

Marketing Unhealthy Foods and Beverages: Our Children at Risk

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Introduction

Children between two and five spend an average of thirty-two hours watching television weekly and children between six and eight watch television for an average of twenty-eight hours each week. Given these numbers, imagine the possible gains from using commercials to advertise products to children (Uzoma, 2017). Children are often targeted because they have “many years of consumer behavior ahead of them” (Harris et al, 2009, pg. 212) and companies want to cultivate “positive, long-lasting brand relations with children and teens and with parents to create brand loyalty in the future” (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006, pg. 167). Research has found that children view more than 13 food and beverage ads on television daily and adolescents view an average of 16 ads (Schwartz, 2013). Furthermore, the average preschooler sees more than 11 food ads per day, even though the food industry has pledged to not advertise to very young children because of preschoolers’ vulnerability to advertising’s influence (Schwartz, 2013). Many of these food and beverage commercials are filled with advertisements for products that are considered unhealthy. The problem with advertising unhealthy products to children is intensified when considering the rise in childhood obesity rates in recent years (Jolly, 2013). The goal of this paper is to examine the ethical dilemma associated with marketing to children, especially as it relates to food and beverage advertising, and to provide some possible solutions to this dilemma.

The Ethical Dilemma Associated with Marketing to Children

Marketing is all about influencing an audience. Adults know and understand this; however, children twelve and under do not, leaving them at a distinct disadvantage for avoiding the manipulation tactics utilized in advertisements. Children are easily swayed by marketing ploys because they have not yet developed the cognitive abilities related to information-processing to differentiate between television programs and commercials (Jolly, 2013).

Although children may not understand the selling intent in advertisements, this does not mean that the child is unaffected by the ads they view (Nestle, 2006). Research has shown that marketing food related products that intentionally target young children results in children consuming foods and beverages that are higher in calories and fat (Nestle, 2006). Approximately 90% of U.S. advertisements viewed by both children and adolescents display foods and beverages that are considered unhealthy (Harris, Sarda, Schwartz, and Brownell, 2013).

These marketing tactics have been proven to work. Harris et al (2013, 2015) found that food packaging with McDonald’s branding on it is preferred over a more generic packaging. Not only did the children in the study prefer the branded packaging over the plainer choice, the children also thought that the food within the packaging tasted better, proving that food promotion has a direct effect on children’s food preferences, knowledge and behavior.

Noticeably lacking in television commercials targeted to children is the product’s nutritional content. Many cereal commercials claim that their product is part of a balanced breakfast (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006); therefore, children might believe that the cereal is indeed nutritious (Harris et al., 2013).

In addition to branded packaging, some companies have also created characters to become the face of their brand. Some characters are created to help market a brand to children, like McDonald’s Ronald McDonald. Other characters are licensed by corporations to create an association between their product and popular animated characters presented in children’s movies or television programming. For example, Nabisco has created Dora the Explorer crackers and cookies; Kellogg’s created Spiderman PopTarts; and Kraft Macaroni ‘N Cheese had noodles shaped like both Sponge Bob Square Pants and Scooby Doo (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). A child

seeing a favorite character represent a food brand might be more likely to buy that food since they associate good things with that character and thus associate good things with the product (Klein, 2010).

Obesity and the Marketer's Impact

Obesity amongst children has been a growing concern. Globally, it is estimated that 43 million preschool children are now obese, which is a 60% increase since 1990 (Harvard School of Public Health, 2017). While individual companies have claimed to make efforts in combating childhood obesity, food and beverages are still listed as a contributing cause of obesity and remain one of the most prevalent types of marketing aimed at children (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). According to Nestle (2006), at least 30 percent of the calories in the average child's diet derive from sweets, soft drinks, salty snacks, and fast food. Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between BMI (body mass index) and how much television a child watches (Sonneville et al, 2015).

Potential Solutions

Although the food industry has pledged to not advertise to very young children (Schwartz, 2013), the self-imposed pledges and self-regulations have been largely ineffective. The United States government has done little to intervene on behalf of children (Wilde, 2009). Possible solutions include a formal ban, a partial ban, creating formal government regulations, and classifying higher ages for what constitutes a child since the self-regulation approach has not been effective.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper investigates the possible impact of promotional efforts, especially television advertising, on the unhealthy eating habits of minors in the United States and whether this may have contributed to increased instances of childhood obesity. Potential solutions are discussed.

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TRACK: Nonprofit/Public Sector Marketing