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Marketing Unhealthy Foods and Beverages: Our Children at Risk

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Abstract – This paper examines the ethical dilemma created because of the largely ineffective self-regulation of the advertising industry as it relates to children and the corresponding drastic increase in childhood obesity. Unhealthy food and beverage companies are intentionally targeting children who have not yet developed the cognitive skills necessary to discern programming content from advertising. Children, who have many years of consumption ahead of them, can be an appealing target market for companies promoting products high in fat and calories. Given that existing self-regulation policies have been largely unsuccessful, four potential solutions are discussed.

Key Words – Childhood Obesity, Television Advertising, Nutrition, Food and Beverages

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.

Introduction

Companies have been using television commercials to market their products for over sixty years and children have been the target audience to this form of marketing for just as long (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). Research has shown that "the bulk of marketing budgets is spent on television advertising" (Harris et al., 2009, pg. 213). In fact, so much focus is placed on television when it comes to marketing because companies view it as "effective at building strong brands" (Boyland and Whalen, 2015, pg. 332).

This may be especially true for advertising geared towards children as well. When considering 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, imagining the possible gains from using commercials to advertise products is easy (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).

Often a child will come across food and beverage commercials for the first time by watching television programs (Boyland and Whalen, 2015); however, many of these food and beverage commercials are filled with advertisements for products that are considered unhealthy. Sodas, fast foods, and sugary snacks are just a few examples of the unhealthy products that are typically advertised during children’s programs. In fact, 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). 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 facing marketers when creating marketing messages targeted to young children and how this dilemma is intensified due to obesity rates. Some potential solutions that could rectify this ethical issue are also discussed.

The Ethical Dilemma Associated with Marketing to Children

Marketing is all about influencing an audience. The goal of an advertisement is to convince any possible viewers that they need to buy the product being shown, or at the very least, put the product name in their head so they remember it when they are shopping in a store later. Adults know and understand that this is the point of marketing. Children twelve and under, on the other hand, do not and cannot fully understand this concept, 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). Two key information-processing skills that children lack when viewing television commercials include the ability to discriminate commercial from noncommercial content and the ability to determine intent to persuade and consistently apply skepticism to advertising messages (Jolly, 2013). Typically, these two skills develop with age; advertisements that may influence someone as a child would not influence that same person as an adult.

Although children may not understand the selling intent in advertisements, this does not mean that the child is unaffected by the ads they view. By the age of two, children can identify brand logos they have seen in television commercials (Nestle, 2006). A typical four year old views advertisements as a form of entertainment, much like the television programs they were watching just moments before it. They can also recognize brand names they have heard and can ask for said brands while out shopping with a parent or guardian. It isn't until the age of twelve that a child begins to understand the intentions behind advertising. He or she cannot yet explain the methods

used to market and sell (Jolly, 2013). 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 et al., 2013).

It is easy to see why children are drawn in by the food and beverage commercials aimed at them. For example, Kellogg's Frosted Flakes advertisements show cereal covered in enough crystalized sugar to sparkle which may draw many people's eyes to the product on the screen. Adults are able to combat the images shown with the knowledge that what is on the screen is hardly what the product looks like in reality, and the nutrition facts printed on the side of the box might make an adult think twice before buying the product. However children are not so easily dissuaded from desiring the products and beverages shown. This problem is compounded considering children have a "biological preference" for food and drink items that taste sweet or salty (Kraak et al, 2016).

Even companies claiming to champion physical activity may pair such activities with sugary foods. Kellogg's Frosted Flakes cereal commercials often show a child being active and playing sports with other children after eating a bowl of their cereal. The company has even made its advertising more personable, focusing less on the product and more on the customer, moving away from the tagline "they're gr-r-reat!" to "let your gr-r-reat out!" (Kellogg's, 2011). Everything in a Frosted Flakes commercial is aimed at drawing in young viewers to convince them that they want this cereal. The company does not just want a child to remember their cereal; they also want them to have a positive association with their brand so that the child has a strong affinity for and loyalty to their brand (Harris et al., 2009, 2013, 2015). Other food and beverage companies use these same tactics in their own commercials. Such tactics focus on taste, fun, happiness, and immediate gratification (Harris et al., 2009, 2013, 2015). Fast food companies such as McDonald's are also guilty of this sort of marketing in advertisements by portraying children as being happy and smiling while enjoying a meal from one of their fast-food restaurants (McDonalds, 2016).

Other ways that marketers appeal to children are not as obvious. Advertisements may focus on certain aspects of the food or drink product. Commercials will highlight a product's sweetness or "chocolatey" flavor. These verbal descriptors are often paired with close-up views of the product. To reinforce the perceived product flavor, often the name itself will contain these descriptors (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). For example, the name Frosted Flakes implies the sweetness of the sugary coating that covers the small flakes in the cereal. Other cereal brands using this tactic include Apple Jacks, Cocoa Puffs, and Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

Noticeably lacking in television commercials targeted to children is the product's nutritional content. From a marketing standpoint, this makes sense as no child cares about the numbers listed on the side of the box. However, many cereal commercials claim that their product is part of a balanced breakfast (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). Without the nutritional facts listed within the commercial, any child watching could believe that the cereal is indeed part of a nutritious breakfast (Harris et al., 2013).

These marketing tactics have been proven to work. One study tested the theory that food packaging with the McDonald's branding on it would be 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 had a better taste to it. The study proved

that food promotion has a direct effect on children's food preferences, knowledge and behavior (Harris et al., 2013, 2015).

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 clown mascot, 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; Edy's created a Fish 'N Chips ice cream featuring Disney's Finding Nemo characters; 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). For some, this sort of symbolic marketing would be considered a form of deception since it uses characters to increase brand equity for the brand (Wilde, 2009). 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).

In addition to character placement, some companies also utilize product placement as a way to market their product to children. Some product placements are so well done that they stick with the public's memory. For example, one of the most famous product placements occurred in the 1982 movie E.T. where the featured product was Reese's Pieces. This particular product placement was extremely successful, resulting in a 65% increase in sales within 30 days of the movie opening (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). Another example of a commercial tie-in with a popular movie franchise was Coca-Cola's \$280 million agreement with the Warner Bros. Harry Potter movie franchise. Although Coca-Cola products were not placed in the movies, Coca-Cola was guaranteed tie-ins with any promotional material through product packaging, games, the Web site, and in-store displays (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). Thus, a legitimate growing concern exists regarding the correlation between promoting food and beverage products to children and the often unhealthy outcomes that result.

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). Because of this, the World Health Organization declared that childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century (Jolly, 2013).

Although typically denied by companies and lobbyists, marketing to children impacts what they choose to eat by increasing their awareness of, desire for, and intention to buy the products promoted (Harris et al., 2009). 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. This may have contributed to the extreme rise in the rates of adult onset diabetes in young people, where the number of cases reported has doubled over the past decade (Cohen, 2011).

Body mass index, or BMI, is one way in which obesity can be measured. Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between BMI and how much television a child watches

(Sonneville et al., 2015). Harris et al. (2009) reported that lowering television viewing significantly reduced BMI in young children at or above the 75th BMI percentile and that children typically eat more when they see food advertisements on television. It has been estimated that "approximately 40% of deaths from non-communicable diseases worldwide are attributed to excess consumption of saturated fats, trans fats, sugar and salt" (Dutton et al., 2012, pg. 100). These diseases include cardiovascular risk factors, asthma, chronic inflammation, orthopedic abnormalities, liver disease, and diabetes types I and II (Boylard and Whalen, 2015).

The Potential Solutions

As noted previously, 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 although there has been some recent discussion of implementing possible changes due to the rising obesity rates (Wilde, 2009). Some solutions mentioned 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. These options are discussed in more detail below.

The most extreme solution proposed is the complete ban of food and beverage marketing to children below a certain age limit. This solution was mentioned in the early 2000's by the American Psychological Association. In this particular solution, all food and beverage marketing would be banned for children younger than eight years old (Wilde, 2009). This ban was proposed since, as noted previously, research has shown that children lack the necessary skills to understand marketing messages (Jolly, 2013). Since a majority of the food and beverages targeted to children are unhealthy (Nestle, 2006), banning all marketing messages to this age group might lessen the marketer's influence, resulting in lower childhood obesity levels.

An overall ban has been attempted in the past. Since 1980, Quebec, Canada has had a ban on advertising to children; however, there have been difficulties which slowed the rate of change (Dutton et al., 2012). In this situation, channels based outside of Quebec are not required to comply with this ban even though these channels could be picked up in Quebec. This issue might also occur in the United States if a ban was introduced. In this option, all television advertising which is directed to, or seen by, audiences composed of a significant proportion of children, regardless of the product being advertised would be banned.

A more neutral option would be a partial ban on only food and beverage marketing to children. By restricting how much unhealthy food and beverages children see in television commercials, it might impact how much of this food children are eating. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Center for Science in the Public Interest recommend this tactic because it would limit the exposure of children to high calorie, low-nutrition foods and beverages in commercials (Wilde, 2009). A partial ban leaves the door open for many more options than a complete ban would allow. For example, a partial ban could be based on the nutritional content of the food or beverage, the product category, the age of the target market for the commercialized product, or other relevant criteria (Harris et al., 2009). A partial ban could also force companies to provide equitable distribution in the advertising content for products that are deemed unhealthy (e.g. including the nutritional information and/or health disclosures in the advertisement) (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006).

A third solution focuses on amending the current classification of what constitutes a child. Instead of banning advertisements, the parameters of who counts as a child would be expanded. For example, this could allow food and beverage commercials to be restricted from children who are twelve or younger. Currently a child is typically considered someone eight years old and under. By classifying a child as twelve or younger, the number of television channels and programs considered “for children” would increase and would require them to follow current commercial rules and regulations (Harris et al., 2009). The Children’s Television Act of 1990 limits commercial times to twelve minutes per hour on the weekdays and ten and a half minutes per hour on weekends for programs targeting children (Palmer and Carpenter, 2006). A problem with this solution deals with programs classified as for adults or adolescents even though many young children still watch this programming content. An example would be reality shows such as America’s Got Talent or The Voice. Research has found that roughly “half of children’s TV advertising exposure occurs during programs that do not qualify as children’s programming” simply because the programs still garner a large child audience (Powell, Harris, and Fox 2013, pg. 460). However this problem could be solved simply by setting advertising standards in broadcast programming to include programs with at least a 20% child audience (Harris et al., 2009) rather than just amending the age of a child.

The final solution suggests more extensive government intervention. There are few current regulations and these regulations have shown limited impact. The government could enact legislation that forces companies to modify how products targeted towards children are advertised. For example, the government could create more stringent standards regarding what constitutes a “healthy” product. Many companies claim that a food or beverage product is “healthy” in advertisements even though the product is not actually “better for you” than other possible alternatives. This is because the standards for such things as “better for you” products do not play by the same rules; there is an “either/or character” (Wilde, 2009, pg. 163). This means that a product could be considered healthy inasmuch that it has a low level of sugar, meeting FDA standards, but could also have a high level of sodium or fat. While a company can now advertise the low sugar level, the company can elect not to tell audiences about the other high level of equally fattening or unhealthy things on the nutritional facts label.

Conclusion

Pushing ethical boundaries is something marketers have been known to do at times; however when it comes to children who can be easily fooled by the flashy colors and half-truths of commercials, people may not be so quick to overlook it. Only recently have people started to notice and question the impact this could have on today’s youth. The effectiveness of using the television to market to children has led to more ethical questions being asked, with health concerns regarding childhood obesity being a primary concern. Children’s inability to comprehend marketing techniques leaves them vulnerable to such tactics and has led to companies who purposefully employ tactics that will appeal to a young audience in an attempt to attract both them and their buying power to their product (Jolly, 2013). Commercials aimed at children mainly concentrate on entertainment and cheerfulness; they typically do not focus on the possible ramifications of eating unhealthy food and drinks. Obesity is considered one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century (Jolly, 2013). This rise in obesity is not considered a random occurrence and many organizations, such as the World Health Organization, are starting to consider unhealthy advertisements as part of the problem.

With very limited success when allowing companies to regulating themselves, government intervention may eventually becoming a requirement rather than a suggestion. However, outright government intervention is only one possible solution to this dilemma. Others, including banning food and beverage advertisement aimed at children completely, a partial ban, and adjusting current age parameters for children have also been mentioned as possible ways to address this concern.

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