

Role of food marketing in childhood obesity

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ABSTRACT: Childhood Obesity has come across as one of the rampant health concern in United States. The causes engendering to childhood obesity are multifactorial but food companies are often criticized. Particular attention has been focused on the aggressive food marketing stunts adopted to lure children. Comprehending these marketing strategies is of major importance in combating this problem. Employing a comprehensive literature review on marketing food to children and their impacts create the crux of this article. The tactics embraced by companies include advertisements through Television, Internet and Advergaming, In-school marketing; these strategies influence children's dietary consumption, eating preferences and purchase requests. A lot of emphasis needs to be given on self-regulations, policy implications and government intervention to demonstrate stealth advertising and promote healthy lifestyle amongst children. Although a large body of research advocates the direct connection between food advertising to children and obesity but nothing has been grounded so far.

KEYWORDS: Obesity, Television, In-school marketing, Internet, Advergaming, Policies and Self-Regulations.

1 INTRODUCTION

A remarkable rise of obesity in children in United States has emerged as a serious concern to the public and the policy makers. Children being the vulnerable crowd are primarily targeted by food companies as they lack cognitive ability and the experience to comprehend and process the marketing messages triggered by companies [1]. In attempting to analyze the possible reasons behind nurturing this beast such as genetic disorders, lot of energy intake and utilizing food with carbohydrates, medications for thyroid, diabetic treatments psychotropic medications, sedentary behavior due to technology and less physical activity [2]. A lot has been argued over marketing and advertising done by food companies.

This paper provide the baseline to examine some key methods employed and what regulations need to be applied to regulate obese pattern in children. While the food constitutes dominantly on what is marketed to children, food marketing involves multitudinous marketing messages including advertising by toys, character licensing, promotion through clothing, programs on television, movies, internet, video games and other consumer goods [3]. While television grabs the attention when advertising products to children, but several other marketing communications have been incorporated like product placement, brand licensing, sales ,coupons, promotion, in school marketing, internet online marketing [4].

Comprehending these marketing stunts is of major importance in combating this problem. A large body of research has been conducted to prove the interdependence between food marketing and childhood obesity but has been a challenging and ongoing work. Still this relationship is important to investigate and is dependent on what is being marketed to children [1]. The research conducted by National academics Panel by Congress to delve about the impact of advertising in encouraging obesity in children concluded that children's food preferences, requests and short term eating patterns are influenced by television food advertisements [5].

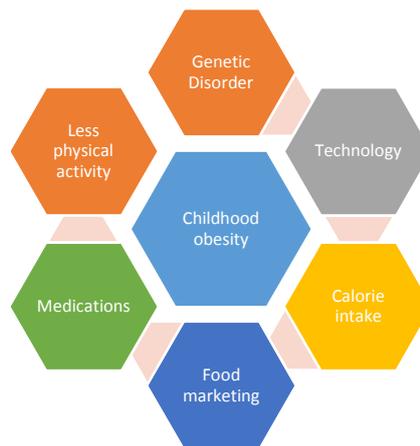


Fig. 1. Contributing factors of obesity in children

Fig. 1 shows the Contributing factors of childhood obesity.

1.1 RESEARCH METHOD

The main point of research was to establish the relation between food marketing and obesity in children and provide an assessment. Employing a comprehensive literature review on marketing food to children and their impacts create the crux of this article. Using the grounded theory, a framework was designed and evaluated. With new regulations coming into existence and advancements in digital technology, many studies suggest that there is a possibility of direct link between food marketing and childhood obesity. A new model was prepared to illuminate the innovations in marketing, their implications and policy regulations.

The research employed to create this paper was limited to the review and meta-analysis of literature found on the related subject. No empirical data was used to justify the findings. The research was specifically target to highlight the three methods of marketing.

2 FOOD MARKETING STRATEGIES

Out of all the factors, child targeted marketing has gained a lot of criticism due to its implication on children’s overweight and obesity. Though not much has been researched and proved particularly in non-experimental settings about the interdependence between obesity and food marketing but we need to consider it as one of the furnishing factors which has been designed to lure the most vulnerable lot i.e. children influencing their short term and long term eating pattern, encouraging the sedentary behaviors. Maelstrom of strategies are designed and adopted by food companies to coax children. This study focuses on few of the tactics which influence preteens and children and also revisits the policy implications and regulations.

Food marketing plays a major role in affecting children’s preferences, short and long-term dietary consumption, purchase requests and also the exposure to the advertisements affect the products choices [6]. The relationship between the two is not yet proven but it cannot be denied that food marketing does affect the weight of children leading them to obesity. The buying behavior, predilection for a product, short and long term dietary consumption are influenced by the food marketing tactics and the advertisements telecasted on television. The food preferences are influenced by publicizing practices including food availability, variety, value and convenience adaptation to the local environment, emerging fast food culture being and ultimately leading to overweight and obesity [7].

2.1 TELEVISION

Television viewing has often treated as a culprit of correlation between food marketing and childhood obesity. As in [8], author explains about the sedentary behavior in children is due to watching television which is a replacement to physical activity. Television viewing has been a contributor to mindless eating and advertisement of nutrient deficient and high calorie food induces food intake.

An experimental research was done to determine if the amount eaten of two familiar, palatable, high-density foods (pizza and macaroni and cheese) was increased during a 30-min meal when watching TV which proved stationary inactive behavior of children [9]. Viewing television has the correlation with in between snacking meal, consumption of advertised food, and influencing mothers for food purchases [10]. A growing body of research speculate that advertisements telecasted has great impact on eating habits of children as well adolescents. Promotion of unhealthy food is depicted to result in the positive outcome even when consuming nutrient poor and unhealthy food [11].

A cross-sectional study was done to evaluate the type of food, nutritional quality and marketing tactics and messages send to advertise on Saturday morning on children television program. From the study it was concluded that almost there were almost 281 food advertisements out of 572 total features telecasted. The study inferred that 49% of advertisements were for food out of 27.5 hours of total programming [12]. The research so far predicts that television is the main contributor in obesity but other factors need to be considered like exposure time, type of food promoted and advertisement telecasted time.

A preliminary study was accomplished to examine the lean, over weight and obese children's ability to process different food and non-food adverts. The study was repeated and the results were measured after both sessions. It was observed that obese and lean children respond similar to non-food adverts but there was a difference in response to food advertisement [13].

2.2 INTERNET AND ADVERTGAMING

Poor food choices lead to gain in weight and thus to obesity. When other food marketing tactics have been criticized for increasing obesity, a lot of weightage has been given to online marketing stunts. Food companies are dependent on various strategies to promote their products. Internet is an emerging tool to which has covered all the domains in today's world. Internet and online marketing has become a common tool to promote food products to children. Food companies target children by attractive ways to advertise their products on websites.

One of such method to advertise is "Advergaming" or "Advertainment". Advergaming was first conceived by Tony Giallourakis in January 2000. It can be defined as the interactive technique or games which engages advertisement of product as the part of game [14, 15]. The very first advergaming was distributed on computer floppy disks which was given free after a purchase. This kind of free distribution encourage the sales and purchase and also induced the brand recognition [16]. A systematic content analysis was done to analyze food and beverage brand websites and the marketing techniques involved on these websites. The results concluded that almost 63% of websites contained advergaming. More than half of the websites used cartoon characters (50%) or spokescharacters (55%) and a direct link to specially designed area for children (58%) was present on homepage [15].

Food companies endorse a branded environment through online media. These electronic advertisements or infomercials offer different entertainment, animation for children. These websites have games, puzzles, contests, quizzes and riddles music sweepstakes, commercial clips, screensavers that publicize products. Through these websites, children receive newsletter about the latest products and sales or promotions [17]. Internet and online marketing has become a common media to advertise food products to children. It has also been discussed that that youth are not escaped from such marketing strategies Food industry use lucrative styles on children's website like advergaming, online cartoon characters etc. on the homepage. Although the correlation between internet & advergaming and child obesity is not been proven yet but responsible marketing techniques and nutritional professionals need to promote healthy food items to children [15, 18]. As in [19], author described that for a food to fall under "health food" advergaming brands need to meet the health nutrition criteria for a product advertised and if some products were not healthy in a brand promoted then they needs to be classified as both "healthy as well as unhealthy food".

The research shows that childhood obesity has one of its pillars standing on internet thought not yet decided about this relation but it definitely influences sedentary behavior in children and impact their food preferences. The techniques need to be carefully analyzed and some restriction needs to be imposed on visiting these websites. . A policy analysis and review of online marketing practices is required from the end of public health officials, policy makers, consumer advocates and industry groups [20].

2.3 IN SCHOOL MARKETING

Use of public schools have been most prevalent by food companies to promote their products. By allowing food and soda companies to flood their products in schools are not only undermining their efforts to mentor students about healthy eating

but also are helping to increase childhood obesity [21]. In school marketing has been a contributing strand in promoting unhealthy and nutrition deficient food and thus to overweight and obesity in children. Various type of advertising strategies had been incorporated to attract children but government needs to consider some regulations to enhance the healthy lunch meals and encourage dietary intake.

School is one of the probable markets for food advertisers to market their products and is linked to prevalent childhood obesity [22]. There have been research to prove the fact about the school food environment might have an impact on food choices on youth as well because 35-40% of youth's energy is consumed at schools [23]. Food and beverage promotion activities in school can be broadly classified into three categories 1) Direct Advertising 2) Indirect advertising and 3) Product Sales Marketing. Direct advertising uses brand name, logo on a sign or banner to attract children. Indirect advertising promote a food product using brand names with educational programs, corporate sponsorship, food-based reward or incentive programs, scholarships, and textbooks. Lastly product advertising involves promoting a product by fancy packaging labels [24].

Food teaching materials and contests in schools incorporates sponsors of food products and brands. The marketers distributes the products directly or advertise on book covers with a motive of providing school equipment in return of product labels and introduce the educational classroom materials with the help of nutrition professionals [25]. There has been efforts to improve the regulations regarding the marketing of food products in school. Promoting low standard and nutrition deficient and poor food have weakened the efforts of government which is moving ahead to improve the healthy and dietary intake of children [26].

We know that children and youth spend lot of time in schools and thus marketers are considering schools as their possible markets to advertise their food brands. Therefore, it requires lot of observation and investigation to formulate strategies to control the unhealthy food publicity and prevent childhood obesity.

2.4 REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

Child targeted marketing has become ubiquitous these days; such that it requires lot of investigation and redesigning to control obesity and overweight in children. The research has been done involving government regulations, self-regulations and parental awareness for food marketing techniques to control obesity in children.

Self-regulation gives freedom to food and soda companies working with huge budgets that they tend to challenge parental influence on children. The companies with the help of nutrition professionals and psychologists exploit children cognitive ability [27].

One of the remedy to control obesity is reducing the exposure of television advertisements promoting unhealthy food can be one of the possible remedies of childhood obesity. WHO has formulated set of regulations and recommendations for the member states to follow while creating the policies for promotion of food high in saturated fats, trans-fat, free sugars or salt being targeted to children [28]. Regulations regarding nutrition disclosure needs to be added in advertisements so that parents and children can discuss how much particular food needs to be consumed and under what situation while they are watching the television together [1].

Government intervention gets necessary in three situations –1) marketers do not provide full information about the food so government needs to declare or intervene that all market will provide all necessary nutrition information which consumers might need 2) People are bearing the rising cost of obesity beast, so government needs to design policies to lower cost to taxpayers 3) as children do not fall under category of rational customers (being vulnerable and lacking cognitive ability) which can identify and evaluate the future consequences so government needs to step up to formulate strategies to help children make healthy choices [29].

Some policies are designed for controlled internet marketing methods. There are three different type of safeguards help children to analyze about the web content. First is warning safeguard which warns children that the web content is not appropriate for them or mentions that this particular website will be available for certain age (e.g., age 13 and over to comply with COPPA guidelines) and after a particular age, these website require registration. Second is Threat safeguards which warns children about the registration been informed to parents, teachers and other authoritative figures. Last is a prohibitive Barrier safeguard which requires parental approval for access [30].

There has been increasing evidence food and beverage advertising impacting children food choices and intake; which requires several national governments and food and beverage industry to stop marketing to children and advertise only “better for you” products [31]. Food companies and government need to blend together to design a good system to battle

childhood obesity. In reality if no such regulation will be there, companies will take undue advantage of self-regulations as their power.

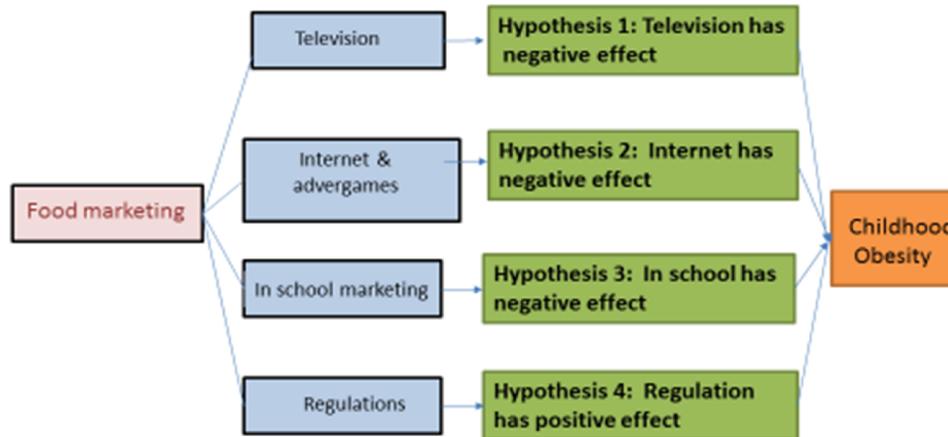


Fig. 2. Food marketing strategies and policy

Fig. 2 shows the positive and negative impact of different food marketing tactics on children and what role does regulations play in combating childhood obesity. Television and internet encourages sedentary behavior and marketing in school is done for nutrient deficient food and promotions through books, thus methods have negative impact on obesity so regulations need to be introduced to control these tactics.

3 CONCLUSION

The proliferation of childhood obesity has grabbed lot of attention of policy makers, parents and food companies as well. Amongst other factors contributing to obesity in children; role of food marketing is frequently talked about. Wide spread marketing of non- nutritious food and beverages on almost every media like television, internet and school expose children to unhealthy food.

In this article, I have tried to establish correlation between food marketing strategies and obesity. Nothing so far has been grounded to prove this relation; still more research is required to examine whether the advertising and marketing of food is really a causal factor in increasing weight and sedentary behavior in children. Epidemiological and experimental research including longitudinal framework is required to prove this interdependence. The research needs to be done to investigate all channels of marketing targeted to children including television, internet, advergaming and schools. Also, some study needs to be done to analyze the impact of advertising on children of different age group, ethnicity and origin. By examining international studies and drawing a comparative data can help to shed some light on the role food advertising plays in obesity.

Even though the relationship is not yet determined, but marketing strategies cannot be left unattended and thus policies need to be well thought to reassure that marketing of food is aimed to encourage children for healthy diet rather than nutrition deficient diet. Both companies and government need to design a system of regulations where children are well protected from the marketing stunts of food companies who just target children for their financial benefit. Healthy children and healthy youth ensures healthy and flourishing future of society and country.

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