Research report

Mothers’ perceptions of the negative impact on TV food ads on children’s food choices

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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S A M P L E   C O N T E N T

Introduction

In 2007, about one-third of American children between the ages of 10 and 17 were classified as overweight, with roughly half of these further classified as obese (Science News, 2010). Obese children have about a 70% chance of becoming obese adults (Debby, 2005; Pereira et al., 2005; USA Today, 2005). Several factors influence children’s eating habits: children’s innate preferences (Young, 2003), siblings and peers (Benton, 2004), the behaviors of adults around children (Harper & Sanders, 1975), parental food preferences and beliefs (Campbell & Crawford, 2001), and exposure to diverse media content, including TV food advertising (Caroli, Argentieri, Cardone, & Masi 2004). Even though some researchers have doubted that there is a direct relationship between childhood obesity and exposure to TV food advertising aimed at children (Ambler, 2007; Livingstone, 2005), many academic studies and media reports have pointed specifically to such a relationship, leading to the claim that the content of TV advertising targeting children should be regulated (Boynton-Jarrett et al., 2003; Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2007).

In terms of the overall regulatory environment for TV food commercials in the US, the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) has been the initiative-leader that has regulated diverse aspects of commercials aimed at children. The need for the FTC’s regulation of TV food ads targeting children has been validated by various empirical studies that report that children’s exposure to advertising for calorie-dense low-nutrient foods could seriously contribute to the increasing rate of childhood obesity in the U.S. The FTC first obtained the authority to more aggressively regulate food advertising to children in 1938. Now, even though the FTC does not screen all food ads for children prior to their being publicized, they have the authority to regulate if the FTC believes an active advertisement is deceptive. The basic perspective of the FTC toward this issue is that children within a certain age range do not differentiate clearly between TV commercials and regular TV programs. Therefore, the FTC believes that there should be some effective regulation of the content of TV food commercials that target children, so as to protect them appropriately. According to one study, children consumed about 45% more unhealthy snack foods after they were exposed to TV food advertising.

Despite the abundance of research on the effects of TV food advertising on children, studies dealing with the opinions of mothers, children’s major caregivers, are comparatively scarce (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; McDermott, O’Sullivan, Stead, & Hastings 2006). Even though the importance of mothers in discussions about the impact of TV food advertising on children has been noted in several studies (e.g., Corder-Bolz & Fellows, 1979; Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam, & Colimore, 1985; Rossiter & Robertson, 1975; Warren, 2002), there has not been enough investigation of their opinions (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005). With this in mind, the major goals of this exploratory study are twofold. First, the author investigates mothers’ opinions regarding the possible influences of TV food advertising targeting children in several respects, including the impact on children’s food choices, conflicts over food choices between mothers and children caused by the children’s exposure to TV food advertising, and the need for stronger
impact of TV food advertising on children's health (Kaiser Family
Foundation, 2007; USA Today, 2005). According to a report by
the International Food Information Council (2007), news coverage
discussing the serious rate of American childhood obesity and the
negative influences of media content, including food advertising,
on children has increased from 21% in 1999 to about 30% in 2005
(2007). The high interest in childhood obesity by the media and
the public can be attributed to several factors. For example, the
number of Google hits for the words “Childhood Obesity and the
regulations of the advertising messages. Second, the author exam-
ines the presence of the third person effect (Davis, 1983) in moth-
ers’ opinions about the effects of TV food advertising on both their
own children, and the children of people they do not know.

Literature, research question, and hypotheses

According to recent reports, the average child between the ages
of 7 and 12 is exposed to about 40,000 TV ads a year, with the main
products they are exposed to being candy, toys, cereal, soda, and
fast food (Kunkel, 2001; Mercola, 2005). Many ads that include
high-fat, high-sugar, and low-fiber foods are frequently advertised
during children's TV programming (Kotz & Story, 1994; Taras &
Gage, 1995). Harrison and Marske (2005) found that 83% of adver-
tised foods aimed at children are convenience/fast foods and
sweets. This study builds on the literature about children and TV
food advertising by examining the opinions of mothers. Mothers’
perspectives toward TV food advertising can provide important
implications for academia and policy makers. Parental attitudes to-
ward advertising have been considered a critical reference point
to understanding issues involving children (Young, de
Bruin, & Eagle, 2003). More specifically, policy makers have utilized
parents’ viewpoints to establish or modify regulations limiting the
content of advertising targeting children (Hawkes, 2005).

Before setting the hypotheses, this study examines whether the
mothers who participated in this study believed that there are too
many TV food ads aimed at children, which forms Research
Question 1. Many studies indicate that there has been a significant
amount of media coverage dealing with the issues of the negative
impact of TV food advertising on children’s health (Kaiser Family
Foundation, 2007; USA Today, 2005). According to a report by
the International Food Information Council (2007), news coverage
discussing the serious rate of American childhood obesity and the
negative influences of media content, including food advertising,
on children has increased from 21% in 1999 to about 30% in 2005
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the public can be attributed to several factors. For example, the
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Table 1
Mothers' attitude toward TV food advertising aimed at children.

| Statements | Agree | Disagree | Neither Agree / Disagree | Sig.
|------------|-------|----------|--------------------------|--------
| "There are too many food ads in TV directed at children." | 237 | 23 | 56 | P < 0.01
| **TV food ads to children use tricks and gimmicks.** | 251 | 28 | 38 | P < 0.01
| "**TV food ads aimed at children under the age of 12 should be banned." | 126 | 85 | 98 | P < 0.01
| "Most TV food ads deceive children." | 188 | 42 | 87 | P < 0.01
| **There is too much sugar and fat in food products advertised in TV directed at children.** | 251 | 18 | 49 | P < 0.01
| **"There should be a ban on TV advertising heavily sugared products aimed at children."** | 172 | 58 | 88 | P < 0.01
| "TV food advertising is an important cause of my child pestering me for advertised food products." | 181 | 84 | 53 | P < 0.01
| **"TV food ads encourage my child to want food products he/she doesn't need."** | 247 | 37 | 34 | P < 0.01
| "**TV food advertising to children leads to family conflicts in my house." | 57 | 177 | 78 | P < 0.01
| My child is able to distinguish between regular programs and TV food advertising. | 237 | 37 | 43 | P < 0.01
| TV food ads encourage discussion of food products within my family. | 145 | 70 | 99 | P < 0.01
| My child understands the real purpose of TV food advertising. | 157 | 93 | 67 | P < 0.01
| The more food ads my child watches through TV, the more he/she will want food products advertised. | 213 | 47 | 58 | P < 0.01
| "My child is deceived by TV food ads more easily than me." | 248 | 32 | 35 | P < 0.01
| The more TV food ads my child watches, the better he/she will understand them. | 47 | 173 | 97 | P < 0.01
| TV ads help my child become more aware of the world around him/her. | 76 | 150 | 87 | P < 0.01
| I have the overall responsibility for deciding what TV food ads my child should watch. | 213 | 43 | 59 | P < 0.01
| When my child decides what foods to buy, he/she is influenced more by his/her friends than by TV food advertising. | 185 | 48 | 83 | P < 0.01
| The foods advertised on TV is an important cause of my child's unhealthy eating habits. | 67 | 169 | 78 | P < 0.01
| **Snack and food TV advertising is the main influence on my child's diet.** | 24 | 235 | 58 | P < 0.01
| "If snack and fast-foods were not advertised in TV, my child's eating habits would improve." | 57 | 176 | 82 | P < 0.01
| My child usually demands food he/she has seen in TV ads. | 78 | 175 | 64 | P < 0.01

The questions with * are about RQ1.
The questions with ** are about H1.
The questions with *** are about H2.

Table 2
Mothers’ Opinions about the Influences of TV Food Advertising on Their Own Children and the Children of Others

| Statements | Agree | Disagree | Neither agree / disagree | Sig.
|------------|-------|----------|--------------------------|--------
| Third person effect (comparison between my children and other people's children) | 150 | 33 | 135 | P < 0.01
| "I think that the children of others are more negatively influenced by current TV food advertising than my children." | 85 | 64 | 169 | P < 0.01

"New York Times" increased from 8.65 million in January 2005 to
about 31 million in February 2007. Also, the words “Childhood
Obesity and CBS” returned 863,000 hits in 2007, which represents
a tenfold increase from two years previously. There is some debate
as to whether Google hit counts are an effective measure of how
prominent issues regarding childhood obesity and media’s influ-
ence are in society at large. However, Google hit counts have been
actually used in several studies as an important reference when
discussing the extent to which a specific concept (or political fig-
ures, sports athletes, accidents, celebrities, other diverse issues,
etc) is popular among members of a certain society.

To generate the hypotheses for investigating mothers’ percep-
tions about current TV food advertising targeted at children, this
study first employs the theory of agenda setting (McCombs &
Shaw, 1972). The theory has been used to investigate the possible
relationships between media coverage of a specific issue and peo-
ple’s attitudes toward particular issues (Len-Rios & Qiu, 2005).
Mothers’ perspectives are generally more influenced by media
reports than by other information sources (Jones, Denham, &
Springston, 2006). Introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the
agenda-setting theory suggests a relationship between the amount
of media coverage and the prominence given to a specific issue by

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the media and the public’s perception of the issue’s importance (Golan, Kiousis, & McDaniel, 2007; Hester & Gibson, 2007). Since McCombs and Shaw first demonstrated that people’s general perceptions about an election are shaped by news coverage (1972), the phenomenon of agenda setting has been replicated by numerous researchers. The theory has been applied in diverse fields for more than three decades, including the field of advertising (Golan et al., 2007; Lim, 2006; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006).

A number of reports (CDC 2007; Kaiser Family Foundation 2007) have found that much of the media content dealing with obesity issues was actually addressing the relationship between childhood obesity and TV food advertising to children. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are formulated based upon the rationale of the agenda-setting theory presented above and the amount of negative coverage by numerous media reports and studies regarding the influence of TV food advertising aimed at children.

More specifically, these two hypotheses examine mothers’ opinions regarding two subtopics of the debate about TV food advertising aimed at children, which are indicated as critical issues in related literature: (1) mothers’ perspectives regarding the negative influences of TV food advertising on children’s eating habits (Hitchings & Moynihan, 1998), and (2) and mothers’ opinions about the need for stricter regulations of the TV food advertising targeted at children (Mallaliou, Palan, & Lacznik, 2005).

**RQ1**

Do mothers in this study express the opinion that there are too many TV food ads aimed at children?

**H1**

Mothers in this study express the opinion that the content of TV food ads aimed at children negatively influences their children’s health.

**H2**

Mothers in this study express the opinion that there should be stricter regulations of TV food advertising aimed at children.

Next, the present study investigates whether the third person effect is operational when mothers express their opinions about the possible negative influence of TV food advertising on their children and the children of others. The third person effect has generally been observed when people talk about the effect of media content that they consider negative (such as sexual content in advertising and violence in movies) to the extent that they desire regulation (e.g., Fang and Youn; Huh, DeLorme, & Reid, 2004). Therefore, testing to see whether the effect operates in the context of mothers’ opinions about the influence of TV food advertising on children will have important implications regarding how contemporary mothers think about advertising.

Regarding the third person effect, Davis (1983) suggested the existence of the effect based upon research on people’s different perspectives toward a 1978 gubernatorial election. Since then, many studies have discussed this concept in different types of mass communication, including news, debates, drama, and political advertising (Perloff, 1993). Most of the subsequent studies have produced findings that support the existence of the third person effect. For example, researchers (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Griswold, 1992; Gunther, 1991; Huh et al., 2004; Mutz, 1989; Salwen, 1998) found the effect was active in people’s responses to news, elections, advertising, and other political issues. In addition, censorship of media content because of the third person effect has been the subject of public discussion as well. The third person effect was identified as the basis for supporting restrictions on pornography, gambling, violence, and other anti-social activities manifested in media content (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). Research on the third person effect and advertising has been generally limited to a few topics, such as political advertising (e.g., Cohen & Davis, 1991; Rucinski and Salmon, 1990), public service announcements (e.g., Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Gunther & Thorson, 1992), and direct-to-consumer (DTC) drug advertising (Huh et al., 2004). Many studies dealing with advertising and the third person effect have discussed regulation of negative advertising messages.

The third person effect has been used as an important theoretical framework to discuss the topic of regulation (Fang & Youn, 2004; Huh et al., 2004). When negative effects on audiences were generally expected from the content of advertising, the third person effect was frequently found in the participants’ opinions of the advertising (Fang & Youn, 2004; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Huh et al., 2004). Since negative public perceptions regarding the content of TV food advertising (e.g., the use of cartoon characters, the promotion of unhealthy ingredients, the appearance of violence) have been found by many studies (e.g., Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2007; Kunkel, 2001; Mercola, 2004; Harrison and Marske 2005), this study hypothesizes that there will be a third person effect in the answers of mothers to this study’s questions about the effects of TV food advertising on children.

**H3**

Mothers believe that the children of others are more strongly influenced by TV food advertising than their own children.

**Method**

A purposive convenience sample of mothers with children between the ages of 7 and 12 was obtained from the local parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), church groups, and Little League baseball teams in a Southeastern city in the U.S. The survey was conducted in July, 2010.

The respondents were paid $5 for each completed survey. The survey was conducted during a meeting or a gathering of each group at the location of this group’s usual meetings (e.g., the elementary schools on the day of a PTO meeting or the church buildings). At the request of the mothers of children on Little League teams, the author visited the fields at which the games were held to conduct the survey. Some mothers told the author that they did not have a TV set or had a strict rule not to watch TV in the house. In these cases, the author asked them not to fill out the survey.

In developing the questionnaires, the author modified the questions asked by Young et al. (2003) in their study of attitudes toward advertising for children. In addition, the possible third person effect was examined using the following statements. The statements below comparing the mothers’ opinions about the effect of TV food advertising on their own children with the effect on the children of others were designed to investigate the presence of the third person effect.

“I think that the children of others are more negatively influenced by current TV food advertising than my children”.

“More regulations of the content in TV food advertising are needed to help protect the children of others rather than to protect my children”.

**Results**

A total of 318 completed surveys were collected (adjusted response rate was 48.5%), and missing values in the surveys were
eliminated from the statistical analysis. The largest group of respondents consisted of mothers of 10-year-olds (21%), and the smallest group consisted of mothers of 8-year-olds (12%). Mothers of boys were more prevalent (59.7%) than mothers of girls (40.2%) in the sample. Among the mothers, 83.2% had more than one child in their household.

First, the mothers’ opinions about the amount of the TV food advertising aimed at children were investigated. A total of 237 mothers agreed with the statement “There are too many food ads in TV directed at children”, and only 23 mothers disagreed (Table 1). Therefore, the first research question was answered. Next, the nine statements in the scale were used to examine the mothers’ perspectives toward the possibly negative impact of TV food advertising on their children’s health. The fact that those nine statements were asking about the same topic was supported by acceptable reliability values (Cronbach alpha = 0.738). Different levels of agreement were found among the mothers’ answers to these statements. Even though the mothers strongly agreed that there was too much sugar and fat in the products advertised to their children (p < 0.01), they had different attitudes toward the statement asking whether TV food advertising was the main influence on their children’s diet (p < 0.01) (Table 1). The mothers also disagreed with the prediction that their children’s eating habits would be healthier if TV food advertising aimed at children was banned (p < 0.01) (Table 1). Based upon the results, the second hypothesis was partly supported.

Another three statements about the mothers’ opinions concerning regulation of TV food advertising targeted at children were used (Cronbach alpha = 0.857). The mothers strongly agreed with all the statements about stricter regulations of TV food advertising. For example, 172 mothers agreed to the need for regulation of ads for heavily sugared products (p < 0.01) (Table 1). Therefore, the third hypothesis was supported.

To examine for the presence of the third person effect in the mothers’ perceptions of TV food advertising’s impact on children, mothers were asked to respond to the following statements: “I think that the children of others are more negatively influenced by current TV food advertising than my children.” and “Greater regulation of the content in TV food advertising is needed to help protect the children of others rather than to protect my children.” In response to the first statement, many mothers showed agreement. The difference between the rate of agreement and the rate of disagreement was statistically significant (p < 0.01). Therefore, the third person effect was clearly present in the mothers’ answers. However, to the second statement about the need for regulation, not many mothers agreed (Table 2).

General discussion
The results of the present study showed that most mothers believed that there were too many TV food ads targeted at their children. They also indicated a belief that the TV food ads encourage unhealthy eating habits in their children, lead to nagging behavior that may cause parents to buy unnecessary food products, and that such ads fool their children by using tricks and gimmicks. These negative attitudes from the mothers may have been influenced by the numerous media reports and studies indicating the negative impact of TV food advertising on children (Gallup, 2006; Kaiser Family Foundation 2007; Nemours Foundation 2007). However, the mothers disagreed that TV food advertising aimed at their children was the most important influence on their children's eating habits. Therefore, even though it was clear that the mothers were generally negative about the impact of TV food advertising on their children and wanted to see more regulation of content, at the same time they did not think that TV food advertising was the most important factor influencing their children’s eating habits and health. The mothers thought that they were and should be the most important mediator of how many TV food ads their children watched and what kinds of food their children ate.

As such, this study revealed mothers’ complicated perceptions and cynicism about TV food advertising aimed at their children: they did not feel that TV food advertising was the only or even the most important factor in their children’s health, even though they believed that the TV food advertising had several negative impacts on their children. In addition to accepting the reality that the food companies were interested in increasing their sales, mothers perceived that advertising mediation on their part and their management of the healthy eating habits of their children were the most important factors in improving their children’s health.

Regarding the statements that attempted to measure the possible presence of the third person effects in mothers’ perceptions of TV food advertising on children, the first statement asked about the possible differences in mothers’ perceptions of the influences of TV food advertising on two different types of children. It was found that many mothers did not believe their own children were less influenced by TV food advertising compared to the children of others. The next statement asked the mothers about the influences of TV food advertising on the need for stricter regulations of the content of the advertising. The statements used the possible differences between the opinions about the mothers’ own children and the children of others as a test for the third person effect. The difference of opinions about their children and the children of the people they did not know was statistically significant. As several studies indicated, the third person effect (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Davis, 1983; Gunther, 1991; McLeod et al., 1997; Salwen, 1998) is generally found for media content that causes negative public attitudes (Duck et al., 1995; Fang & Youn, 2004), such as sexual content in the media (Duck et al., 1995), unethical content of DTC advertising (Huh et al., 2004), and binge drinking related content (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002). Since the core notion of the third person effect is that an individual considers that he or she is less influenced by negative media content compared to other people, the results from this study indicated that most mothers considered that the content of the TV food advertising was hazardous enough for their own children to show the third person effect.

Limitations and recommendations
Even though the mothers’ perspectives were considered the most important factors for this study, it is possible that information provided by other family members, such as fathers and even the children themselves, could have been useful. Therefore, a potential future study could employ similar questions but include the children, fathers, and other family members as participants. The other limitation of this study could be the similarity of the demographic or psychographic characteristics of the mothers. Since the participants were recruited from organizations such as PTOs and Little League baseball teams, it is possible that mothers in the sample were more generally active than mothers who did not participate in those gatherings. Generally, most mothers in the sample were dedicated to their children and aggressively participated in events in which their children were involved. Therefore, it is possible that many of the participants shared certain personality traits, like being sociable, active, confident, and very committed to their children. This possible homogeneity among the participants might have caused a lack of diversity in responses in some parts of this study. While recognizing this possible limitation, a future study could extend the sample to less active mothers who might have different perceptions about the possible negative influence of TV food advertising on their children.
References


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