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Parenting in an Obesogenic Environment

AUTHOR(S): Michele Roberts

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of a food-marketing trend that uses fun to sell unhealthy food to children. Twenty-one mothers of young children were interviewed (nine in focus groups and twelve in in-depth interviews). The study found evidence of significant and potentially harmful changes in the food preferences and food consumption behaviours of children in response to these techniques. The findings also suggest that these techniques are increasing family conflict and undermining parental authority.

ARTICLE

The combination of food and entertainment has been referred to as 'eatertainment' by the food industry, trade press and media. This food-marketing trend is aimed at children and utilises several 'fun' techniques:

- * Premium offers (the offer of something free as an inducement to purchase, e.g., free toys, stickers and trading cards inside packages of snack foods, cereals and convenience foods);
- * Children's licensed characters and movie tie-ins on food packaging,
- * 'Kidz meals' combining child-sized portions of food with soft drinks and free toys or confectionery. Pioneered by fast food restaurants, this model is being widely adopted by restaurants and cafes and is now also available in supermarkets.
- * Fun product designs that incorporate interactive play value, often incorporating unusual shapes, textures, colours, tastes and smells, and characters printed directly onto the food.

The purpose of this study was to improve our understanding of the consequences of food promotion by investigating the impact of marketing activities that use fun to sell unhealthy food to children.

Method

The research design incorporated a grounded, phenomenological approach to generate new insights on the complex issue of how food promotion influences children's food consumption. Focus groups were combined with in-depth interviews to provide different and complimentary contributions to the research problem. Two focus groups (containing nine participants in total) and twelve in-depth individual interviews were conducted. Interviewees were middle-class mothers with primary school children. Although this was a convenience sample, a representative balance was achieved between single and two-parent families, working and non-working mothers and a wide spread of child gender and age. The individual interviews offered detailed insights into the impact on everyday food consumption, however their effectiveness was reduced by social desirability response bias. Interviewees were reluctant to discuss the unhealthy food their children consumed, requiring extensive probing and lengthy interviews to establish trust and allow meaningful discussion. This problem was surprisingly reduced (though not entirely absent) in the focus groups, where the shared camaraderie of 'mothers-in-arms' allowed parents to lower their masks and talk freely about their triumphs and failures with their children's diets.

Findings

Without exception, the mothers discussed examples of premiums driving greater demand for unhealthy food. This was especially apparent with collectable premiums—frequently included in cereals and chip packets and in sets of characters included with fast food meals.

Mine went crazy when the Tazos were in the chip packets...We were getting chips all the time... they'd get chips they didn't even like (mother of two).

They do want to go back to get the other ones in the set...if there's five games, they'll want to get the whole set. If there's a good toy, they'll pester me to go to McDonald's. It's got nothing to do with the food, it's all to do with the toy (mother of four).

The fun appeal of these products appears to create greater resonance between child and brand, with children embracing these 'fun foods' as much for their play potential as their taste appeal. Play is experienced on two levels: interactive play with the product through dunking (Dunkaroos), unwinding (Roll-ups) and shredding (Cheese Stringers), and playing with friends through the trading of snacks or premiums (Tazos or cards).

Fun appeals – increasing peer pressure on the lunchbox

The parental admonishment not to play with your food is increasingly 'falling on deaf-ears' as children engage in brand-play in the playground. Despite the young age of the children, they already appreciate the ability of brands to confer and deny status as we see in this story told by the mother of a child in pre-primary:

The teacher asked me to come in and she said the kids had been telling them that their mother had put a special treat in their lunch box – and it wasn't there! My daughter had been caught taking them. I was horrified –my child is a thief! The teacher said: "She probably thinks she is missing out, because she said she doesn't ever get any of that in her lunchbox...It was the packet, it was the look of the packet...that it wasn't home made. It was being able to unwrap this packet and everyone saw that you had the same packets as them" (mother of two).

Several mothers mentioned the danger of children being excluded at school if they failed to participate in these conspicuous consumption rituals:

If we explain to our kids that these toys are a waste of money and don't give them, then they are going to be in that few who are going to be different (mother of three).

This anxiety appeared to drive the mothers' desire to do everything they could to increase their children's chances of surviving the playground jungle – in this case by providing them with the necessary props to play the games.

The influence of individually packaged 'kidz meals' is extending to family eating occasions:

I said: "We're buying a big chicken and we're going to divide it," and he didn't want it on a plate. He wanted it in his own little box (mother of three).

I wrap their veggies on their dinner plate in a parcel of green or red cellophane, so they've got to unwrap it...they'll eat it, coz it came out of a packet. I say, "oh it wasn't home cooked, I didn't make that" (mother of three).

The findings suggest that this form of marketing has greater impact than marketing has traditionally been credited with. The free toys, high sensory appeal, collectability, trading dimensions and appeal of the invincible superhero on the packaging are not merely a child's equivalent of 'a set of free steak knives'. These techniques appeal to children's deep-rooted psychological needs (Bettelheim, 1976 cited in Zipes, 1983). The importance of children's vulnerability to these appeals is emphasised by Carruth et al. (2000). Their study found that preschool children in the preoperational stage of development – according to Piaget's (1976) model – were unable to select cereal on more than one attribute. The five-year-olds were incapable of weighing up multiple attributes such as the presence of a premium against whether they liked the taste or how much it cost. This was noted to be a source of family conflict by the interviewees who selected cereal on economic grounds.

Effects on Food Marketing on families: Mothers-in-Arms

The interviewees reported feeling as though they are engaged in battle to provide a healthy diet for their children. This struggle appears to take place on two levels: with other carers and within the wider community. Several discussed the failure of other caregivers to reinforce healthy eating messages. Despite the increasing reliance on care provided by other family members, the mothers perceived that fathers and grandparents are 'playing' at the role of caregiver rather than taking on the full responsibilities of the role. Some described returning home from work to discover the debris of fast food containers and unopened homework.

(When) their grandfather picks them up from school...I come to pick up the children at 5pm and he'll say, "Don't worry, I've given them a Happy Meal" (mother of three).

The mothers suggested that ex-husbands and grandparents were particularly prone to purchasing fun foods as a way of enhancing time spent with their children. The consumption of special foods helped to reinforce the 'specialness' of their time together. This suggests that societal changes – such as the increases in working mothers and non-traditional family models – may put increasing pressure on children's diets.

The failure to provide consistent messages about healthy eating was not limited to family members. Many mothers believed that this failure is occurring throughout the community and that this contributes to their sense of fighting a 'loosing battle'. Schools were heavily criticised for providing canteens that sell exactly the kinds of foods that parents were criticised for serving at home and for their use of unhealthy foods to reward students. The mothers also expressed a sense of hopelessness over influencing how much of the healthy food that they put into the lunchbox was actually consumed at school:

I'd gone up to school to drop something off...and I saw my son stand up and chuck his banana into the bin. I was so cross. I saw a child in my daughter's pre-primary class do it too – he got out his apple and chucked it into the bin. It's so wasteful, but I don't think the teacher noticed. They don't seem to take any notice (mother of three).

The mothers shared several stories about doctors and dentists rewarding their child's 'bravery' with burger-vouchers. These incidents are concerning not only because of the effect on children's diets and the messages they give to children; they also subtly contribute to the mother's sense of what foods are acceptable.

The interviewees also expressed concern about the increasing pervasiveness of promotions targeting children, particularly in the supermarket. They reported feeling of being defeated at every turn by supermarkets and by advertising:

There's something in every aisle...he'll ask for everything. Even those frozen icy poles, they have characters on now. Jelly has characters on now. Everything, paper towels, toothpaste...The flavoured milk, that's where my kids have a fit. If they've missed out on the yogurt and they've missed out on whatever, then they get to the milk – that's the last thing they can ask for, and that's why I cop it (mother of three).

Even a trip to the movies was a source of conflict over premiums. Four of the mothers mentioned their frustration that a trip to the movies now included licensed coke 'cups' that are heavily marketed by the cinema complex:

When you go to the movies and they sell those combos (popcorn and coke) that works incredibly effectively, every time you go they want to have the Mr Incredible drink topper with the picture on the cup... it's so in your face (mother of two).

Implications

Although this was a small, non-representative sample, the message from mothers was unanimous - fun techniques are increasing children's consumption of unhealthy foods. This effect was most noticeable with the use of sets and collectibles as premiums. The mothers' concerns with their inability to control their children's diets suggest that social marketing campaigns should target a wider community, including schools and grandparents, not just parents and children.

This study reveals significant changes occurring in promotional culture: parents and other caregivers are giving children increasing control of their children's diet at a time when food marketers are targeting children more intensely. These two trends may be occurring independently or may be interrelated. The fallout from these two forces colliding may be a significant contribution to the failing health of Australian children. As such, further research is needed to guide policy decisions in this area to facilitate an improvement in Australian children's diets. In particular, investigation is required into the relative importance of newer promotional elements such as licensed packaging and premium offers relative to other more acknowledged influences, such as advertising.