

'Like me, want me, buy me, eat me': relationship-building marketing communications in children's magazines

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Abstract

Objective: Television, Internet and print media are saturated with advertisements for unhealthy food that use marketing tactics aimed to build long-term brand loyalty and 'relationships' with children. While research in this area has largely focused on television, the current study examines children's responses to relationship-building marketing communications found in popular children's magazines.

Design: A qualitative study consisting of friendship-pair interviews in which children were interviewed and asked to comment on a range of recent food advertisements.

Setting: A university-based after-school care programme in New South Wales, Australia.

Subjects: Ten children aged 6–13 years, interviewed in self-selected friendship pairs.

Results: The children reported being attracted to the advertisements because of specific elements of the marketing strategies utilised. Some children were able to recognise the persuasive intent of the media, whereas others did not even identify the pages as advertisements.

Conclusions: It was clear from the children's responses that these types of relationship-building marketing communications influence children's attitudes towards branded food products and their views on the nutritional value and social meanings of food.

Keywords
Children
Branding
Food marketing
Brand loyalty
Covert advertising

Childhood obesity rates in Australia are higher than international levels, and the evidence suggests that the proportion of overweight and obese children is increasing⁽¹⁾, with experts estimating that more than one-quarter of Australian children and adolescents are overweight or obese^(2,3). Policy makers, researchers and the general public are increasingly recognising the role of environmental factors in this public health crisis. This includes an increasing recognition of the impact of child-targeted food marketing on children's food choices⁽⁴⁾. Numerous studies have showed that children are exposed to extensive advertising for products high in fat and sugar^(5–7); and that marketers' efforts to tap into the minds and culture of today's children have created an interactive, high-speed marketing environment that seems almost inescapable^(8,9). Although there have been differing findings from observational and experimental studies, a major review concluded that research to date shows 'modest direct effects only' of television advertising on food preference, consumption and behaviour⁽¹⁰⁾. However, it has been argued that the effect has been understated – in part because research, thus far, has almost exclusively focused on television, and the cumulative effect of television advertising combined with other promotional channels is likely to be greater than the effect of television advertising alone^(6,11).

Food marketing to children

Children are a particularly vulnerable consumer group, due to their limited ability to recognise the persuasive intent of advertising⁽¹²⁾. Children under the age of five have difficulty distinguishing advertising from programme content, and it is not until around 8 years of age that they develop an 'adequate' knowledge of advertising intent and purpose⁽¹³⁾. An understanding of the tactics used by advertisers develops in the period between ages 11 and 14 years⁽¹⁴⁾, and even then this knowledge is not always sufficient to override a child's emotional reaction toward an advertisement⁽¹⁵⁾.

Exposure

Children are exposed to billions of dollars of food advertising and marketing in the media each year^(16,17), and have a high level of exposure to advertising for unhealthy products⁽¹⁸⁾. For example, children aged 2–7 years see an average of twelve food advertisements a day on television and those aged 8–12 years see an average of twenty-one per day; of these, 72% are for candy and snacks, high-sugar cereal and fast food⁽¹⁹⁾. It has been shown that children exposed to food advertising choose advertised food products at significantly higher rates than

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those not exposed⁽²⁰⁾. Repetitive exposure to food brands can influence children's taste perceptions, with a study showing that children preferred the taste of a hamburger given to them in McDonald's packaging over the same hamburger given to them in unbranded packaging⁽²¹⁾.

Salient features/appeals

A range of promotional techniques is used to make unhealthy food products appealing to children, including bright packaging, intensely coloured and flavoured ingredients, free gifts, puzzles, competitions, collectables, and ties in with cartoon characters, pop stars, sporting heroes and popular children's films⁽²²⁾. In addition, emotional appeals are also used in food advertising to children. A study from the United States that examined 147 food commercials aired during children's programmes found that the most prominent emotional appeals evident were fun/happiness/play, fantasy/imagination, social enhancement/peer acceptance and coolness/hipness⁽²³⁾. Furthermore, a recent Australian study showed that many parents believe that particular children's food advertisements suggest that a child would be perceived as popular for consuming the advertised product⁽²⁴⁾, appealing to the child's sense of peer acceptance.

Brand licensing and celebrity endorsement

Brands commonly develop their own trademark or 'brand character' (e.g. Ronald McDonald) to promote a product; others engage in brand licensing, the use of external trademarks or characters, and the extension of these to products of a completely different nature⁽²⁵⁾. For example, it is common for food brands to associate their products with animated characters from movies and/or computer games. In addition, food advertisers have partnered with toy companies to create toys that advertise food and vice versa in cross-promotion⁽²⁶⁾. Brand licensing plays on children's pre-existing attachments to these characters in the hope that they will carry over to the food product⁽²⁵⁾, thereby making it easier for marketers to build a relationship between child and brand. The use of celebrity endorsement has a similar effect on the brand relationships between children and food products. Celebrity endorsement is appealing to children⁽²²⁾, and sports celebrities in particular have been shown to contribute to brand name recognition, create positive product associations for both children and adults, and contribute to the credibility of a brand⁽²⁷⁾. A study from the United States reported that 16% of food advertisements targeted at children and teens contained at least one celebrity or cartoon character⁽¹⁹⁾.

Promotions

Food marketing to children often incorporates non-food components (promotions) to increase brand exposure and sales, including premiums, contests and sweepstakes⁽¹⁹⁾, as well as kids' clubs and free downloads in interactive media⁽²⁸⁾. A premium is a product or service

received for free with the purchase of a food product (such as the free toy received with McDonald's Happy Meals). Unlike premiums, which provide a free incentive with a purchase, contests and sweepstakes offer the promise of the opportunity to win a prize⁽²⁹⁾. Promotions enhance the image of the particular brand in the child's mind, promoting brand awareness and recall⁽³⁰⁾. A study from the United States that investigated food advertisements targeted towards children and teens found that 19% of advertisements featured premiums and 7% contained a contest or sweepstake⁽¹⁹⁾. Online media is also host to a multitude of embedded food advertisements, with many promotions designed to target children⁽³¹⁾. An Australian study that examined the nature and extent of food promotions on five popular children's websites, which were linked to top-selling children's magazines, found that most of the online promotional tactics were subtle yet prevalent, with most products advertised being associated with games, competitions or prizes⁽³²⁾.

Until now, the focus of research has primarily been on television advertising⁽²⁸⁾. The influence of food advertisements in media channels such as magazines and the Internet is under-researched, despite the fact that the distinction between content and advertising can be subtler in these media, with children's magazines often carrying hidden advertisements in editorials, comics, games and puzzles⁽³³⁾. A marketing journalist commented that while television advertising aimed at children 'raises tempers', 'subtle marketing through children's magazines has gained parental approval'⁽³⁴⁾. For example, the marketing website for the Australian Consolidated Press states that:

Disney Adventures is a magazine PARENTS trust... READERS have proven to be responsive to advertising campaigns that have been specifically designed to fit in with the editorial content i.e.: competitions, giveaways. We have seen record numbers of responses to these promotions – this is the essence of our magazine (emphases in original)⁽³⁵⁾.

Furthermore, despite an abundance of research on the types of food advertised to children, comparatively little attention has been paid to the aggressive nature of campaigns targeted at children that are designed to develop long-term brand loyalty and 'relationships' with food brands. The establishment of brand strength and value is seen by marketing companies as integral to the success and longevity of a brand⁽³⁶⁾, and emphasises developing psychological and emotional connections between consumers and brands⁽³⁷⁾. There is a need to examine the strategies employed by food companies to communicate directly with children, particularly with the increasing availability of targeted media such as children's magazines and Internet sites in which marketers can access and interact directly with children, often without parental supervision⁽³⁸⁾.

There is a small but growing body of literature examining the extent and nature of food marketing to children

on the Internet^(28,32,39,40). In relation to children's magazines, there have been a small number of content analyses of this advertising^(18,39,41), and one study that examined parents' responses to food advertisements in children's magazines⁽²⁴⁾. However, to date there are no published studies on children's responses to this form of marketing communication.

The present paper draws on literature on food branding and advertising targeted at children, as well as the results of interviews with a small sample of children to examine their responses to food-branding marketing communication strategies that are being used in Australian children's magazines. We investigate the way these strategies build relationships with children by exploiting their level of cognitive and social development, with clear potential for negative effects on children's food choices. This is one of the first studies to examine the use of these strategies in children's magazine advertisements and the first to examine children's responses to them.

Materials and method

A qualitative study consisting of five friendship-pair interviews was conducted with children aged 6–13 years (Table 1) to investigate their attitudes towards popular food brands commonly advertised in children's magazines. Also known as dyads, friendship pairs involve interviewing two friends at the same time, and are often used by commercial market researchers when young respondents are shy or do not seem capable of speaking to researchers directly or comfortably (<http://www.millwardbrown.com>). This format allows questions to be redirected so that the children talk to each other. Friendship pairs also avoid some of the limitations of focus groups, which may be 'led' by the strongest child(ren), with the others agreeing with the leaders⁽⁴²⁾.

The children were recruited from a university-based after-school care programme. Each pair completed three activities designed to explore their knowledge, attitudes and responses to child-targeted food advertisements and branded food products. The study protocol was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Activity 1

The participants were shown a sample of popular children's magazines (e.g. *D-Mag*; *K-Zone*; *Total Girl*), and asked whether they were familiar with the magazines, whether they liked the magazines, and what they liked or disliked about them. If the children had not seen the magazines before, they were given time to familiarise themselves with the typical magazine content.

Activity 2

Each friendship pair was asked questions about four different food advertisements, representative of four different styles of advertisement commonly found in children's

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Pair number	Gender	Age (years)
1	Female	10–11
2	Male	6–7
3	Male	10–13
4	Female	8–10
5	Male	6–8

magazines. For three of the four styles, male and female participants were shown different pages, as these advertisements are designed to appeal to different genders. The first page was a standard advertisement for a food product; the second offered a premium or gift upon purchase of a food product; the third was considered to be a 'hidden' advertisement, where the bulk of the page consisted of a puzzle but the food brand was printed in the corner; and the final page was a 'multiple' advertisement, which included information about the various advertised products (including, but not exclusively, food products) on the same page in a 'what's hot now' style promotion. For all of the advertisements, the children were asked what they saw on the page; what the page made them think of; what they liked and disliked about the page; and what they thought the purpose of the page was. Finally, the participants were asked which of the four advertisements they liked the best and why.

Activity 3

The children were shown a series of ten flash cards, each with a different food brand or product logo (e.g. Cadbury (chocolate), Vegemite (yeast-based sandwich spread), Milo (chocolate flavoured powdered drink additive)) and asked to discuss with each other and the interviewer any knowledge or thoughts they had about the brand or product logo shown.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed and the data manually coded for the key themes and features identified in the literature. That is, rather than the analysis being guided by a 'theoretical' framework, it was guided by the key elements identified in the literature as important in understanding how advertisers build relationships with young consumers. The results are thus presented following this framework: responses to advertisements – including exposure, salient features/appeals, brand licensing, celebrity endorsement and promotions; brand associations; and recognition of the intent of advertisements.

The analysis was conducted independently by two of the authors (N.M. and J.G.), and a synthesis of the two independent reports was compiled by the first author (S.J.) after listening to the full audio-recordings, with any discrepancies discussed and resolved as a group. Field notes were kept by the focus group facilitators (the third author and a research assistant), including such factors as participants' familiarity with the magazines and level of engagement in the discussion, and diary notes were kept

by the three authors as they coded the data. These fields and diary notes were consulted in discussions on the two analyses and in preparing the paper. As the parents were assured of the anonymity of their children's data, no identifying information or demographic data, other than age and gender, was recorded.

Results

Only one pair of children reported being unfamiliar with the magazines (pair 3 – boys aged 10 and 13 years); the others all reported being occasional or regular readers.

Response to advertisements

Exposure

There was very high recognition of the food advertisements and logos shown to participants in activities 2 and 3. Furthermore, pairs were readily able to discuss their knowledge of the brands and products, indicating high levels of exposure to unhealthy food advertising and/or having consumed these products.

Pretty much everyone knows it. [People] usually get Cadbury because that's one of the best brands (boy, 10 years).

Middle childhood (ages 6–11 years) is a time of major cognitive development and mastery of cognitive, physical and social skills⁽⁴³⁾. Children in this age group progress from dependence on their parents to increasing independence, with a growing interest in the development of friendships and understanding the world around them. Children's eating behaviours reflect these changes and become more influenced by outside sources⁽⁷⁾. Consumer socialisation – the process by which children learn how to function as consumers in the marketplace – occurs in parallel to this stage of cognitive development⁽⁷⁾. Food companies therefore target children as current consumers to build brand loyalty among future consumers.

The participants made clear associations between brands and social or physical outcomes. For example, participants associated Uncle Toby's with healthy kids and healthy parents (physical), and identified Vegemite as a food that 'Australian' kids eat (social) and Milo as a drink that provides you with energy (physical).

Healthy kids [eat Uncle Toby's], whose mum tells them to be healthy (girl, 10 years).

[People eat Vegemite] because they like Australian food (girl, 10 years).

[I think of] the song, the ad..., we're happy little Vegemites (girls 10 and 11 years).

[People drink Milo] when they want energy, cause it says on Milo that it makes you have energy (girl, 11 years).

None of the participants were immune to making these associations, and they appeared to believe them to be true (as evidenced by references to 'healthy kids' and 'when they want energy'). This was evident even for the older participants who displayed more advanced media literacy skills in other areas (see following section).

Salient features/appeals

When shown samples of children's magazines and asked what parts of the magazines they liked, the participants nominated the quizzes, puzzles and/or games (*n* 3); movie references (*n* 3); posters (*n* 2); stories (*n* 2); references to famous people (*n* 2); cute stuff (*n* 1); bright colours (*n* 1); advertisements for toys (*n* 1); comics (*n* 1); references to computer games (*n* 1); and articles (*n* 1). These same preferences were evident in their reasons for being attracted to, and liking, the advertisements shown to them.

I like it because you get to play a game... (girl, 8 years).

It's catchy; the character they use is cool (boy, 10 years).

I like the colours (girl, 11 years).

Furthermore, all participants chose the 'multiple' advertisements (entitled 'What a girl wants' and 'What we're obsessed with now') as their favourite, giving reasons such as the attractive colours, to get information about what is new and available to buy, and that the products advertised were popular and their favourites.

[It tells] you what you can buy. If you don't know about something, then you'll see it and say you really want to get it, and you didn't know about it before (girl, 10 years).

I notice the big word "Obsessed". I also notice all the toys (boy, 13 years).

[I like it because] it tell[s] us if they're good or not and if they can do the things they say they can do (boy, 10 years).

This finding is important as it suggests that the children did not identify these pages as 'advertisements' but rather as 'information', and they were thus potentially more vulnerable to the persuasive nature of these messages than to more overt advertisements. These advertisements also set out to target children's need to possess what is popular, and are commonly found in children's magazines. It is not clear whether appearances on these pages are paid for or the whether the products are independently chosen by the magazine's editorial team. These pages are not presented as advertisements, but as an authoritative opinion of what every child should have (or want). The advertisements are clearly effective in targeting young consumers, and are likely to lead to increased requests for purchase, supported by the 'evidence' that 'everyone else has one'.

Brand licensing and celebrity endorsement

Four of the advertisements used in the present study included the use of brand licensing, and it was evident from the responses that the participants were attracted to and liked this union of well-known characters with popular products.

Smurfs, Star Wars, Captain Underpants, and [The] Incredibles, ...It's cool..., [I like it] because all my favourite stuff is on it (boys, 6 & 8 years).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement was evident when discussing the food drink Milo, which uses celebrity endorsement in conjunction with appeals such as fun and adventure to create the view that Milo gives you energy and is consumed by active and healthy people. We note that the Milo advertising campaigns utilise athletes and sports stars (such as members of the Australian cricket team) who are easily recognised and often admired by children and teenagers.

I've seen those ad campaigns with the sports stars. On all the tins they've got pictures of the celebrities, like Brett Lee (boy, 13 years).

People eat this to be very healthy and do lots of sport (boy, 8 years).

This is consistent with findings of previous research conducted by the authors, which found that children and teenagers accept the implied message that active people need a 'sugar rush' to enhance their performance, and that they themselves consume these foods before sport in an effort to boost their performance⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Promotions

Our study involved two advertisements that included premiums for free toys. The participants all reported noticing and being attracted to the toys before they noticed or considered the reference to the food product. Some participants later noticed the affiliation with the food brand independently, whereas others needed extra prompting 'what else do you notice?' before mentioning the affiliation with McDonald's. In one instance, the oversight was blamed on the size and colour of the advertised toys.

Because [the dolls] they're bigger and more colourful than the writing (girls, 10 and 11 years).

I just see Spyro and Crash and a little bit of writing. I wouldn't really notice it was a Happy Meal because it's only [written] tiny down the bottom (boy, 13 years).

This finding is important given the Industry Code of Practice on Advertising to Children, which at the time of data collection stated that 'Advertising and/or Marketing Communications directed towards Children for Food and/or Beverage Products or services shall not feature ingredients or premiums that are not an integral element

of the product/s or service/s being offered'. The fact that children needed to be prompted to realise that this was, in fact, an advertisement for a food product suggests that it was clearly perceived as an advertisement for the premium itself.

Recognising intent of advertisements

Consistent with cognitive development literature, the older participants (≥ 10 years) were more often able to recognise the intent of the advertisements than the younger participants (≤ 9 years).

[The aim of the page is] to make people buy it (girl, 10 years).

It gets the kids to play the game and then it's like a subliminal message to also buy Coco Pops. The game draws them in and then they're looking at the Coco Pops logo (boy, 13 years).

[I think this page is about] video games and when that guy [Crash Bandicoot] races (boy, 8 years).

However, for the multiple advertisement ('What we're obsessed with now'), the two eldest male participants (10 and 13 years) did not recognise that this was an advertisement, whereas two of the younger male participants (6 and 7 years) did, which may be associated with familiarity with the magazines (given that the older boys reported not reading the magazines), although this would require further research.

(INT: Do you know what this page is trying to do?)

I'm not sure. It looks like something you'd find in a kids magazine. They've usually got pages where they're reviewing toys (boy, 13 years).

It's trying to get you to buy things (boy, 6 years).

Media literacy refers to the ability to develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature, technique and impact of what we see, hear and read in all forms of media⁽⁷⁾. Research has shown that younger children display lower levels of media literacy than older children and teenagers⁽¹⁷⁾, a finding that was generally consistent in the present study. However, there is also some evidence that even though teenagers are generally more media literate than younger children, they are not necessarily less influenced by advertising; rather, different processes of persuasion are effective at different ages⁽⁴⁵⁾. Typically, advertisements aimed at younger children seek to appeal through the physical aspects of the product, such as bright packaging, whereas advertisements targeted at older children and teenagers emphasise witty or stylish imagery, subtle messages and references to peer group approval⁽⁴⁶⁾. This may explain an interesting result from the present study in which children over the age of 10 were more attracted to and less critical of the informative advertisements (the 'multiple' advertisements)

than the other types of advertisements. These findings have implications in the design of strategies aimed at counteracting the effects of marketing. Media literacy programmes should be designed to be age-specific, reflecting the differing persuasive techniques effective on children of different ages and teenagers, and the same age-specific considerations should be employed when formulating potential changes to media regulation.

Regulation

In Australia, all advertisements targeted at children must comply with the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) 'Advertiser Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children'⁽⁴⁷⁾. The code operates on a self-regulatory system, and currently does not effectively restrict the use of any of the marketing strategies discussed in the present paper. On 1 January 2009, the AANA launched 'The Responsible Children's Food Marketing Initiative' to provide a framework for food and beverage companies to help promote healthy dietary choices and lifestyles to Australian children⁽⁴⁸⁾. However, adherence to the guidelines of this initiative is also voluntary, and many loopholes are still evident. Government legislation restricts the number of minutes dedicated to commercial viewing on television during children's programming and limits the length of each advertisement, but does not restrict the types of marketing strategies used. More importantly, and related to this study, marketers continue to be free to use the pervasive strategies discussed throughout the present paper for online and magazine advertising. This concern was highlighted in the United Kingdom among Members of Parliament who felt that the new regulation imposed on junk food advertising on television had failed because it simply allowed brands to divert their budgets online⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Limitations

The present study has a number of limitations. The primary limitation is the small sample size (five friendship pairs). However, the children's responses showed consistent patterns, and suggest the need for further research in this area. Future studies, in addition to using larger sample sizes, could gather information as to participants' levels of exposure to food advertising, as well as their pre-existing knowledge and attitudes in relation to food, magazines and advertising. This information would offer a further understanding of why the children provided certain responses to certain questions. Similarly, the participants were only exposed to a small number of food advertisements (four advertisements per friendship pair), and although these advertisements were chosen specifically to represent the main types of advertisements found in children's magazines, it would be of interest to examine responses to a larger sample of advertisements. Finally, the present study was conducted in Australia, using advertisements from top-selling Australian children's

magazines, and therefore the results may not be generalisable to other populations.

Conclusions

Food marketing to children is a multimillion-dollar business. The literature describes a multitude of techniques used by food marketers to forge relationships with children and build brand loyalty, thus increasing both current and future sales. The interviews highlighted that children are attracted by these marketing techniques, form brand associations as a result of exposure to this marketing, and differ in their ability to recognise the persuasive intent of marketing messages targeted towards them.

The present study, while small-scale and exploratory in nature, is the first to examine children's responses to relationship-building marketing communications for branded food products found in popular children's magazines. Our findings suggest that children notice, like and are receptive to the marketing strategies used in these magazines. Furthermore, while younger children have less of an understanding of the intent of most magazine advertisements, older children appear to be susceptible to more sophisticated marketing strategies.

There is a need for future studies to examine the relationship between (non-television) food advertisements (and subtler forms of marketing communications) and children's attitudes and responses to food brands, and whether media literacy programmes can reduce the vulnerability of young people and improve their food choices. Finally, stricter regulation surrounding food marketing to children, such as restrictions on pervasive marketing strategies (e.g. brand licensing, celebrity endorsement and premiums) could be a useful tool in addressing an important contributor to childhood obesity. However, it is important that such controls are implemented across media channels (including Internet and magazines), and that these channels are monitored for compliance with these standards.

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