

Marketing junk food to children



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Consumers make buying decisions every day, therefore marketers need to develop their strategies by understanding consumer behaviour. That is, when, why, how, and where people do and do not purchase products. The essential issue refers to how consumers respond to the various marketing stimuli used by an organisation.

To achieve this, organisations undertake extensive research concerning the relationship between marketing stimuli and consumer response. As a result, the marketing stimulus enters the consumers mind and produces an intended response. (textbook)

The contemporary marketing issue to be discussed concerns advertising “junk” foods to children and its contribution to obesity. Marketing strongly influences children’s food preferences, requests, and consumption. Due to this, the issues that these advertisements are the cause of obesity and ultimately need to be banned arise. Marketing to children is hardly new, however recent methods are far more intense and pervasive than ever before. By understanding consumer behaviour, marketers intentionally target children who are too young to understand and distinguish advertising from the truth, thus desiring the product without proper knowledge.

(<http://www.educacionenvalores.org/spip.php?article876>)

There are a number of influences on consumer behaviour that marketers strive to understand, in an attempt to gain insight in to the motivations that drive consumption preferences. However, the most significant ones relative to children are the psychological influences, particularly motivation and perception.

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“ A motive is a need that is sufficiently pressing to direct the person to seek satisfaction of the need.” Many marketing companies actually employ psychologists and other social scientists in order to carry out motivation research on children to effectively create a desire for the product. Through undertaking this research, marketers have established that through the use of children’s cartoon characters, such as SpongeBob SquarePants and Shrek, they are easily able to manipulate children into desiring the product.

Because of the use of visual images that are appealing to children, it’s not solely that children actually want to consumer the product, but rather are attracted to the characters because of their knowledge and recognition of them. This results in young children consuming excessive amounts of high-calorie, low-nutrient junk foods which can ultimately lead to childhood obesity, which is to be discussed in further detail.

The second influence is perception. Perception refers to the way people perceive what is happening around them and how they respond based on their perceptions of the situations that they find themselves. Different perceptions are formed by different people and one of these perceptual processes is selective exposure. Research indicates that we are more likely to notice stimuli that relates to a current need. As a result, children are exposed to hundreds of “ junk food” advertisements daily, however they will more than likely only notice and respond to stimuli that again, displays cartoon “ spokes characters” that they recognise and desire. (textbook)

In addition, marketers also incorporate a number of different tactics to stimulate children and create and maintain desire. A very effective strategy

is the use of collectable toys schemes, which requires a number of purchases in order to collect the whole set. Other strategies include competitions, placing games and activities on product packaging and so on.

Children represent an extremely important demographic as they heavily influence their parents' buying decisions. This refers to the strategy of "pester-power." Pester-power is a marketing strategy, where by advertising the product, children will nag their parents in to purchasing the product that the otherwise would not buy. ([http://www. media-awareness. ca/english/parents/marketing/marketers_target_kids. cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/marketing/marketers_target_kids.cfm))

Advertisement constantly surrounds and attracts children, however, the contribution of television food advertisement to childhood obesity has become a major societal concern and as a result, there has been a call for restrictions or outright bans on television "junk food" advertisements aimed at children. The Coalition of Food Advertising to Children aims to enhance the health of Australian children by calling for a ban of all television food advertising during programs where children aged 0-12 makes up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience. Furthermore, food and drink advertisements should not exploit children's inexperience and innocence. The predominant messages directed to children are related to having fun, being cool and the food being tasty. This is re-enforced by advertisements representing young children consuming and enjoying the product which relates directly to the young audience viewing. ([http://www. youngmedia. org. au/mediachildren/03_03_ads_food. htm#food](http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03_03_ads_food.htm#food))

It is estimated that advertisements at times of children watching occurs at a rate of 30 per hour, or 75 per day. As a result, if a child watches the average amount of television, which is 2 hours and 30 minutes a day in Australia, this equals to around 22000 per year. In addition, an average of 34% of the total ads on television is food advertisements. Ultimately, Australia recorded the highest number of food ads per hour, exposing its children to more “junk food” than the US, UK and New Zealand. (http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03_03_ads_food.htm#food)

Currently there are restrictions on advertisement set by The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). The regulations require that advertisements may not mislead/deceive children, give false nutritional information, and must accurately represent the product.

This is due to the fact that fast food companies such as McDonald's, KFC, Pizza hut, and soft drink and confectionery producers such as Coca-Cola and Cadbury have an estimated combined spending total of \$165 million on advertising per year.

However although there are regulations, essentially the advertisements are still viewed, and therefore the product is still being recognised and demanded by children, and as stated earlier, children are usually more interested in the characters associated with the product. Also, marketers intentionally persuade children to consume foods made “just for them,” in an attempt to undermine family decisions about food choices. This is because it's also convincing children that they should also have control over their food choices, and majority of the time, “junk food” will win.

Simultaneously, the number of Australian children who are overweight or obese is rapidly increasing. Obesity is one of the most important public health problems facing adolescents in developed countries, with recent data from Australia suggesting that the combined prevalence of overweight and obesity is 25% among adolescents. (<http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/pqdweb?index=5&did=1901777371&SrchMode=2&sid=3&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1282528282&clientId=20824>)

Studies also show that once a child is overweight, it is unlikely they will reduce it as adults, resulting in 50% of obese adolescents continuing to be obese in adulthood. Ultimately, the alarm estimate is that, “ If weight gain continues the path it is following, by the year 2020, 80% of all Australian adults and a third of all children will be overweight or obese.” (<http://www.child-obesity.info/child-health/alarming-statistics-about-child-obesity-in-australia.html>)

Children are targeted as never before with marketing for foods high in sugar, fat, salt, and calories. Therefore, restrictions on advertising to children can only have a positive impact. How can it have a negative impact? At worst there will be little change, however, continuing this bombarding on children can only end in detrimental results. However, marketers argue that it is solely the parents responsibility to decided what their children eat, and that there sole intention is to gain profits for the organisation. Instead of placing blame on the families, the current marketing issue needs to be viewed as a societal issue and addressed as such. This is due to the fact that most parents struggle to set limits on their children's' consumption as

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corporations often undermine parental authority by encouraging children to nag. This is extremely effective on those parents who are time restricted due to intense work commitments. There is mounting evidence linking food advertising to children's food consumption. (<http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/pqdweb?index=9&did=773815921&SrchMode=2&sid=2&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1282527368&clientId=20824>)

In a conversation with a family member, Jan discussed the issue concerning whether or not junk food advertisements should be banned all together. In response, she suggested that it would be highly relevant to ban all forms of advertisement on television, as majority of children watch television when they arrive home from school. Also, although children are constantly surrounded by advertising, when at home usually the only form, apart from the internet, is television, therefore it would be a huge benefit if they were not exposed to the constant bombarding of these ads. Much the same as the banning of cigarette ads, if the government acted this strongly towards "junk food" ads, then there must certainly be only positive outcomes. Jan also concluded, "It's really no wonder why childhood obesity is increasing with the amount of "junk food" ads flooding through the television."

In another conversation with a friend, Sarah, the issue was discussed whether or not she thought television ads were a direct cause. In her response, she stated that it is definitely a very large factor in the cause of childhood obesity, however there is still the responsibility of the parents to ultimately choose what their children consume at a young age. She believed that yes the advertisements gave the children the idea and desire for the

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product, however at the age of 5, what child has their own money to purchase such products? If their parents are going to give their children an allowance, it is their responsibility to educate and monitor them on their food consumptions.

In reflection of these two views on the subject, it is obvious that there are a number of different views on the issue. Many believe it's solely the parent's decision whilst others believe it is ultimately the responsibility of marketers who advertise detrimental products to health.

In conclusion, it is however consistently shown that children exposed to advertising choose advertised products at significantly higher rates than those unexposed. As a result, there is a realistic link between obesity and “junk food” advertising.