstract: The marketing tactics used to promote food products in the United States has grown exponentially over recent years. Companies no longer promote products through traditional television commercials alone but utilize their ability to reach consumers through a multitude of modern social media outlets. Because of this, food promotions are all around us. However, the advertising and marketing of food targeted at children and adolescents may not be as harmless as it seems. This article explores why the progressive target marketing of food to children may be a key factor in the rapid growth rate of childhood obesity in the United States.

When watching television or flipping through a magazine, it is evident that advertisements promise consumers products that will remedy their feelings of inadequacy. From the makeup we wear to the food we eat, ads are meant to exploit emotions felt by consumers as a way to promote products to amass audiences and drive up sales.¹ The food industry is the second-highest purchaser of advertisements in the United States economy, behind only the automotive industry. The avenues in which companies may advertise include radio, newspaper, billboard, television, and magazines.² However, food and beverage advertisements are not limited to these platforms. In fact, they use a full spectrum of promotional systems and programs. In 2009, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported food and beverage companies spent 1.79 billion dollars marketing their products specifically to children. Additionally, the greater part of the food and beverage advertising industry targeted at youth is for products of poor nutritional value.^{1,3} The hopeful consumer may believe significant investments in advertising allow companies to promote healthy and nutritious food for the advancement of a stronger generation, but this has not been the case. The advertising and marketing of food targeted at children and adolescents in the United States are driven by profit and have an explicit impact on eating habits. Ultimately, these marketing strategies influence the rapid growth rate of childhood obesity and negatively impact public health.

Children and adolescents are an important market force for food and beverage companies. Young demographics are targeted because of their susceptibility to persuasion, potential continuance as long term customers, disposable income, and powerful purchasing influence within their household.² The impact of market schemes on children and adolescents is greater compared to adults. The larger influence is in part due to the neuroplasticity of a young brain, which is the brain's ability to wire, rewire, and transform. Long-lasting changes in the brain occur as one learns new information and commits it to memory. Although the brain changes throughout a lifetime, the most impactful changes transpire as the brain is initially wired. Because a brain is wired for the first-time during childhood, it is more open to inducement from marketing and the creation of permanent connections. Furthermore, key players in the proper development of a young brain are nutritious eating and physical activity. The eating and exercise habits formed during the ages of 12 to 18 are likely to carry over as lifestyle practices into adulthood.²

marketing because they contribute billions of dollars to the food and beverage world. Since most children and adolescents are not concerned with paying bills or saving money, they have a substantial disposable income and spend the majority of it on food. The FTC estimates US adolescents, ages 12 to 17, spend an average of 140 billion dollars a year on food and drinks.² In addition to the personal money youth are spending, they also greatly influence the buying patterns of their families. Purchases as large as a vacation or as small as a drive-thru meal are heavily influenced by the children of a family.⁴ Generally, children under 12 spend 25 billion dollars on food and beverages and influence an additional 200 billion dollars of spending per year.² Combined, children and adolescents yield 165 billion dollars of revenue for food and beverage companies. Based on revenue alone, it is clear why consumers in this age range are strategically targeted to develop brand awareness and loyalty.

Taking the idea of brand awareness and loyalty one step further, young consumers are more likely to purchase the same product over several years if that habit is formed early in life. As mentioned, a young brain is incredibly impressionable. If a company can convince an adolescent to regularly purchase and consume a certain product, the young consumer is prone to habitually purchase the same product for decades into adulthood. This cycle ultimately creates a stable and renewable income for companies, a clear incentive for target marketing of products to children.

Creating a consistent income for food companies is vital to their success. Marketing experts, therefore, utilize a wide variety of methods to reach young consumers. As noted previously, the US food system is a primary buyer of traditional advertising mediums such as television, newspapers, and magazines.² In addition to these traditional marketing sources, nearly every environment where a child might play, study, or eat is an opportunity to influence purchase and consequently includes advertising.³ Modern media is an appealing marketing tool for food and beverage companies as it is tremendously versatile and far less costly than television. Apps and websites appealing to adolescents can offer subscriptions, music downloads, screensavers, redeemable stickers, and more in conjunction with the buying of a product. Some companies even go as far as contacting adolescent consumers through social media direct messaging and text messaging.¹

Moreover, children and adolescent consumers are targeted by

24 April 2020

Another modern promotional method is linking the purchase of a product with access to a company website or app. On the inside of a product's packaging is a code that allows for entry to the website or app, permitting the consumer to participate in games, contests, sweepstakes, or giveaways. For example, in 2006, Coca-Cola launched a program called "My Coke Rewards".⁵ Every coke bottle, can, or box packaging contained a code redeemable to participate in sweepstakes, claim free drinks, obtain discounts with brand partners, and more. The program was phased out and replaced by a Coca-Cola website and app called "Sip & Scan" in 2017.⁵ The new platform is similar as it allows consumers to scan a barcode on the bottle for access to experiences, rewards, and raffles. In today's generation, viral media—such as company-sponsored websites, social networking platforms, and online promotions—accounts for a larger portion of food marketing and sales than ever before.

Not only are youth promotional campaigns widely reachable, they are also fully integrated. This means images and themes found in popular television shows, movies, and books are carried over to packaging, in-store displays, and online platforms.¹ The cross-promotion created by prominent characters and influencers in collaboration with food and beverage products is especially effective. When a child or adolescent sees an actor or celebrity endorsing a product they are more inclined to purchase the item because they feel a personal connection to the role model displayed on the front.¹ This type of promotion takes the focus off the food and beverages and onto the social and emotional benefits of purchasing the products. Companies can easily promote highly processed foods when combined with pop culture icons. It is clear companies take advantage of younger consumer habits to increase sales, and inadvertently contribute to the childhood obesity epidemic.

Foods marketed to children are primarily processed snacks full of sugar and fat. These foods are inconsistent with the national dietary recommendations for children. In 2014, an adolescent's standard diet consisted of over 50 percent fat and added sugar.⁶ Not surprising, these children were less healthy and weighed more than those who ate fat and sugar in moderation. Likewise, these same children have a higher chance of developing chronic diseases, including diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular diseases.⁶ The rising epidemic of childhood obesity is at the forefront of public health concern. In the United States alone, more than 12.5 million children have been diagnosed as obese.⁶ This means 30 percent of children are affected by the comorbidities of obesity before they are considered an adult in control of their diet.⁶ Because there has been a rise in the marketing and consumption of low nutrient-dense foods among adolescents, it seems clear that there is a relationship between marketing, food consumption, and the childhood obesity epidemic.

To effectively tackle the growing issue of childhood obesity and the role food marketing plays in the epidemic, researchers suggest not only the strict monitoring of advertisements across all platforms, but that companies limit advertisements to the promotion of healthy food. Additionally, the criteria for healthy foods should be standardized and taught in schools.¹ The FTC, as the lead reviewer of food marketing to children, calls public attention to the issue and holds companies accountable for the

adverse effects of their marketing schemes. Being that advertising is very useful in affecting children's and adolescents' purchasing habits, perhaps the same marketing techniques could be used to promote healthy eating. A shift of direction to education and implementation may help curb the rising childhood obesity epidemic rather than exacerbate it.

References

1. Botha S, Fentonmiller K, Jennings C, et al. A review of food marketing to children and adolescents. Federal Trade Commission. <https://www.ftc.gov/reports/review-food-marketing-children-adolescents-follow-report>. December 2012. Accessed September 30, 2019.
2. Story M, French S. Food advertising and marketing directed at children and adolescents in the US. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act*. 2004;1(3): Article 3. doi:10.1186/1479-5868-1-3. Accessed September 15, 2019.
3. Botha S, Fentonmiller K, Jennings C, et al. Marketing food to children and adolescents. Federal Trade Commission. <https://www.ftc.gov/reports/marketing-food-children-adolescents-review-industry-expenditures-activities-self-regulation>. July 2008. Accessed September 15, 2019.
4. Calvert SL. Children as consumers: advertising and marketing. *Future Child*. 2008;18(1):205-34. doi:10.1353/foc.0.0001.
5. FAQ. Coca-Cola website. <https://us.coca-cola.com/mycokerewards/>. June 2017. Accessed September 30, 2019.
6. Estrada E, Eneli I, Hampl S, et al. Children's hospital association consensus statements for comorbidities of childhood obesity. *Child Obes*. 2014;10(4):304-317. doi:10.1089/chi.2013.0120.