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Food as people: Teenagers' perspectives on food personalities and implications for healthy eating



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ABSTRACT

In light of its influence on food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns, food marketing—particularly for unhealthy foods—has been increasingly recognized as a problem that affects the health of young people. This has prompted both a scrutiny of the nutritional quality of food products and various interventions to promote healthy eating. Frequently overlooked by the public health community, however, is the symbolic and social meaning of food for teenagers. Food has nutritive value, but it has symbolic value as well—and this qualitative study explores the meaning of non-branded foods for teenagers. Inspired by the construct of brand personality, we conduct focus groups with 12–14 year olds in to probe their perspectives on the “food personalities” of unbranded/commodity products and categories of food. Despite the lack of targeted marketing/promotional campaigns for the foods discussed, the focus groups found a remarkable consensus regarding the characteristics and qualities of foods for young people. Teenagers stigmatize particular foods (such as broccoli) and valorize others (such as junk food), although their discussions equally reveal the need to consider questions beyond that of social positioning/social status. We suggest that public health initiatives need to focus greater attention on the symbolic aspects of food, since a focus on nutritional qualities does not unveil the other significant factors that may make foods appealing, or distasteful, to young people.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, food marketing has been increasingly recognized as a problem that affects the health of young people worldwide (WHO, 2010, 2013; Hawkes and Lobstein, 2011; Raine et al., 2013; Garde et al., 2012). The World Health Organization, for instance, has released a series of recommendations that seek to counter the “powerful marketing techniques” that promote foods high in sugar, fat and/or sodium to children (WHO, 2010, 2012, 2013). Such recommendations emerge from evidence that suggests that young children are cognitively unable to recognize or guard against the persuasive intent of marketing (Kunkel et al., 2004), and that unhealthy food marketing influences children's preferences, purchase requests, and consumption patterns (Kunkel et al., 2004; Cairns et al., 2009, 2013; Harris et al., 2014; Hastings et al., 2007; McGinnis et al., 2006; Persson et al., 2012; WHO, 2010, 2013). While rising rates of youth overweight/obesity has prompted intense scrutiny of the nutritional qualities of food aimed

at young people (Hastings et al., 2007; McGinnis et al., 2006; Potvin, Kent & Wanless, 2011; Elliott, 2012a, 2012b, 2008), no less significant is the relationship between food and the social and cultural aspects that might promote more positive dietary in youth (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010). Simply put, food has nutritional properties, but is also embedded in a “social matrix of meaning” which can influence consumption (Schor and Ford, 2007, p. 16). Food has symbolic value, functions as a sociocultural product (Levi-Strauss, 1962; Douglas, 1966, 1975; Coveney, 2014) and can prove central to discourses about identity—in general, and also for young people.

A growing body of literature has taken up the question of the social meaning of food for young people. Research has revealed how children identify food “for themselves” and “for others” (Elliott, 2011; Roos, 2002; James, 1998; James et al., 2009), and how particular foodstuffs (including food brands) can serve an image and social “status” function. For instance, Willis et al.'s (2009) study of British middle class teenagers reveals the importance of “belonging” and of negotiating with the peer group when making food consumption choices. Similarly, Martine Stead et al. (2011) explore how preoccupations with social status factor in British teenagers' food choices and attitudes toward foods. For the

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teenagers interviewed, consuming mainstream brand products “signaled a secure social position in the peer group” whereas consuming supermarket and no-name brands was regarded as “uncool” and “nerdy” (Stead et al., 2011, p. 1135). As such, a popular person would drink Coca Cola or Pepsi and not unbranded soda (2011, p. 1135). Roper and La Niece (2009) also found that British children (aged 7–14) evaluated food products in light of what might be popular with peers. Branded products, such as Coke, Evian, Walkers, KitKat, and Coke, were seen as “cool” and able to make their consumer more popular among peers.

Viewing branded products as cool and as capable of communicating social status has long been recognized in the field of marketing, where strategists deliberately strive to create “brand personalities” for their products. As a construct, brand personality refers to “the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands” (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003, p. 151) or more simply “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 150). Brand personality is presumed to give the brand a meaning (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003, p. 143) and is viewed as invaluable in creating brand equity (Geuens et al., 2009, p. 97). Key to the brand personality construct is the notion of *traits*—the types of terms used to describe the personality. Traits are stable and recurrent (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Moreover, brand identity (and brand personality) should be understood from the “sender side” perspective, the *desired* personality being constructed (Geuens et al., 2009). To illustrate, Aaker explains that “Absolut vodka personified tends to be described as a cool, hip, contemporary 25-year old, whereas Stoli’s personified tends to be described as an intellectual, conservative, older man” (1997, p. 347). Alternatively, when it comes to the personality traits associated with cola, Coke is regarded as “cool, all-American and real”, Pepsi is seen as “young, exciting, and hip”, and Dr. Pepper, “nonconforming, unique and fun” (1997, p. 348).

The assumption is that consumers frequently infuse brands with human personality traits, which serve a symbolic function (Aaker, 1997). Even though the brand personality concept has been assessed and refined (Geuens et al., 2009; Austin et al., 2003; Beldona and Wysong, 2007; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Johar et al., 2005), from a marketing perspective one key message is that the personality traits come to be associated with a brand due to its product endorsers (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). That is, brand personality emerges out of very deliberate messaging and advertising/promotion. However, creating a brand personality is also a dynamic process—and one not wholly controlled by the marketer. People bring in their personal, subjective meanings as well (Johar et al., 2005, p. 468).

In light of this, our study set out to connect questions pertaining to the symbolic meaning of food for teenagers with the concept of non-branded “personality” (i.e., those existing outside of brands). Specifically, we were interested in how teenagers perceived commodity products and categories of foods that *weren’t* brands and did not have sizable marketing budgets designed to create particular associations. Did teenagers attribute consistent characteristics to non-branded foods, and what might be the significance of this? While much of the public health/public policy literature is focused on how to choose *for persons* (i.e., limiting the marketing of poorly nutritious foods to young people), we were interested in how young people understand food *as persons*. Specifically we asked teenagers about food personalities (e.g., if broccoli was a person, what kind of person would broccoli be?). To reiterate, commodity products and categories of food do not generally have advertising and promotional campaigns seeking to communicate particular attributes. Our study aimed to explore teenagers’ perceptions of these foods.

2. Methods

Focus groups were used to elicit teenagers’ perspectives on food and food personalities. Focus group methodology is increasingly being recognized for its effectiveness in research related to health and nutrition (Feldman et al., 2014; Jones, 2010; Labiner-Wolfe and Lando, 2007), as well as for its ability to gain insight into young people’s attitudes (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005; Heary and Hennessy, 2002). Focus groups were also selected since they are often used by industry to gauge consumer attitudes and perceptions (Michman and Mazze, 1998, p. 184; Schade, 2007; Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003) and have specifically been used to explore “brand personality” (Geuens et al., 2009; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003, p. 143)—which was the inspiration for probing youth ideas pertaining to “food as people”. Finally, this method allowed us to unveil how group norms shape perspectives about food: focus groups are premised on the fact that people draw on a shared fund of experiences (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p.183). As such, they are ideal for identifying the norms or attitudes of a particular “community”, such as teenagers (Hennink, 2011, p. 140).

Five focus groups ($n = 6$) totaling 30 students (18 female, 12 male) were held at a Junior High School in the spring of 2013. Focus groups were segmented by grade and gender, as is recommended in research with young people (Heary and Hennessy, 2002; Greenbaum, 1988; Vaughn et al., 1996). This allows for group homogeneity (Hennink, 2011, p. 150), and creates a context where participants are more likely to be at ease (e.g., adolescent participants may be uncomfortable/shy or distracted by members of the opposite sex). Segmentation has the additional benefit of allowing researchers to determine whether issues cluster according to different types of participants. Given this, three teenage girls groups were held (grades 7, 8 and 9) and two teenage boys groups (grades 7 and 8), corresponding to an age range of 12–14 years. As per leading market research companies and health agencies, teenagers were defined as spanning ages 12 to 19 (Mediamark Research Institute, 2003; CDC, 2014).

After receiving ethics approval from both the Research Ethics Board and the participating school, a letter detailing the aims of the study was distributed to students for both student and parental consent. A trained moderator, following a semi-structured moderator’s guide, led the discussion. As this was part of a broader research study, the first section of the focus group consisted of open-ended questions related to foods and packaged foods, followed by discussion inquiring into how the participants evaluated the “health” qualities of packaged foods (i.e., what did they look for on packages). Participants also engaged in selection and sorting exercises of packaged foods (placing them into categories of healthy and less healthy) as a strategy for facilitating discussions around what they selected and why, and the kinds of packaging “facts” and symbolic appeals that influenced their decisions. Finally, the questions moved to the topic of “food as people”—which is explored in this article. The moderator opened the conversation by saying: “It is interesting to consider different food and think about the kinds of ideas they bring to mind. Let’s say broccoli was a person at a party. What kind of person would broccoli be?” This same line of questioning was raised for various foods and categories of food, including milk, eggs, meat, “junk” food and organic food.

Participants’ responses were videotaped and transcribed verbatim; field notes were also recorded by the researchers during and after each session. One benefit of videotaping is that researchers could refer back to the tapes during data analysis in order to ensure that the interaction between participants was fully captured, as well as clarifying the meaning of the participant’s responses. Following grounded theory, the lead researcher and a research assistant created a provisional list of codes from the data

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