“IT’S JUST THERE TO TRICK YOU”

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF 11-19 YEAR OLDS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD AND DRINK MARKETING
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Obesity is the biggest preventable risk factor for cancer after smoking and is associated with around 18,100 cancer cases a year in the UK (about 5% of all cancer cases)\(^1\). Overweight and obesity is related to thirteen types of cancers\(^2\), with the largest number of weight-linked cases in the UK being breast, bowel and womb\(^1\). Furthermore, modelling studies estimate that if current trends of overweight and obesity continued, it would lead to a further 670,000 cancer cases by 2035 \(^3\). The cost of this rise in obesity to the NHS would be an additional £2.5 billion/year.

Youth obesity constitutes a specific problem. Incidence has plateaued at an alarmingly high level, with Public Health England’s most recent National Child Measurement Programme trends analysis showing that around one third of 11 year olds are obese\(^4\). An obese child is five times more likely to become an obese adult \(^5\), increasing their health and cancer risks and causing psychological\(^6\) harm in the short term. No single factor explains the increase in levels of obesity, but research points to factors as diverse as genetics, exercise and increasing food consumption \(^7\)\(^-\)\(^11\). However, factors which increase food consumption have been shown to have the largest impact \(^7\)\(^,\)\(^12\)\(^,\)\(^13\).

The evidence base is clear that television marketing exposure increases food consumption and weight \(^14\)\(^-\)\(^17\). In answer to this evidence, regulations were introduced in the UK in 2008 preventing junk food marketing on programmes designed for children. Yet, it is uncertain whether these decade-old regulations are sufficient to reduce child and adolescent marketing exposure to acceptable levels. Particularly, changes in viewing habits might lead to problems. A substantial amount of young people’s TV consumption now comes in evenings and weekends – and often peaks between 7:00-8pm\(^18\). The shows at these times – such as soaps, entertainment and reality TV – generally escape junk food marketing regulations. Research is needed to assess whether current regulations are genuinely sufficient or if further protections are needed.

This report, based on eight focus groups of forty-one British 11-19 year olds, helps fill that research gap. It is one of the first Britain-wide qualitative explorations of the link between junk food marketing and food/drink choices in the context of current UK regulations, and will provide new evidence for policy.
**FINDINGS**

**YOUNG PEOPLE ARE INFLUENCED IN A VARIETY OF WAYS**

A wide range of factors underpinned participants’ perceptions of what motivated their food/drink choices. Television (TV) advertising was most frequently mentioned, alongside non-broadcast (e.g. bus stop adverts) and social media.

Less traditional forms of marketing were also discussed. Price, promotions and deals (from lunch ‘meals deals’ to very specific descriptions of favourite promotional deals) were influential in purchasing decisions. Equally, the colourful, youthful, and/or bright designs of many high fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) products seemed better tailored to this demographic – especially when compared to often “dull” healthy choices.

**TV MARKETING IS PARTICULARLY INFLUENTIAL**

TV Marketing had particular impact. Even those young people who said they watched very little TV or actively avoided marketing could name a favourite junk food TV advert. They worked through a variety of persuasive techniques, including catchy slogans and jingles, celebrity endorsements or by specifically referencing youth culture:

“...their advertising is on point... Every time someone says, 'it gives you wings' you think

of [energy drink]...”

The appeal of junk foods adverts subsequently increased brand knowledge, recall and recognition, and consumption. At times, there were even detailed descriptions by participants of how marketing influenced them to consume food/drink they would not have otherwise:

“I think that new [Name of fast-food restaurant] advert where the alternative girl with the bright blue hair is making the wrap... So if a young person sees it on the telly they’re gonna know that young people are gonna go and get it just to see if they see the girl...”

**YOUNG PEOPLE DISLIKE “DISHONEST” JUNK FOOD MARKETING, BUT ARE STILL VULNERABLE TO IT**

There was a concern in some focus groups that marketing targeted younger people, who might lack the skills to distinguish advert from reality:

“Like when I was little they used to do the [Name of biscuits] advert and puppies coming out of the packet and I used to believe that when I was little!”

However, most participants showed a surprising level of media literacy, identifying a number of ways marketing worked to persuade them to buy. This often led to negative perceptions of junk food marketing:

“[soft drink]! ... it's just trying to catch your eye, stick in your head, and it gives you nothing about, like, the nutritional value, whether you're actually making a good choice. It's just there to trick you.”

Yet there was no evidence that these negative perceptions diminished junk food marketing’s appeal. This shows even older and more media aware participants were vulnerable to junk food marketing – and that it has a much larger impact than previously thought.
**POLICY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

Young people were exposed to a significant quantity of junk food marketing, and described it as an influence on their perceptions and choices. TV marketing was the most important medium and was discussed the most frequently, in the most detail. Participants worried that this exposure would impact younger, less media aware children. However, our analysis also shows marketing impacted the choices and perceptions of older, more media aware participants. Even though they realised the tactics marketing used, and felt negatively about it, they were nonetheless highly vulnerable to its targeted ‘persuasive intent’. This higher than expected impact of junk food marketing makes a case for wider, more inclusive protections for children and adolescents in the UK.

This evidence further supports the case for restrictions on junk food marketing. Given Ofcom’s figures suggest family viewing shows are currently a major source of exposure for this demographic, these should focus on ‘family viewing’ shows – particularly those broadcast before 9pm. This would put the strongest regulation on the shows young people watch the most - including soaps, talent shows and family entertainment, which are generally unregulated.

This would be a proportional response. It would align marketing regulations with their stated purpose of dropping young people’s exposure to junk food marketing to acceptable levels. It could be achieved without legislation – for example, via the Broadcasting Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) and Ofcom. Whilst this is not sufficient to tackle childhood obesity entirely by itself, it is the most pragmatic and sustainable next step, offering policy makers a way to positively impact the increasing rates seen in the UK.
REFERENCES