Prime Minister for a day: children’s views on junk food marketing and what to do about it

Louise N Signal, Gabrielle LS Jenkin, Michelle B Barr, Moira Smith, Tim J Chambers, Janet Hoek, Cliona Ni Mhurchu

ABSTRACT

AIMS: This study explored children's awareness of and engagement with food marketing, and their views on action to address it.

METHODS: A purposeful sample of 33 children (11–13 years) from the Wellington region of New Zealand were interviewed.

RESULTS: Children were knowledgeable about food marketing, although most were not aware of the extent to which they were exposed. Children did not distinguish ‘marketing to children’ from other marketing. According to the children, they were frequently exposed to food marketing, and persuaded, against their better judgement, to purchase food they knew to be harmful to their health. As many children recognised the unhealthy nature of the food marketed to them, they agreed they would take action to reduce junk food marketing if they were Prime Minister for a day. Interventions included making food marketing honest, providing nutrition information, removing billboards and increasing the promotion of healthy food.

CONCLUSIONS: These findings suggest children’s exposure to junk food marketing may cause them physical, mental and moral harm, in direct contradiction of the New Zealand self-regulatory code for marketing. The children’s views align with the World Health Assembly’s recent decision to endorse initiatives to end childhood obesity, including restricting marketing of unhealthy foods.

Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages (junk food) shapes children’s dietary preferences and behaviours, and is a key contributor to childhood obesity. International estimates suggest that 60–90% of food marketing to children is for unhealthy foods, including pre-sugared breakfast cereals, soft drinks, savoury snacks, confectionery and fast foods. Children are a lucrative target for food marketers as they have spending money of their own, substantial influence over household spending on food and a lifetime as consumers ahead of them. According to Consumer Socialization Theory, children are the population group most vulnerable to marketing’s persuasive effects. To mount an effective cognitive defence against advertising, Wright et al argue that children must be able to do the following:

“access advertising and persuasion knowledge from memory, recognise when a persuasion attempt is occurring, note features of advertising that indicate what the marketer’s specific tactics and goals are in the particular campaign or situation, construct or execute their own message-processing and persuasion coping tactics, and commit to memory information about the tactics used in specific advertisements and access that information in future to recognise similar ploys”.

However, accessing these cognitive defences automatically, at the time of advertising exposure is a learned skill and may not develop until late in adolescence.
In 2017, the World Health Assembly (WHA) endorsed an implementation plan to end childhood obesity, including “implement effective measures, such as legislation or regulation, to restrict the marketing of [unhealthy] foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children”. Despite the strong evidence base supporting the WHA's recommendation, little is known about children's views on unhealthy marketing, despite their right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to express their views on all matters that concern them, and for decision-makers to consider those views. This omission does not reflect children’s capacity to provide such information. For example, a qualitative study of Australian children's views on TV advertising, found children aged 8–11 could readily “reflect on their experience of advertising”.

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the OECD. However, food marketing is self-regulated under voluntary Codes developed by the industry body in New Zealand, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Since the research presented here, the Codes for marketing to children have been revised. However, according to leading public health and nutrition experts, there has been no substantive change to the Codes as a result. The revised Codes require that: “ads targeted at children or young people must not contain anything that is likely to result in their physical, mental or moral harm and must observe a high standard of social responsibility”.

The research reported here was part of a broader research project, Kids'Cam, in which 168 New Zealand children wore cameras and GPS devices for four days to document their everyday lives. The study was undertaken in the Wellington region of New Zealand (estimated 2018 population 521,500) which includes four cities—Wellington, Hutt, Upper Hutt and Porirua. The primary Kids'Cam study revealed that children were exposed to an average of 27 unhealthy food advertisements per day in multiple settings including at home, in public spaces and at school; over twice as many as for healthy food. These estimates did not include marketing on TV, screens, or in stores, key marketing not easily captured or analysed in the Kids'Cam study.

The current study addressed the gap in research on children's views of unhealthy food and beverage marketing (excluding alcohol) by asking Kids'Cam children what they thought about food marketing. Specifically, we asked what was children's awareness of, and engagement with, food marketing, and what, if anything, would they do about unhealthy food marketing if they were Prime Minister for a day?

**Methods**

This paper reports on a qualitative sub-study of Kids'Cam undertaken to give meaning to the camera data. Full details of the Kids'Cam study methods are published elsewhere. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Health) (13/220) to study any aspect of the world children live in and their interaction with it. As a result, children were unaware of the primary food marketing focus of the study.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 33 of the 168 children (19%) who took part in the Kids'Cam study. The children were purposively selected to represent an equal distribution of girls and boys and, in line with the larger study, to represent a range of socioeconomic profiles and ethnicities. Eighteen of the 33 children were females and their mean age (both boys and girls) was 12 years (range 11–13). The majority were of European ethnicity (n=14), followed by Māori (n=11) and Pacific (n=8). There were almost equal proportions of children from high, medium and low decile (socioeconomic measure) schools (n=10, 12 and 11 respectively).

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed, piloted with 10 children and refined, largely for language simplification. This pilot data was not used in the final analysis. Questions explored children's nutrition knowledge, their awareness of and engagement with food advertising, and what, if anything, they would do about food advertising if they were Prime Minister for a day.

Building on the work by Mehta et al who found that “children did not distinguish between advertisements directed at them and those directed at adults”, we did not...
limit our line of questioning to advertising directed at children but rather asked about all food and beverage advertising to which they were exposed. The interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed before being coded and thematically analysed in NVivo 10. Coding categories were developed iteratively using the constant comparative method, which involves repeated examination of the source material with the final themes agreed on by two senior researchers (LS and GJ). Analysis of children's knowledge of healthy and unhealthy foods was based on the New Zealand Ministry of Health advice Making Healthier Food Choices.

Results

Children's understanding of nutrition

Children in the study clearly understood the difference between unhealthy and healthy foods and beverages and readily provided examples when asked. This suggests that the children had the nutrition knowledge to understand the difference between advertising for healthy and unhealthy food. Typical identified unhealthy foods or beverages were: takeaways/fast-foods (burgers, pizza), fries, chocolate, lollies, fizzy drinks and energy drinks. Specific brands were also named, such as McDonald's, Coke and Sprite. Healthy foods included fruit and vegetables, specific foods (eg, apples, broccoli), 'anything green', 'seafood', some meats, nuts, eggs, milk, water and fruit juice.

Where children see or hear food advertising

Unprompted, most children identified television as a medium where they saw food marketing. Generally, children needed prompting with a list of other possible places where they might see food marketing and often took some time to recall where they had seen it. Once prompted, most reported seeing food marketing in some or all of the places about which they were asked. These included at home, at school, at sports venues, while in the car or outdoors in public places, in shops and supermarkets, on the internet, on billboards and signs and, less often, in newspapers and magazines, and on the radio.

Understanding the purpose of marketing

All children recognised that the purpose of food marketing was to encourage them to buy the product, and many were clear that this was so that food companies could make money.

Knowledge of marketing tactics

Children identified a range of persuasive marketing tactics, largely when prompted.

Fun

Unprompted, many children remembered advertising because it was fun: “they try and make it [the ad] funny”.

Catchy songs or slogans

Some children recalled catchy songs and slogans as getting ‘in their head’.

Imagery

A number of children identified appealing, and often misleading, food imagery, and found promotional images poor representations of the actual product.

“Just say if you go to McDonald's, and on the ... when you go through the drive-through, it's kind of like a fake, because none of the actual products look like that. Like their burgers, like, squash down a bit more.”

Other children remembered seeing appealing scenes in advertisements, “about people jumping into water and letting their Coke bottles go”.

Free toys

Many children also recalled the use of free toys as a promotional technique, particularly McDonald's toys.

“Like when I was younger, McDonald’s were promoting their Happy Meals and their toys. Now I don’t really want to have a meal, and I get the large combo. No, they used to get my attention because it was toys. Ooh, toy, toy, toy! Even if I didn’t get a Happy Meal I’ll say, ‘Here Mum, can you get me a toy?’”

Competitions

Some children recalled competitions for game consoles, football games, kayaks and trips to Disneyland. As one child said it “makes people want to buy it so they’ll be in to win something ... get heaps of them and then be in to win a trip to like Disneyland or something”.

ARTICLE
Price

Many children reported noticing appeals to price, such as low price, buy one get one free or half-price specials.

Health and nutrition claims

When prompted, most children could not recall seeing health or nutrition claims in food advertisements, although a few children did comment.

“Oh yes. On TV I tend to see it ... the average 12-year-old doesn’t get the amount of calcium they need. So come and drink Milo, and you’ll get it.”

“Like the Nutri-grain ads, that like the ads tell you that if you eat this, after a while you’ll be like a pro athlete or something.”

“Well, not a lot of people like just go to the back [of the pack] and look at the chart [the Nutrition Information Panel].”

Sports sponsorship

Several children mentioned the use of sports heroes or national teams in association with food marketing.

“Powerade [sports drink]. It’s got the All Black [New Zealand national rugby team] people. It shows them playing, and then they say like it boosts your energy level or something.”

“A bunch of All Blacks [play rugby] ... and at the end they all sit down to have a burger or something. And yeah, it’s like oh well they’re eating it, like it must be okay then. Like by using celebrities ... to entice customers to thinking, ‘Yeah it’s okay. You have to let us have it.’”

Credibility of marketing messages

When asked if they believed the messages in food marketing all but one child responded “sometimes”, or gave very similar responses such as:

“Not always ... because sometimes they’ll say it’s healthy, and it’s not.”

“No, like they’re over-exaggerate, and they’re not telling the truth most of the time.”

Only one child responded ‘yes’.

“Well I like to eat like McDonald’s, because I find it yum. But it’s also pretty fattening. But I don’t know, I just get the temptation of eating, and feeling hungry whenever I see those ads.”

A number also noted that they were ‘bored’ by the advertisements, and several noted that they were annoyed by them: “sometimes they annoy me, because I’m hungry. And then I want them”. A few children felt that they could just ignore the advertisements.

On being asked whether they talked with their friends about advertisements that they had seen, only some children recalled that they did so if they were ‘eye-catching’, ‘funny’ or for ‘new products’. “Yeah, like chocolate, when new chocolate comes out. They’re like, ‘Oh I’ve tried it’.”

Food purchasing behaviours

On being asked what food and drinks they bought when they have money to buy food, the majority of children reported buying predominantly unhealthy food and snacks such as chocolate, confectionary, fizzy drinks and chippies.

“Like if you had a dollar you wouldn’t buy an apple or anything. You’d buy sweets or lollies. You just think about taste before you think about health.”

Occasionally, healthy food such as sandwiches, wraps and sushi featured among the list of foods children bought. Only two children reported they seldom bought food. Some reported the influence of parents on their food purchasing behaviour.

“Sometimes I buy unhealthy things like chocolate or chips, but my mum makes me buy like tuna and crackers, so as to eat that. Yeah.”

On being asked if they bought the food they saw in advertisements most reported that they sometimes did, but several reported that they did not.

On the question of where they bought food, children typically reported buying it from the dairy [convenience store], or supermarket, with some reporting they bought their food from a service station. Some reported buying food from the school tuck shop [canteen]:

“Sometimes you can get ‘dream lunch’, which is like ... because they have like chips, and they have like ice blocks, and slushies and stuff.”

Engagement with food marketing

Many children reported that seeing advertisements for food made them feel ‘hungry’.
Parental purchasing of food
To give an indication of pester power, we inquired if children asked their parents to buy the food they saw in advertisements. Most commonly children reported no or sometimes. “No. Occasionally, if they’re in a happy mood. If you ask him, he agrees”.

Children’s views on food marketing policy options
When asked, “should junk food be advertised to children” many agreed that it should not. For example, one child noted that “I reckon it shouldn’t, because then children could get like diabetes and stuff like that”.

Children were asked “If you were Prime Minister for the day and could change anything you wanted about unhealthy food marketing, what would you change?” Nearly two-thirds of the children said that they would change something, a fifth would make no changes and the rest did not know. The most common suggestions were making food advertising truthful, providing nutrition information, removing billboards and signs, and increasing the promotion of healthy food (see Table 1).

Table 1: Children’s views on action they would take on food marketing if they were Prime Minister for a day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Truthful advertising</strong></td>
<td>I’d like take off all the false advertising and I’d like make it all true.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would actually like tell you what is actually in it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I’d tell them to tell the truth. Like not to lie about how healthy it is, and like did it actually make you lose weight? And how does it actually work?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Or maybe make rules about advertising, so they just tell you the facts … like I remember Nutri-Grain ads. They don’t actually fill you up that much. But they have all this stuff about all these people like bungy-jumping and surfing, all these extreme sports and stuff. And it’s like “Nutri-Grain energises” … because that’s not actually really true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provision of nutrition information</strong></td>
<td>Probably just how they describe it. Like if they say how yum and that it is, why don’t you say like how much like sugar or how much fat is actually in it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would make them say it was unhealthy.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’d put more information about what's in it.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I’d get rid of all the billboards and big signs that everyone’s forced to see. KFC, the Burger King and McDonald’s, I’d take all their billboards down and the advertisements. Because a lot of people see them in one day.

I’d like you know [promote] apples, or like promote water, and go down to the school and just give it out. Maybe putting more healthy ads on TV.

I’d just make sure that it was like more exciting in the healthy stuff. Like fruit and veggies more exciting. Veggies maybe not, because no way you can make your kid eat that if they don’t want it.

Stop them from advertising fizzy drinks and ice cream, because that’s what’s making kids get bigger.

I would change ones about lollies … ’cause like when a kid sees lollies, they really want it. And they’ll just keep on begging for it.

I guess I would stop some of the advertisements that are bad for children. Like junk food ones.

[Put the ads on] when children go to sleep.

I would change the law of getting the energise drinks for kids so they wouldn’t buy them, unless they had a supervisor, so like 15 or over, for the kids that aren’t supposed to be drinking it.

I’d probably make it [advertising] age-appropriate sometimes.

I’d probably keep foods as sponsors, but I would have less food ads on TV, radio and the internet. Well for me it just gets in the way, and slows down time sort of. But because it’s on so many times, you’ll see it once and twice, and then … you see it so many times it’s boring.

I’d have a little bit of the unhealthy food. But I’ll mostly put the more healthy food ads for it on TV.

Maybe putting more healthy ads on TV.

But they should promote healthy food, because they’re rugby players.

It’s like they should do cheaper prices on healthy food, because like they should get more people to be healthy and active, instead of obese and that.

Because like they should see it’s unhealthy, and then what’s healthy and good for you.

I will change the lollies, because then kids always go and grab them.

### Table 1: Children’s views on action they would take on food marketing if they were Prime Minister for a day (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remove billboards and signs</td>
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<td>Maybe putting more healthy ads on TV.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make healthy food exciting</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop promotion of specific unhealthy foods</td>
<td>Stop them from advertising fizzy drinks and ice cream, because that’s what’s making kids get bigger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would change ones about lollies … ’cause like when a kid sees lollies, they really want it. And they’ll just keep on begging for it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stop advertising</td>
<td>I guess I would stop some of the advertisements that are bad for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviewer: Like what? Like junk food ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertise when children are asleep</td>
<td>[Put the ads on] when children go to sleep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age restrictions</td>
<td>I would change the law of getting the energise drinks for kids so they wouldn’t buy them, unless they had a supervisor, so like 15 or over, for the kids that aren’t supposed to be drinking it.</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe not as much unhealthy foods being advertised on TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In sport</td>
<td>But they should promote healthy food, because they’re rugby players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think it’s not very smart to put like unhealthy things on a sport thing.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviewer: Why? Because when you do sports … you have to try and be healthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper prices</td>
<td>It’s like they should do cheaper prices on healthy food, because like they should get more people to be healthy and active, instead of obese and that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on the food labels or packaging</td>
<td>Because like they should see it’s unhealthy, and then what’s healthy and good for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information, I’d actually make it a bit more visible. Like people can see it. Because sometimes you just can’t see it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of food in the shop</td>
<td>I will change the lollies, because then kids always go and grab them.</td>
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</table>
promoting unhealthy foods, stop advertising, advertising when children are asleep, age restrictions, reducing the price of healthy food, having fewer advertisements on the internet because "you see it so many times it's boring", not using sports people to promote junk food, and moving lollies from supermarket checkout areas. Prompted responses related to the settings where unhealthy food is promoted revealed that children were most supportive of restrictions on unhealthy food marketing on television and in sports.

Discussion

This study assessed New Zealand children’s views on food marketing and found children understood marketing’s purpose, several commonly used marketing tactics and some of the subsequent impacts. All could distinguish healthy from unhealthy foods, suggesting they have the nutrition knowledge to make this distinction in the marketing they see. Children readily identified television as the key medium where they saw food marketing, but were less able to recall other media commonly used by food marketers.1 The larger Kids’Cam study, from which this sample was drawn, found that 33% of unhealthy non-screen time food marketing was in the home, 30% in public spaces and 19% at schools, and consisted largely of product packaging (64%) and signs (28%).17 The current research confirms earlier research that much food marketing in the environment is not consciously recognised, regardless of its potential impact at a more sub-conscious level.23,24 All children understood the purpose of food marketing but most believed they were still influenced by it, a finding consistent with previous research.1 This finding is also consistent with Consumer Socialization Theory, which suggests that children aged 11–16 are still developing defence mechanisms against marketing messages such as those discussed in this research.7 Defence mechanisms identified by the children include ignoring advertisements or being bored or annoyed by them.

The children were all aware of, and could recall, persuasive marketing techniques used to promote food.22 These included the use of fun, catchy songs and slogans, health information, endorsement by sports heroes, offers of free toys and appeals to novelty with new products. While the children identified some marketing tactics they thought particularly appealed to children, eg, offers of free toys, they did not distinguish marketing aimed at children from other marketing, eg, advertisements for fast food. This evidence adds weight to arguments that food advertisements not specifically targeting children can, and do, influence them. As such, policy banning unhealthy food advertising ‘aimed at children’ as occurs in countries such as Norway, Sweden and Taiwan,25 fails to provide sufficient protection. This research suggests that the focus needs to be on unhealthy food marketing ‘to which children are exposed’. The World Health Organization Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity recommendation is consistent with this finding, ie, “reduce [ing] the exposure of children and adolescents to, and the power of, the marketing of unhealthy foods”.9

On the matter of credibility of the food marketing messages, children questioned the truthfulness of some messages, as did children in previous studies. Mehta et al12 reported that children were sceptical of the truthfulness of food advertising, citing the exaggerated positive imagery and exclusion of nutritional information or information about the negative health effects of consuming the product.

On the issue of engagement with food marketing, many children noted that food marketing made them feel hungry and want the advertised food, a finding that confirms previous research.12,26 Further, the majority of children reported buying predominantly unhealthy food and snacks such as chocolate, confectionary, fizzy drinks and chips, consistent with the findings from Kids’Cam about the products children were most exposed to,17 and inconsistent with recommendations by the World Health Organization.27 Children in this study knew the marketed foods were unhealthy, but the advertising made them feel hungry and led them to desire the foods, which most reported going on to buy. Due to the lack of substantive reform in the New Zealand voluntary ASA Code14 and the failure of industry-controlled, voluntary Codes to effectively protect children from unhealthy food advertising globally,28 it seems likely
the current code will do little more than the previous one to protect New Zealand children from these harms.

Many children agreed that junk food should not be marketed to children. The majority would change something about unhealthy food marketing if they were Prime Minister for a day and many identified specific actions needed to reduce the impact of junk food advertising. These included making food marketing honest, providing accurate nutrition information for products advertised, removing billboards and signs advertising unhealthy foods, increasing the promotion of healthy food and restricting marketing particularly on television and in sport.

Like Mehta et al.,12 we found that children were capable of reflecting on the broader social dimensions of advertising. However, we go beyond Mehta et al by asking children about how they would act, if they had the opportunity. Children proved to be very capable of reflecting on their world and how it could be better constructed for their health. It is interesting to note that many of their responses aligned with the implementation plan to end childhood obesity recently endorsed by WHA.2 This finding demonstrates that children are capable of suggesting plausible solutions to address issues that concern them and supports their inclusion in the decision-making process, as is their right.11

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to explore children’s views on food marketing through all media and in all settings. It is also one of the first to explore their views on appropriate health promotion actions to reduce harm to children from food marketing. Too often children’s worlds are constructed by adults without consideration of children’s lived reality. This research demonstrates the value of seeking children’s views about their world and how to improve it, as required by UNCRC.11

While a qualitative study of New Zealand children aged 11–13, the results are from a purposeful sample which included participants who varied by school decile, ethnicity and gender. Given the particular vulnerability of children to marketing until late adolescence,7 these findings may have relevance to a wider age range of children. Due to the global nature of food marketing, these findings may be relevant in similar jurisdictions.

Children in this study were knowledgeable about food marketing, although most were not aware of the extent to which they were exposed. Nor did they distinguish ‘marketing to children’ from other marketing, which suggests the distinction between marketing to children and general marketing is irrelevant to them. According to the children themselves, the food marketing they saw often prompted them to purchase food they knew to be harmful to their health, against their better judgement. Given this is the case, such advertisements result in physical, mental and moral harm to the children, in direct contradiction of the New Zealand ASA Code15 and of UNCRC.11 Most children in the study recognised these harms and would take action to reduce junk food marketing if they had the opportunity to do so. In line with the views of children, and the wisdom of the WHA,9 regulatory action by governments to ban junk food marketing to which children are exposed is urgently needed. Such policy, as part of a comprehensive health promotion strategy as agreed by the WHA,9 would likely make an important contribution to children’s diets and to ending childhood obesity.
Competing interests:
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