



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parental awareness and attitudes of food marketing to children: A community attitudes survey of parents in New South Wales, Australia

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Food marketing directed to children is recognised as a key factor that contributes to children's food preferences, their food purchasing behaviour and their food consumption.^{1,2} With almost one in four Australian children either overweight or obese,³ the

marketing of unhealthy food to children is an issue of public health importance.

Food marketing to children uses many different channels, including television and other non-broadcast media (e.g. print, Internet and radio). To date, much of the research on food marketing to children has focused on television as the primary advertising vehicle, with relatively little research focusing on children's exposure to non-broadcast media or the effect of this non-broadcast media marketing, including parents' opinions and attitudes towards this marketing and children's actions. The collective effect of television advertising and non-broadcast food marketing techniques are likely to heighten the influence of food marketing on children's food choices and dietary intake.⁴ In Australia, the proportion of all television food advertisements that are for unhealthy food range from 43%⁵ to 81%⁶ (variations according to the food classification system used), and even higher during programmes that are most popular with children.⁵ Recent Australian research indicates that the majority of food and beverage advertising through non-broadcast media, including popular children's websites,⁷ children's magazines,⁸ product packaging,⁹ and outdoor advertising around primary schools,¹⁰ are for foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt.

An Australian survey of parental attitudes towards television food advertising to children, conducted by the Coalition on

Key Points

- 1 The majority of parents are concerned about food marketing to children, with the highest level of concern registered for the positioning of food at supermarket checkouts.
- 2 Parents indicated strong support for government regulations for non-broadcast media food marketing to children.
- 3 For some non-broadcast media channels, there appears to be a disjunction between a parent's level of concern and the potential impact of this marketing on children, indicating that parents are not aware of the nature and extent of this marketing. Raising community awareness about this issue is important in driving family and policy efforts to limit exposure.

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Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), indicated that the majority of parents (67%) were concerned about unhealthy food advertising during children's peak viewing times.¹¹ This survey included some questions on parental concern about non-broadcast forms of food marketing to children, including the use of premium offers, fundraising, sponsorship and the Internet to promote food products. The survey indicated that while parental awareness of non-broadcast marketing was low, for those parents who were aware, more than 60% reported a concern about this type of marketing.

The aim of this study is to further investigate the awareness and attitudes of parents of children aged 5–17 years in New South Wales (NSW), Australia regarding both television and non-broadcast media food marketing to children, the perceived role of the government and the food and advertising industries in food marketing regulations, and the effect of food marketing on children's food purchasing requests.

Materials and Methods

Design and participants

A cross-sectional survey using computer-assisted telephone interviewing was undertaken between 5 and 8 November 2007. Parents of 5- to 17-year-olds living in NSW and who were the main household grocery buyers were eligible for the survey. The child in the household who had the most recent birthday was selected as the reference child. Quotas were set for the reference child's age, so that there were approximately equal numbers of respondents with younger children compared with adolescents.

Newspoll, a national marketing research company, was contracted to undertake the interviews because their omnibus database is composed of a representative sample of telephone numbers that are used for weekly national telephone surveys and therefore provides access to targeted calling of eligible households. The study was approved by the NSW Cancer Council Ethics Committee.

Measures

A questionnaire was developed by the research team, adapting questions from a previous survey conducted by the CFAC on television food advertising to children.¹¹ Questions included the following:

- Parents' awareness of, and level of concern about, the different forms of food marketing to children.
- Parents' level of trust in the food and advertising industries to protect children from unhealthy food marketing.
- Parents' perception of the role that the government could play in regulating non-broadcast food marketing to children.
- The frequency with which the respondents' children request food that they see advertised.

The term 'unhealthy food' was defined at the commencement of the interview as 'food and drinks that are high in fat, sugar or salt, such as some types of fast food, soft drinks and confectionery products'. This was provided so that the respondents understood the specific food types being referred to in the survey.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 14.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., 2004, Chicago, IL, USA). Data were weighted to adjust for the population distribution between Sydney and the rest of NSW. Pearson's χ^2 test was used to determine significant differences between younger children's (5–12 years old) and adolescents' (13–17 years old) food purchasing requests for advertised foods. The results were considered significant at the 0.05 level.

Results

Four hundred and two parents participated in the survey (60% from the Sydney area). The response rate was 26% (of 1529 households, 33% refused or terminated the interview; 13% did not answer or were engaged for three attempted calls; and for 28% of the households, the main grocery buyer was not available at the time of the survey). Descriptive characteristics of the survey respondents are presented in Table 1. The majority of respondents were mothers (78%) with post-school qualifications, such as a college, an apprenticeship or university education (77%), and with annual household incomes greater than AU\$50 000 (72%). There was an even socio-economic distribution of households according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indicators for Areas (SEIFA) score as determined by the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage/Disadvantage using postcodes as a proxy for location. SEIFA scores were divided into quintiles (1–5), with

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents ($n = 402$)

Characteristic	Number of respondents (%)
Area of residence	
Sydney	241 (60)
Rest of New South Wales	161 (40)
Gender of parent	
Female	312 (78)
Male	90 (22)
Age of child†	
5–12 years	249 (62)
13–17 years	153 (38)
Number of children per household	
One	156 (39)
Two	166 (41)
Three or more	80 (20)
Parent's education	
Primary/secondary school	93 (23)
College/apprenticeship	169 (42)
University	140 (35)
Household income‡	
<AU\$50 000	88 (22)
AU\$50 000–89 999	135 (34)
≥AU\$90 000	153 (38)

†Reference child is child in the household with the most recent birthday.

‡Did not respond, $n = 26$.

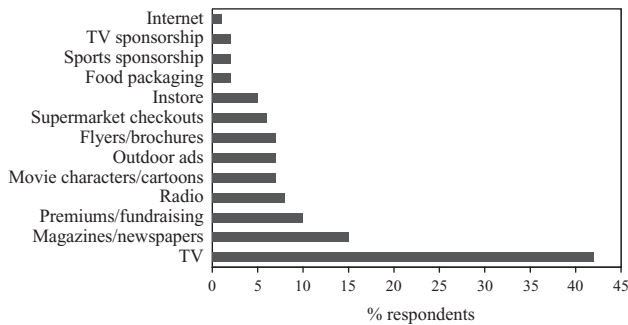


Fig. 1 Unprompted parental awareness of forms of food marketing media.

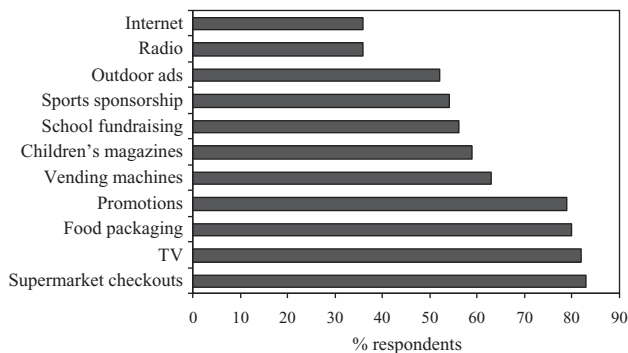


Fig. 2 Proportion (%) of parents who were 'very concerned' or 'somewhat concerned' about unhealthy food marketing using a range of media.

quintile 1 representing the area with the lowest socio-economic status (SES); 17% of the households were in quintile 1, 22% in quintile 2, 20% in quintile 3, 21% in quintile 4 and 21% in quintile 5.

Parental awareness and concern about unhealthy food marketing to children

The parents' unprompted awareness of non-broadcast marketing media to promote food to children was low. Compared with the parents' awareness of television food advertising (42% of the respondents), only 15% of the parents nominated magazines and newspapers as a form of food marketing to children, 10% nominated premium offers including giveaways, toys and competitions, and fundraising, and 8% nominated radio advertising (Fig. 1). Awareness of other forms of marketing was lower.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of the parents who were either concerned or somewhat concerned by each form of food marketing media. The parents were most concerned about the positioning of food at supermarket checkouts (83%), television advertising (82%) and the packaging of food products designed to appeal to children (80%). More than half of the parents reported that they were concerned about premium offers, such as toys and give-aways with food, food sold at school vending machines and advertising in children's magazines.

Approximately a third of the parents reported that they were concerned about food marketing on the Internet (36%) and

radio (36%). However, of those parents who were concerned about Internet food marketing, the majority were concerned about all forms of Internet marketing, including kids-only sections on websites (84%), downloadable items, such as mobile ring tones and screensavers (83%), online competitions (81%) and food product placement within computer games (80%).

Parental perceptions of the role of industry and government in food marketing regulations

The majority of parents (91%) did not trust the food and advertising industries to protect children from unhealthy food marketing (Fig. 3). Most parents (81%) believed that the government should restrict the ways in which unhealthy food and beverages are marketed to children using non-broadcast media. Ten per cent of the parents believed that the government should restrict all food marketing to children, including foods that are considered both healthy and unhealthy. Few parents (8%) believed that the government should not restrict non-broadcast food marketing.

The effect of food marketing on children's food purchasing requests

Overall, 58% of the parents reported that their children 'always' (15%) or 'sometimes' (43%) asked for food products that they had seen advertised on television or through non-broadcast media. The parents of younger children (5–12 years old) were significantly more likely to report that their child asked for advertised food products, compared with parents of adolescents (13–17 years old) (65% vs. 48% respectively; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.46$, $P < 0.0001$). There was no difference between boys and girls in their food purchasing requests for advertised products (57% and 60%, respectively).

Discussion

The results of this survey showed that parents in NSW are concerned about food marketing to children on both television and non-broadcast media. The highest level of concern was for marketing at the point of sale, including the placement of food products at supermarket checkouts, packaging of food products designed to attract children and the use of premium offers. As the main grocery buyer in each household was interviewed, point-of-sale marketing is understandably a prominent form of marketing for this stakeholder group.

Point of sale is a very effective marketing strategy for the food and beverage industry with 70% of product purchase decisions made in the store, and research shows that displaying food at supermarket checkouts can increase brand sales by up to 20%.¹² In Australia, the majority of food products displayed at supermarket checkouts are for unhealthy foods, including displays of chocolate, chewing gum and other confectionery.¹³ At most checkouts, these items are in easy reach and highly visible to children.¹³ Product placement is specifically designed to encourage children to pester their parents for these products while they queue at the checkout.

There is a discrepancy between the parents' level of concern about some forms of food marketing and the level of this

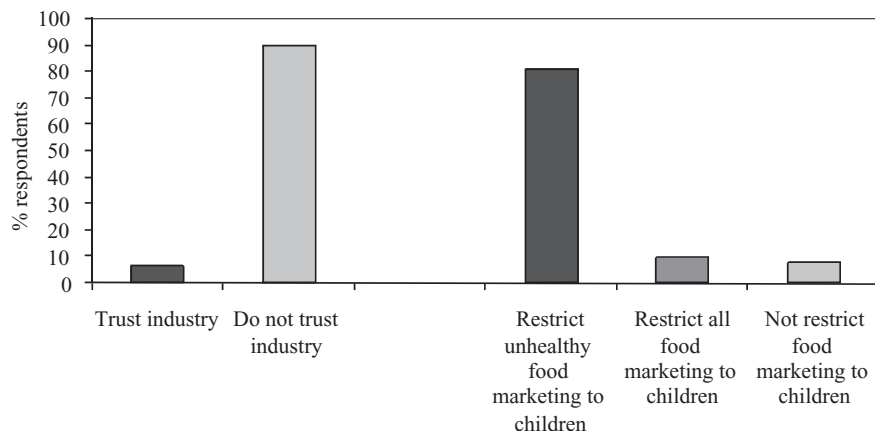


Fig. 3 Proportion (%) of parental trust in the food and advertising industries to protect children from unhealthy food marketing and parents' support of government regulations non food marketing to children.

marketing to children. For example, the low levels of parental concern about Internet food marketing to children conflicts with other research that indicates food marketers target children with persuasive food marketing via the Internet and that most of this marketing is for unhealthy products.⁷ Low levels of concern about Internet food marketing may be related to the parents' lack of awareness of the nature of this marketing, especially as many children access the Internet in closed environments such as their bedrooms.¹⁴ The seemingly low parental awareness about non-broadcast media food marketing may indicate differing interpretations of the term 'marketing'. Findings from this study indicate that the majority of parents interpret 'marketing' as only direct and explicit forms of marketing (i.e. advertising), rather than the more complex marketing activities that include product design, pricing, promotion and distribution.¹⁵ The lack of parents' awareness of the extent of non-broadcast marketing and parents' partial understanding of the extent of marketing activities demonstrate the need to raise community awareness about the extent and effects of food marketing to children. Raising community awareness is an important first step to assist in educating children to be conscious of food marketing practices through all marketing channels, and it will aid their development of critical media literacy skills.¹⁶

The results of this survey indicate that parents have an overwhelming distrust of the food and advertising industries to protect children from food marketing. Care was taken in the design of the questionnaire through the order of the survey questions and the balance of available responses to avoid leading parents to this response. The majority of parents believe that the government should impose restrictions on the use of non-broadcast media to market unhealthy food to children. Currently, in Australia, no statutory regulations exist that restrict the marketing of food to children using non-broadcast media. While industry codes do restrict unhealthy non-broadcast media food marketing,¹⁷⁻¹⁹ not all food companies are signatories of these codes, and the criteria used to define unhealthy foods is often very lenient. Such industry regulations may be seen as a means to deflect government regulations.²⁰

While the majority of the food industry's marketing expenditure is for television advertising, expenditure on non-

broadcast media marketing is increasing.^{1,21} This is cause for concern because children's time spent engaging with other media, including the Internet, is increasing,²² with a concomitant reduction in free-to-air television viewing.²³ Further, with the possible advent of tighter television advertising restrictions with the current review of the Children's Television Standards,²⁴ the food and advertising industries are likely to channel more of their marketing into non-broadcast media. These arguments point to the need for the development of government regulation of these other non-broadcast marketing media.

Parents' preference for restricting the marketing of unhealthy, rather than all, food and beverages, is consistent with previous CFAC findings.¹¹ Additionally, opinion polling by CHOICE, an Australia consumer interest organisation, indicated that a high proportion of respondents (85%) were in favour of government regulation of unhealthy food marketing using cartoon characters, celebrities and toys.²⁵ The classification of advertised food products as either healthy or unhealthy could be achieved using Food Standards Australia New Zealand's Nutrient Profiling system.²⁶ A similar distinction has been made in the UK with the inception of television food advertising restriction to children in 2007, which used the UK Food Standards Agency's Nutrient Profiling Model.²⁷

The majority of parents reported that their children 'always' or 'sometimes' asked for food that they had seen advertised, and that these purchase requests were more frequently made by younger children than adolescents. This finding corroborates previous research that indicated that younger children are at a heightened risk of commercial exploitation, as their cognitive development at this life stage prohibits them from recognising the persuasive intent of food marketing.^{1,21,28,29}

One of the limitations of this study was that the sample response rate was low (26%) and may have potentially introduced some level of selection bias, despite multiple call-backs and interview appointments to attain a higher participation rate. It appears that grocery buyers in family households are predominately women. The sample might over-represent women with post-school qualifications, although the respondents' post-codes were evenly dispersed between high and low socio-economic areas. Future studies on this topic could utilise study design features such as quotas on the education level of participants to further minimise sample bias.

This survey describes parental awareness and attitudes towards non-broadcast media food marketing to children, where these marketing techniques are increasingly being used by the food and advertising industries to target children.^{1,21} This research has highlighted the need to raise community awareness on the range of media used to market food to children to support individual and policy efforts to reduce exposure. The survey suggests that any efforts within the retail sector to reduce point-of-sale promotions at supermarket checkouts would be welcomed by families. Overall, the study reinforces previous findings that there is strong community acceptance and support for government regulation of different forms of food marketing to children.

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