

Sarah Campbell

Bachelor of Psychology (honours)

**A mixed method examination of food marketing directed
towards children in Australian supermarkets**

Professional Doctorate of Clinical and Health Psychology

School of Psychology

University of Newcastle

December 2011

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

Acknowledgements

Many people have provided assistance with this piece of work and I would like to thank them for their contribution.

My thanks go to Rachel Coventry, Seng Hoe Lee, Dana Sparkes, Laura Martin, Sarah Messer, and Gemma Reeves for their assistance in conducting the intercept interviews.

I am very appreciative of the support and advice given by Kathy Chapman and Bridget Kelly in designing the project and input toward the manuscript. A big thank you to Fiona Stacey for her help with conducting the data collection, analysis and input into the article.

A huge thanks to both my research supervisors for all their hard work and support during the whole process. To Jenny, I am grateful for all the help and advice. For Erica, your time, patience and constant encouragement has been essential in getting this project completed – many thanks.

To my beautiful wife, who somehow stood by me through all of this – thank you for the food, advice, strength and courage you have provided.

My family and friends have been a source of encouragement, humour, and support through all of this. I particularly want to thank my parents for their rock-like insistence that I would get there. I am dedicating this piece of work to my father, Andrew Campbell, as a way of thanking him for always encouraging me to strive to learn and grow. Thank you Dad.

Abstract

Scope: Food marketing toward children is evident across many forms of media and at the point-of-sale. There is little previous research into children's requests for food/drinks in the supermarket and the influence of promotional strategies on these requests.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of children's food/drink requests made whilst grocery shopping with a parent/caregiver. The study also aimed to gain further understanding of parents' experience of food marketing directed towards children in the supermarket environment and dealing with food/drink requests whilst shopping.

Method: A mixed methods design was used. *Intercept interviews* (N=158) were conducted with parents/caregivers accompanied by a child/ren on exiting 9 supermarkets in the Newcastle region, New South Wales. Parents were asked about the prevalence of food requests by child/ren generally and during the most recent supermarket visit. Information about the types of food/drinks requested and whether parents purchased any of the requested food/drinks was sought. Food/drink requests were categorised into food groups and then more broadly defined as core or noncore foods. Additional demographic information was collected. *Focus groups* (n=13) and telephone interviews (n=3) were conducted to explore parents' experiences of supermarket shopping with children and children requesting food/drink items. These discussions sought further information on the impact of marketing directed towards children on food/drink requests in the supermarket and dealing with pestering for food whilst grocery shopping.

Results: Of the 158 intercept survey participants (30% response rate), 73% of respondents reported a food/drink request by their child during the supermarket visit. Most requested food items (88%) were unhealthy foods, with chocolate/confectionery being the most common food category requested (40%). Most parents/caregivers (70%) purchased at least one food item requested during the shopping trip. Parents/caregivers purchased a food/drink item regardless of whether they perceived the request to be healthy or not. There was a tendency not to purchase a requested product for

a younger child. Qualitative interviews identified themes associated with food requests and prompts in the supermarket. Discussions established the following themes: parents' experience of pester power in the supermarket; prompts for food requests in the supermarket; parental responses to pestering in the supermarket environment; and strategies to manage pestering and minimise requests for food items.

Conclusions: Food/drink requests from children are common during supermarket shopping. Despite the majority of the food/drinks requested being unhealthy, parents often purchase these foods. The healthiness of the food/drink item did not influence the decision to purchase the requested product. Parents/caregivers reported that food promotion impacted on children's requests for food/drink items whilst grocery shopping. They suggested that point-of-sale tactics and television advertising had the greatest effect on children's food/drink requests. Parents reported difficulties dealing with constant requests for food/drink items throughout the supermarket and expressed desire for environmental changes to reduce pestering including confectionery-free checkouts, minimisation of child-friendly placement of products, and reducing children's exposure to food marketing in general.

Implications: Parents are likely to benefit from being provided with skills to deal with food/drink requests and pestering when shopping. Changes to current regulations around food promotion aimed at children need to be made to reduce exposure and protect children from the effects of unhealthy food marketing.

The thesis has 3 main sections. Section 1 examines background nutritional knowledge prior to conducting a critical review of the relevant literature, section 2 presents empirical findings in the format of a manuscript submitted for publication in the journal *Health Promotion International*, and section 3 presents an extended discussion of the findings.

Table of Contents

BACKGROUND	7
1. HEALTHY NUTRITION AMONGST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS	7
TABLE 1: GENERAL DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS	7
TABLE 2: THE AUSTRALIAN GUIDE TO HEALTHY EATING (1998): SUGGESTED SAMPLE SERVINGS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS	9
1.1 HEALTHY WEIGHT	14
1.2 IMPACT ON DENTAL HEALTH	15
1.3 ESTABLISHMENT OF LIFELONG HABITS AND IMPACT ON FUTURE HEALTH	16
1.4 INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S FOOD CHOICES	17
2. FOOD MARKETING DIRECTED TOWARDS CHILDREN – A CRITICAL REVIEW	17
2.1 TELEVISION ADVERTISING	18
2.2 INTERNET	19
2.3 CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES/PRINT MEDIA	20
2.4 POINT-OF-SALE PROMOTION	21
3. DOES MARKETING IMPACT CHILDREN'S CHOICES?	23
4. CHILDREN'S VIEWS AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROMOTIONAL TECHNIQUES	26
5. PARENTS' VIEWS ON FOOD PROMOTION DIRECTED TOWARD CHILDREN	29
6. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE PARENTS' ABILITY TO RESIST "PESTER POWER"	31
SUBMITTED JOURNAL MANUSCRIPT	33
EXTENDED DISCUSSION	56
1. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS	56
2. INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS IN RELATION TO THE LITERATURE	61
3. SHORTCOMINGS/FLAWS OF THE CURRENT STUDY	64
4. HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OR APPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS	65
5. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	72
6. CONCLUSION	74
REFERENCES	75
APPENDICES	82
APPENDIX 1: INTERCEPT INTERVIEW	82
APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP/TELEPHONE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	86
APPENDIX 3: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS PROVIDED TO PARTICIPANTS OF FOCUS GROUPS/TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS	89
APPENDIX 4: ADDITIONAL RESULTS	91
APPENDIX 5: SCOPE AND INFORMATION ON SELECTED JOURNAL	92
APPENDIX 6: EMAIL CONFIRMATION THAT THE JOURNAL MANUSCRIPT WAS ACCEPTED FOR REVIEW	98