Product, promotion, or audience? Exploring concerns associated with the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages to children and adolescents.

Abstract

The promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents has been debated among marketers, the food and beverage industry, and public health professionals. Concerns have been raised regarding promotional methods used and the products being marketed.

This paper proposes a new way of exploring and explaining this issue by focusing on the variables of product, promotion, and consumer vulnerability. Interviews with public health professionals, and marketers and members of the food and beverage industry inform this work. Drawing on the use of matrices and spectra to represent the interplay of multiple variables, a three-dimensional model is proposed that highlights how this issue is situated at the nexus of concerns relating to each of unhealthy food and beverage products, controversial promotional approaches, and an audience perceived as vulnerable.

This paper offers a new way of exploring food and beverage promotion to children and adolescents and helps to clarify why some instances of this practice are more problematic than others. The use of a qualitative approach enables the complexity and nuance associate with this issue to be captured. Opportunities for further research include verifying or refining the model presented, or adapting it to other social or ethical issues relevant to contemporary marketers or policy makers.
Introduction

Rates of childhood overweight and obesity have increased significantly since the mid-1970s (Wang & Lobstein, 2006). The public health community has consistently highlighted the possible influence of food marketing on increased childhood overweight and obesity rates (e.g., Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009; Hastings, McDermott, Angus, Stead, & Thomson, 2006; McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006; Zimmerman, 2011). The promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages has also been debated among marketers (Chandon & Wansink, 2010; Enright, 2006; Seiders & Petty, 2004, 2007; Witkowski, 2007), and the food and beverage industry (Australian Food and Grocery Council, 2010; Cooper, 2010; Jolly, 2011).

Drawing chiefly from the way this issue is presented within the public health literature, this paper focuses on the three variables of product, promotion, and consumer vulnerability. Within such literature, it can be argued that discussion has concentrated on the promotional mechanisms used by food and beverage companies, in particular television advertising (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009; Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly, Smith, King, Flood, & Bauman, 2007; Lobstein & Dibb, 2005; Matthews, 2008). In addition to promotional methods (Hebden, King, & Kelly, 2011; Montgomery, Chester, Grier, & Dorfman, 2012), the nature of products being marketed (Cheyne, Dorfman, Bukofzer, & Harris, 2013; McGinnis, Gootman, and Kraak, 2006), and audiences targeted by such messages (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra, & Sharp, 2001; Carter, Patterson, Donovan, Ewing, & Roberts, 2011; Stanton & Guion, 2013) represent recurring themes.

This approach also connects to traditional understandings of the ‘marketing mix’ and marketing strategy development (American Marketing Association, 2011; Lancaster & Renolds, 2002). While superseded by a variety of more contemporary explanations (e.g., Constantinides, 2006; Fetherstonhaugh, 2009), the four P’s represent one of the most well-known and discussed of marketing concepts (Doyle, 2011). It has also been used to explain marketing in public health publications that address this issue (e.g., McGinnis, Gootman & Kraak, 2006; Hawkes 2010) and in public health discussions of marketing more broadly (e.g., Abercrombie et al., 2012; Chrysochou, 2010; Patil, 2011).

Such literature prompted investigation as to whether concerns associated with the issue of promoting unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents center on the nature of the products being marketed, or the promotional techniques used. Subsequently, this work is informed by interviews with public health professionals, marketing and food and beverage industry representatives, and existing literature across the marketing, public health and related disciplines. Building on the use of matrices to represent marketing concepts and practices (e.g., Emamalizadeh, 1985; Harris, 2009; Santilli, 1983), the purpose of this paper is to present a new way of understanding this issue by focusing on the variables of product, promotion, and consumer vulnerability, and how they interact. This paper summarizes the methodological approach that informed data collection and analysis, presents a 3D conceptual model, and discusses the implications and possible applications of this work.

Research method

The research approach adopted for this study understands marketing is an evolving, socially constructed concept, and recognizes calls for research methods that reflect these characteristics e.g. (Hirschman, 1986). Among the social sciences the use of a qualitative methods as a whole have increased (Patterson & Williams, 2002), and are recognized as

---

1 Also referred to as ‘this issue’ throughout this paper.
particularly relevant to questions that explore and explain the what, why and how of human behavior, attitudes and motivations (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009). This study is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and draws from the critical paradigm. Against this theoretical landscape Gadamerian hermeneutics provided a framework for qualitative data analysis (Adamson, 2011; Gadamer, 1997; Lawn, 2006; Patterson & Williams, 2002; Schmidt, 2006).

**Qualitative interviews**

As summarized in Table 1 below, data collection comprised two studies, both using interviews as their primary mode of data collection. Interviews are one of the most recognized forms of qualitative data collection (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and in their longer form are particularly well-suited to hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1997). Purposive sampling (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Robinson, 2014) was used to identify those participants who would have professional involvement with, and be willing to discuss, this issue. Two research populations - public health professionals, and marketing and food and beverage industry professionals - were identified in light of preliminary reading of literature and immersion in this issue within an academic setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Population</th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public health</td>
<td>9 interviews</td>
<td>9 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and food and beverage industries</td>
<td>10 interviews</td>
<td>12 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of interviews</td>
<td>19 interviews</td>
<td>21 interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Interviews by study and research population.

A total of 29 participants took part in the studies. Participants could participate in one or both studies (and correspondingly one or two interviews). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by phone, lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each, and occurred between March and September 2012. While the opportunity was given to clarify terminology at the start of interviews, the interviewer was open to alternative explanations that reflected interviewee’s understanding. Where participants consented, interviews were audio-recorded in addition to notes being taken by the interviewer. Reflective notes were also recorded both following interviews and throughout subsequent rounds of data analysis.

Hermeneutic analysis involved several rounds of reading and question-and-answer dialogue with interview transcripts. As recommended by Stake (2012) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994), data analysis occurred while interviews were being conducted, and also continued after their completion. NVivo software also assisted with the management and organization of interview transcripts, and in verifying and refining the hermeneutic analysis. Concurrent with the latter stages of hermeneutic analysis, literature involving matrices and spectra (chiefly within the discipline of marketing) to represent the interplay of multiple variables was also investigated. Matrices, combined with discussions of consumer vulnerability, were also explored as part of a related project. The results of this literature search and analysis are discussed in the following section.

**Existing conceptualizations**

Among studies that applied matrices to marketing contexts the works of Santilli (1983), Smith and Cooper Martin (1997), Leiser (1979), Emamalizadeh (1985), and Harris (2009) were identified as particularly relevant to this enquiry. However, although problematic aspects of marketing have been represented in matrix form by several authors, none
sufficiently accounted for all three aspects associated with the issue of unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children and adolescents, i.e., the product, promotion, and audience. For example, Smith and Cooper Martin (1997) capture harmful product and audience vulnerability dimensions, but not the promotional dimension. Santilli (1983) discusses whether advertising is persuasive or informational, and whether the product is harmful or essential. Hence, Santilli’s work does not directly address audience vulnerability. Alternatively, Leiser (1979) argues that all advertising for harmful products is immoral, while all advertising for beneficial products is morally acceptable. Again, the product and the promotion aspects are addressed, but not the audience.

Initially it was thought that Emamalizadeh’s (1985) model addressed the same underlying concepts associated with the issue of promoting unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents as the model in Appendix 1. Emamalizadeh’s non-rational forms of persuasion could be likened to those aspects of Integrated Marketing Communication previously proposed as 'more problematic' by Harrison & Jackson (2013), such as deep engagement or stealth marketing. In this way Emamalizadeh's matrix was understood to address promotion and product axes, with the implication of consumer vulnerability resulting from non-rational forms of persuasion. However, concerns emerged around Emamalizadeh’s (1985) claim that persuasive techniques could be both non-rational and not affect autonomy. For example, subtle marketing messages often bypass rational modes of thinking, instead relying on affective or implied associations (Nairn & Fine, 2008). Research also shows that once a brand-consumer relationship is established, consumers automatically retrieve relevant information and associations from memory when cued (Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009). Hence, certain forms of marketing are designed to persuade in ways that are non-rational, which in turn may impact on consumers’ autonomy.

Finally, Harris (2009) investigates the nature of the product in criticisms of marketing activities, and proposes a 3D matrix consisting of three axes: social and environmental welfare, immediate satisfaction, and wants and needs. This work demonstrates that the matrix concept can be expanded to account for additional variables and that such a model could be used conceptually to explain potentially problematic aspects of marketing practice. Parallel with continued hermeneutic analysis, the conceptual model (see Appendix 1) continued to evolve and combine characteristics of matrices, with those of spectra. Wing’s (2002) work on autism spectrum disorders provided insights as to how spectra could be used to help explain phenomenon with infinite arrays of variables.

**The 3D model**

The conceptual model in Appendix 1 reflects the understanding that the nature of the product, the types of promotion used, and the degree of consumer vulnerability, can combine in an infinite array of possible combinations. How problematic the resulting promotion for a particular product directed at a target audience is perceived to be, therefore depends on this combination. A scenario involving the promotion of an unhealthy product, to young children who are vulnerable owing to their incomplete cognitive maturity, and using controversial promotional mechanisms such as subtlety could therefore be argued as occupying a ‘most problematic’ position (as represented by Point A, Appendix 1). Yet changing one of these variables – for example promoting fresh fruit and vegetables – would significantly change the overall ‘location’ of this marketing activity on the 3D model (as represented by Point B). It could be argued that the promotional tactics remain problematic, but owing to the nature of the product, the overall concern associated with this scenario would be significantly less than if confectionery was the product in question. Similarly, the same promotional tactics, used for
the same product, but targeted towards an audience of informed, marketing-literate adults could also be regarded as potentially problematic, but not as problematic (as represented by Point C).

The following section presents interview data that helped to inform this understanding.

**Interview responses**
Across both participant groups there was no unanimous judgment that either the ‘product’ or ‘promotion’ was more problematic overall regarding the issue of unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children and adolescents. Participants from both research populations indicated concerns associated with the nature of the product, but more commonly both variables were identified as problematic to differing extents.

Several participants from the marketing and food and beverage industry highlighted the nature of the product as problematic, yet there were no specific instances were promotion *in toto* was criticized. Members of this research population were also more likely to acknowledge the complexity associated with this issue and the roles of detail and subtle difference in shaping their perspectives. For example, the following quote by Marketing/food and beverage industry participant 12B, highlights one participant’s concern specific to the practice of business making financial donations to government, rather than sponsorship per se.

> “I don’t have a problem with sponsorships and you know supporting the community and all of those things, because that’s putting back in the community, but government are the regulators and so where there’s a, they have a financial interest and a direct financial interest in the form of payments and donations, then that’s where it becomes compromised” Marketing/ food and beverage industry participant 12B

In contrast, members of the public health community interviewed were more likely to make a clear judgment, individually, as to whether the product or the promotion was of greater concern. However, among this research population there were also some participants who articulated that they felt both aspects were problematic. The following quote, by Public Health Professional 5A, highlights this perspective: “I think that there needs to be - there shouldn't be as many unhealthy products on the market as there are. Then the ones that are unhealthy shouldn't be allowed to be marketed.”

Further, the responses of some participants, such as the one below, could be interpreted as evidence of differing standards that apply to commercial marketing for unhealthy food and beverage products, and social marketing initiatives for healthy foods and beverages. Some public health participants indicated that they had no concerns should these techniques be applied, and some even suggested the adoption of such techniques would be an opportunity for public health. However others realized the potential for criticism in allowing techniques to be used to promote some foods, but not others.

> “I don’t think there’d be any issues around food promotion in this way if it was around bananas or fruit. The whole issue is that it seems to be attached to high-sugar or energy-dense foods. That’s where the efforts are directed.” Public Health Professional 12A

Public health participants and several representatives of the marketing and food and beverage industry interviewed also displayed strong concern over the possible exploitation of, or harm
to, children. Age and lack of cognitive maturity, the credulity of children and their lack of education were cited as reasons for this concern. During interviews, some public health participants likewise explained that they felt marketing to young children constituted an abuse of children’s’ rights. One participant drew parallels between this activity and sexual abuse of children and another emphasized the predatory nature of this activity. Only one marketing participant highlighted the difficulty in identifying which members of an audience may be potentially harmed as a result of promoting potentially harmful products more broadly. The quote by Marketing/ food and beverage industry participant 5B below, highlights that audiences are heterogeneous, but also implies that this marketer is aware that promoting certain products is likely to be harmful for at least some members of the target market.

Finally, the intent of marketing activities was raised by several participants – either the intent of companies or brands, or the intent behind self-regulation. Initially, this was regarded as an element at odds with the 3D model. However, on further consideration intent of companies or brands was understood to be captured by the model. For example, the intent to increase sales of a certain product, among a specified target audience, using selected promotional methods still involves the elements of audience, product, and promotion.

**Implications of the 3D model**

The 3D model provides a tool to assist marketers, policy makers, and public health advocates to both explain and understand what makes the promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents potentially problematic. It also provides a simple aide to help explain how different aspects used in combination contribute to or reduce the overall perception of marketing executions as problematic. In practical terms, the 3D model may assist in framing arguments associated with this issue by highlighting the complex interplay of an infinite number of factors related to the nature of the product, the promotional tactics being used, and the vulnerabilities of the target audience at any one point in time. Serving as a foundation, the model could also help stakeholders prioritize those aspects of unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children and adolescents are most in need of change.

The 3D model in its current form is conceptual. As outlined above it has been developed in light of qualitative investigation and existing literature. Further opportunities exist to test the model empirically and either verify or challenge its propositions. Finally, while the term ‘product’ has been used to this point, the term ‘branded entities’ may provide a more accurate description as it encapsulates both physical products and brands. This also allows for the model to be applied to other marketing ethics issues, in particular the promotion of certain services.
References


Harrison, P., & Jackson, M. (2013). Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and power imbalance: the strategic nature of marketing to children and adolescents by food and beverage companies. In J. Williams, K. Pasch & C. Collins (Eds.), *Advances in communication research to reduce childhood obesity*: Springer.


Appendix 1. Food and beverage marketing to children and adolescents, as represented through the elements of product, promotion, and audience vulnerability.