



Online marketing communications and childhood's intention to consume unhealthy food



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 January 2016

Revised 29 January 2016

Accepted 31 January 2016

Available online 2 March 2016

Keywords:

Children

Marketing communications

Intention to consume unhealthy food

Health issues

Australia

Social network site

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of online advertising on social network sites on children's intention to consume fast food in Australia. The study adopted a qualitative, inductive approach to data collection using a sample of 30 Australian children who use social network sites and their parents. It was found that fast food advertisements on social networking sites could manipulate the young audience members in terms of their purchasing likelihood, views on fast food, and eating habits. The results from the interviews also indicated that peer pressure is an important element of online communications on social networking sites. By showing their advertisements to a group of young consumers, companies can create a sense of socialization and associate their product with a community. This study is one of the first to consider broad aspects of children's perception of marketing communications on social networking sites in the context of the fast food industry.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

本研究调查了澳大利亚在线社交网站的广告对儿童摄取快餐意愿的影响。研究对数据收集采取了定性归纳法，采样样本为30名使用社交网站的澳大利亚儿童及他们的父母。研究发现，社交网站上的快餐广告能够操纵年幼受众对快餐及饮食习惯的购买可能性及观念。访谈结果显示，同伴压力也是在社交网站上在线交流的一个重要要素。快餐公司通过向年幼的消费者放映其广告，创造了一种社交感，并将其产品与一个群体联系起来。本研究在其领域中最先考虑到儿童在快餐行业的背景下对社交网站市场营销交流所持有的多方面观点。

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1. Introduction

Using social networking sites has become a popular activity among children in this digital age (Fernández, 2011). These sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, allow social interaction and create a sense of community. They act as a portal for entertainment and communication and have developed significantly over the past few years (Fernández, 2011). Research demonstrates that health-related behaviors are formed and controlled by a variety of social and community environments; likewise, the manner in which individuals belong to broader social networks and communities has a significant impact on their health and well-being (Morrow, 1999). In this digital age, social media play an important part in everyone's life, and children are no exception. It is believed that traditional media, such as television, can be blamed for reductions in physical activity and escalations in sedentary behavior, which lead to a wide range of health effects (Marshall et al., 2004). Furthermore,

social networking sites present a new opportunity for companies to target children. A review of online marketing to children in the United States reveals that fast-food restaurants allocated 19% of all their online advertising on Facebook in 2012 (Clarke and Svanaes, 2014). Big brands such as Starbucks, McDonald's, Pepsi and Subway had a substantial presence on social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with millions of followers and 'likes' (Harris et al., 2013). Brands use various engagement tactics such as using celebrity images or videos, doing polls or quizzes, hosting competitions, or providing discounts and vouchers in order to facilitate the interactions between the users and the brands (Clarke and Svanaes, 2014). One of the most popular techniques is to depict complimentary toys or premium with a children's meal or special discount voucher that could be used when purchasing the product in the advertisements. However, an understanding of the effects of marketing communications in social networking sites on children is lacking.

On the other hand, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Australians has been growing progressively for the past 30 years (NHMRC, 2014). Between 2011 and 2012, around 60% of Australian adults were classified as overweight, and more than 25% of

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these fell into the obese category (NHMRC, 2014). In 2013, over 12 million or three out of five Australian adults were overweight or obese (AIHW, 2014). Furthermore, one in four Australian children were overweight or obese (AIHW, 2014). Besides, overweight and obesity are only beaten by smoking and high blood pressure as contributors to the burden of diseases (AIHW, 2014).

Recent research suggests that obesity can be escalated across social networks, highlighting the role of social networks and social media regarding obesity of children (Bahr et al., 2009; Christakis and Fowler, 2007). Previous research concentrated predominantly on advertisements in children's web page design, and advergames as a form of advertising have been given the most attention by researchers (Clarke and Svanaes, 2014). This is partly because of the popularity of online games among children, which is considered an advantage for advergames to become an extremely effective and affordable advertising method (An and Kang, 2014; An and Stern, 2011; Dias and Agante, 2011). Notwithstanding, scant research has been done on the new forms of data-driven advertising, especially social networking sites. There is little evidence on how young consumers respond to fast food ads on social networking sites, which are supposed to be their private space. In addition, as children are considered digital natives and more digital literate than most adults (Clarke and Svanaes, 2014), it is important to investigate to what extent children are vulnerable to advertising influence. Therefore, this study endeavors to investigate the child's perception of online advertising in social networking sites and the impact on his/her intention to consume unhealthy food in the Australian setting, which can be associated with the issue of obesity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online food marketing to children

Marketing communications, especially advertising, aim to deliver a specific message to the target audience through various platforms (i.e. online and offline). Communications are most effective when targeting certain behavior rather than behavioral classifications or objectives (Fishbein, 2000). They can be used to enhance awareness through greater exposure (Chen and Green, 2009). Advertising can also endorse certain behaviors and at the same time diminish the strength of the attitudes or perceived norms that lead to the opposite behaviors or reinforce the existing beliefs and attitudes related to the targeted behaviors, so that their roles are highlighted in determining intentions and actual action (Agha, 2003; Fishbein and Cappella, 2006).

As one of the important elements of the marketing mix, online advertising plays a significant role in companies' communications with their target market (Belch et al., 1985). Advertising can strengthen a behavior, as desired by the company, and at the same time reduce the strength of the attitudes or perceived norms that result in unwanted behaviors (Fishbein and Cappella, 2006). Supporting this view, Verbeke et al. (1999) find that marketing communications influence attitudes, thereby have an impact on the behavior regarding fresh meat consumption in Belgium. As advertising has an impact on customer attitudes and motivates customers to repeat a certain behavior over time, it is proposed that online advertising has a positive influence on customer habits. Recent research reveals that nutritional disorders and poor eating habits among children are related to food advertising effects (Costa et al., 2012). Therefore online advertising can be considered as an important socialization agent in children's food consumption and preference, although there is scant evidence on its role and effects (Young, 2003).

While overweight and obesity are a growing global concern, more and more advertising and promotional efforts have been focused on encouraging the consumption of unhealthy food, fast food in par-

ticular (Clarke and Svanaes, 2014). In 2012, the US fast food restaurants alone spent a total of \$4.6 billion on advertising, increasing by 8% from 2009 (Fast Food Marketing, 2013). In addition, it was found that in 2013 children under six saw about three fast food advertisements every day, whereas 12 to 17 years old saw approximately five advertisements daily (Ramrayka, 2014). The majority of food brands advertising to children on television is also promoted on the Internet through their corporate websites, popular children's websites (e.g., nick.com, neopets.com), ads placed in existing video and especially social networking sites (e.g. banners, sponsored stories). A report on food marketing to children and teens from the Federal Trade Commission reveals that "[f]ood marketers had their own Facebook and MySpace pages, links to Twitter accounts, dedicated portions of YouTube, and used other popular social media sites" (Common Sense Media, 2014, p. 12). For example, children and young users aged 13–24 are most likely to like four pages: Domino's Pizza Australia, Pringles, McDonalds Australia and Cadbury Eyebrows (Dunlevy, 2014). Most of them are professionally managed and appear to be part of an overall marketing strategy. On the other hand, food advertising is one of the main factors behind children's increasing energy consumption, which is a more important contributor to increasing overweight and obesity than decreasing physical exercise levels in Australia (MacKay et al., 2011). Hence, this research is devoted to investigating the role of advertising in promoting an unhealthy lifestyle.

Furthermore, recent research demonstrates that children are bombarded with a large number of marketing messages on social networking sites in the forms of banner ads or sponsored messages in news feed (O'Keefe and Clarke-Peatson, 2011; Dietz, 2013). Researchers raise a concern on the link between youth-oriented brands and a strong presence on social networking sites (Rideout, 2014). Fast food companies have used many tactics to engage young audience on their websites, including images, videos, giveaway vouchers and toys. This engagement strategy attempts to touch on the concepts of fun and novelty, which most likely appeal to young kids (Franchin et al., 2012). For example, young consumers are encouraged to "like" companies' Facebook page or sign up for their Twitter feeds, usually in exchange for premiums such as toys or discounts (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). In fact, food marketing to children featuring toys is prevalent, making up 70 percent of fast-food ads targeted at children (Otten, 2014). On Facebook, young users' activities, for instance liking a page or posting a comment, may show in news feed of their Facebook friends' sites as endorsements or sponsored stories (Goel, 2013). In fact, online food marketing to children is more sophisticated and complex because it is often harder to detect the borderlines between content and pure advertising on the Internet than traditional media such as television (American Psychological Association, 2013). Despite the increase in concerns, little research has been done in the area of advertising to children on social networking sites, including advertising effects and children's exposure, awareness, and understanding (Rideout, 2014). The majority of extant research investigating children's use of social networking sites has mainly concentrated on privacy, social interactions and cyberbullying (Boyd, 2014; Lenhart, 2012; Livingstone, 2008; Valkenburg and Peter, 2007).

2.2. Peer influence and habit formation

Several studies underline the importance of peer influence on habit formation, especially during adolescence, when there is usually a shift from home influence to group motivation (Eisenberg et al., 2005). In line with this thinking, a research by Valente et al. (2009) indicates that overweight adolescents were more likely to have overweight friends than their normal weight peers. The term "peers" is defined as a "group of members who know each other, share mutual knowledge and life experience, and serve as a comparison

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