

“I eat Milo to make me run faster”: How the use of sport in food marketing may influence the food beliefs of young Australians.

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Abstract

This paper reports on one of a series of studies exploring the marketing strategies utilised by leading Australian food companies that produce and distribute foods that are predominantly consumed by children, and consumer responses to these practices. The focus is on the use of sport and sporting celebrities to promote food products and the influence of these promotions on the food attitudes and preferences of young people. The qualitative research with children (6-12 years) and teens (12-14 years) supports results from previous research that branding may have an influence on food preferences. Importantly, it also suggests that associating particular foods with sports may influence young people's food beliefs, including their ability to accurately judge the nutritional value of foods and their perceptions regarding the types of foods which should be eaten by those undertaking physical activity.

Introduction

The intensity and frequency of children's current exposure to commercial messages is unprecedented (Linn, 2004). Food advertising is a concern with regard to obesity because it disproportionately promotes the consumption of foods high in total calories, fat, sugar and salt, and low in nutrients (Hastings, McDermott, Angus et al., 2006; McGinnis, Gootman and Kraak, 2006). A range of promotional techniques are used to make these foods appealing to children, including bright packaging, intensely coloured and flavoured ingredients, free gifts, puzzles, competitions, collectables, and tie-ins with cartoon characters, pop stars, sporting heroes and popular children's films (Dalmeny, 2003); such techniques are rarely employed to promote healthier eating options. Food marketing to kids occurs in a variety of guises across different forms of media, including TV, internet, magazines, in-school marketing, sponsorship, product placement and point of sale promotions (Hawkes, 2004).

It has been posited that the use of cartoon characters and celebrities can have a strong influence on children's attitudes towards products (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006); and experimental research has shown that inclusion of a celebrity endorser significantly increases children's liking of a product (Atkin & Block, 1983; Ross et al., 1984). Dalmeny (2004) argues that celebrity endorsement is particularly appealing to older children. Along with the influence of direct role models such as parents and peers on consumer attitudes and behaviours (Bush, Smith and Martin, 1996), sports celebrities can also contribute to brand name recognition and create positive associations, transferring qualities such as physical appeal and likeability, and assisting in the development of distinct and credible brands (Kamins 1989, Ohanian 1990). Likewise, investigation into the impact of sports role models on teen consumers' behavioural intentions has found a significant association between role model influence and positive word of mouth communication and brand loyalty (Bush et al, 2004). Although this may represent great potential opportunities for sports marketers, caution may be warranted to ensure that the use of role models does not influence young people to develop unhealthy attitudes or make unhealthy choices, for example in relation to food preferences. This is particularly so given that celebrity sports stars have been shown to influence the health related knowledge, beliefs and behaviours of consumers (Brown, Basil and Borcarnea, 2003), and that messages delivered by sports stars are arguably powerful in

influencing children (Charbonneau and Garland, 2005). The fact that children have lower media (or advertising) literacy, and are therefore more likely to be persuaded by advertising that utilises celebrities (among other features), suggests that the use of celebrities and other familiar characters in advertising targeting children should be better researched and perhaps restricted (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Food marketing appears to play an important role in the food preferences of children (both the type of food they eat and the specific brands) and what they pester their parents to buy (Hastings et al, 2006; McGinnis et al., 2006). Therefore, a series of studies was conducted to explore the current marketing tactics employed by seven leading Australian food companies that produce and distribute foods that are predominantly consumed by children. This paper however, reports only on qualitative research that focuses on the use of sport and sporting celebrities to promote food products to children and adolescents, and the influence of these promotions on the food attitudes and preferences of these young people.

Method

A multi-criteria approach was employed to identify the most appropriate food companies to be examined including: total dollar advertising spend for the financial year 2005/2006 (B&T Weekly, September 2006); the “Australia’s Most Trusted Brands Study” from Australian Readers Digest (Buchan, 2006); most frequently appearing brands in the January to December 2005 period in the seven leading Australian children’s magazines (Jones and Reid, in press); and the most recent ACNielsen Top 100 Grocery Brands Report (AdNews, January 2006). The seven food companies selected for final analysis were Cadbury, Kellogg’s, Kraft, McDonald’s, Nestle, Streets, and Uncle Tobys. A series of case studies were conducted from 5 March to 27 April 2007. Marketing and obesity prevention *policies* were obtained from company websites. Marketing *practices* were identified by a combination of: manual search of the top-selling children’s magazines; media monitoring of television advertising; manual search and coding of the company websites; and purchase of all child-targeted products distributed by the companies.

In May 2007, qualitative research was conducted with children in Parramatta, Sydney. Group discussion guides were designed to explore children’s and teenager’s food beliefs, including knowledge of healthy eating. Questions and activities were utilised to establish the children’s exposure to various types of media and food marketing strategies and to explore the impact of these exposures on food beliefs, brand recognition, and favourite foods. Participants were recruited by a commercial recruitment company from the surrounding districts, which include both blue collar areas such as Parramatta and Blacktown and middle class areas such as Baulkham Hills and Castle Hill. Four single sex groups (2 all male and 2 all female) were conducted with five to nine year olds (12 males and 12 females); and four single sex groups with 12 to 14 year olds (15 males and 15 females).

Results

Case Study Findings

Detailed findings of the case studies are not reported here, but a brief summary is provided as background to the focus groups. The food companies collectively sponsor an impressive range of charitable causes related to community activities, health and wellness, and the

environment – notably a large number are associated with sport and being active. Sports sponsorship and activities to encourage physical activity are admirable in their promotion of exercise, particularly when teamed with the promotion of healthy low fat, low sugar food products (such as the Sanatarium promotion of Weetbix). More concerning, however, are promotions which link high sugar foods with sport and sports stars, implying they are needed for energy to boost performance. For example, Nestle, Uncle Tobys and Kellogg's made use of sport and sporting celebrities in their marketing to both children and teenagers. This association between sport and food products was evident in:

- Television commercials (such as Kellogg's Nutri-Grain which depict males, either Iron Men or teenage boys, consuming the product and then being able to take on extreme sports challenges)
- Websites (such as the Uncle Tobys web site which is focused around the FINA World Swimming Championships and three of the Australian swimming team members: Grant Hackett, Libby Lenton and Leisel Jones)
- Competitions (such as the Nestle Milo promotion with the major prizes being entire 'experiences' with famous sports stars valued in excess of \$4,000)
- Giveaways and promotions (such as a cricket coaching CD inside specially marked packs of Milo cereal)

Focus Group Findings

Media use and other interests - Media use for the younger children (5-9 yrs) involved TV and movies (including Pay TV). Only about half of the participants reported being permitted to use the internet at home, with boys more likely to be allowed online at home than girls and this was predominantly for accessing games. Play for boys was much more focused on screen based games on the TV, computer and handheld games. McDonald's was the only food website the participants reported accessing, and this was primarily to play games. Some children also identified that they read children's magazines that they get from the supermarket, but no children could name any magazine titles. Both teenage girls and boys (12-14 yrs) utilised a range of media in their spare time. This included watching television and movies, listening to the radio, using the computer for an online social network (such as MySpace, Bebo, YouTube and MSN) and for downloading music. Teenage boys also reported playing video games (such as X Box and Play Station), while only teenage girls indicated that they read magazines. Sport was a particular focus for young boys (5-9 yrs), who reported playing team sports, watching sports on TV (including AFL, NRL, cricket and soccer) and having favourite teams and associated merchandise.

Food attitudes and beliefs - When asked to discuss food preferences, children (6-12 years) focused on the consumption of foods such as chips, lollies and chocolate. Prompting was required by the moderator to discuss core food groups like cereals, dairy products, fruit and vegetables. However, once prompted, children were able to identify that these foods were "everyday foods" that should be eaten to "make you healthier". Following the discussion of "healthier" foods the children were also able to identify some negative health consequences of eating too many "treats" like chocolate, with mention of body weight and dental health:

R1: "Because if you eat chocolate they don't make you strong they get you more fatter".

R2: "Yep, they don't get you skinny"

R3: "Because you're teeth will get chocolate. You'll get holes in your teeth and they'll fall out". [F, 5-9, group 1]

Teenage participants volunteered a broader range of food preferences without prompting and, appeared to have a good understanding of the principles of healthy eating. As such, they were able to identify that foods and beverages such as lollies, chips, chocolate and soft drinks should only be eaten occasionally. However, these foods were regularly described as treats.

“...you have it at a party or you’ve got a couple of friends over or as a treat.” [M, 12-14, group 1]

“Coco pops is like really special at my house ‘cause once it was like, well it wasn’t the only Christmas present but mum like wrapped up a box of coco pops and gave it to us.” [M, 12-14, group 1]

Celebrities in food advertisements

The presence of celebrities in food advertisements made the foods more appealing to some teenagers:

“Yeah because people think – like might think oh this – that persons advertising it then I’ll buy it because I like that person or something”. [F, 12-14, group 4]

Young children and teenagers also associated sporting people with particular brands through sponsorship deals. For example Grant Hackett was linked with Uncle Tobys. For some teenagers this promoted a natural link between the product and sports performance:

“...because sportspeople advertise it and it says that its good for sportspeople because its like high in energy and they think well if its high in energy and if other sport people are advertising it then it must be like good or something.” [F, 12-14, group 4]

A current food promotion for football cards was highlighted by the boys as something that motivated their purchase of chips:

R1: “The cards made us want it”

R2: “You gotta, you eat the chips and you find a packet you gotta eat” [M, 5-9, group 2].

However, some teenagers were sceptical of the sportspeople’s association with food brands:

“They’re ...they’re like to paid to like say – like to make to sell the food but they might never – not – they might not even like it.” [F, 12-14, group 4]

Associations between food and sporting performance

Among young children (5 -9 years) eating particular foods was associated with sports performance, particularly those utilising sports celebrities in their promotion, like Milo or Nutri-Grain:

“...it’s really good for them and they have the picture of them eating it and then them swimming really fast.” [M, 5-9, group 2]

Teenagers also linked specific food products like Sanitarium Weet-Bix and or food brands such as Uncle Tobys with sportspeople:

“Cricket and stuff, they’re always like “have you eaten your Weet-Bix and stuff” [F, 12-14, group 2];

“Mainly sporting people get Weet-Bix because it’s got all this grain stuff in it which is all healthy food” [M, 12-14, group 3];

Young children also reported eating these foods before playing sport to boost their own performance:

“I eat Milo before I play soccer.....to make me run faster” [M, 5-9, group 4].

Teenagers also frequently mentioned they ate specific foods before playing sport. There was a general perception among teenagers that they needed some extra energy or a sugar rush to enhance their performance or a sports drink to recover and rehydrate after sport:

“I usually eat Coco Pops or something like that to give me some sugar before I play” [M, 12-14, group 1]

“Maybe for the sugar rush and it makes me swim faster [M, 12-14, group 1]

“If I’m doing something that involves like physical things, I like eating sugar” [F, 12-14, group 2]

Elite sportspeople were also perceived by young children and teenagers to eat foods that are healthy such as salads, vegetables, fruit and yoghurt and to eat foods that are high in energy such as pasta. There was, however, the perception that sportspeople could eat anything they wanted because of their active lifestyle.

Discussion

There was reasonable knowledge of healthy eating practices, particularly in the adolescent groups. However, in all groups, knowledge of healthy eating appeared to have only a small influence on food preferences. Consistent with other literature, preferences appeared to be particularly influenced by the power of the brand, particularly branding with sport or celebrities or cartoon or movie characters. This may be similar to the influence of the branding of other products such as clothes, where a desire to imitate their admired celebrities or to fit in and be included by their peers influences the preferences and behaviours of children (see Boden 2006). Whether this holds true for the expressed preferences of children for branded (or sports branded) food products requires further investigation.

Of particular interest from this study is emerging evidence for the coupling of the beliefs about food and physical activity. This is in line with the expressed health beliefs of 11 and 12 years olds in the study by McKinley et al (2005) where attitudes towards healthy eating were often perceived to be part of a healthy lifestyle ‘package’ that included physical activity. In some cases, it appears that the association of particular foods with sport or sports stars may have influenced young people to believe that the consumption of high sugar foods was necessary to enhance sports performance, or that some foods may be healthy simply because their promotion is associated with sports. The potential therefore exists for the endorsement of sports stars or the promotion of food coupled with sport to influence a child’s ability to judge the nutritional value of the food independently. In the present study, some of the products promoted by sports stars were healthy cereals and thus endorsement appeared to work positively for supporting the health of young people. However, many of the endorsed products were not healthy or ‘everyday’ foods. Some teenagers were critical of marketing strategies utilised by food companies, suggesting that sportspeople might not actually consume the products they were promoting. However, it is unclear whether this critical perspective altered food preference or consumption. As such, there is a need for further review of the impact of current marketing practices and policies in Australia on young consumers to ensure that the power of our sporting stars is being utilised to promote – rather than reduce – the health of our young people.

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