

Research report

Television use and food choices of children: Qualitative approach

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Abstract

This study reports the results of 12 focus group interviews with primary school students (7–10 years old, $n = 57$) in Florianópolis, Brazil, regarding their food choices, television (TV) viewing, and physical activity habits. In 2005, an average Brazilian child aged 4–11 years watched TV almost 5 h per day. Intensive TV use in childhood and adolescence may contribute to sedentarism and unhealthy eating habits, and excessive viewing might have long-lasting adverse effects on health. Results indicated that frequent ingestion of snack foods was not a habit for most students, possibly because of an acknowledged parental interference, but these were the food items they bought with their own money. Daily TV viewing was reported by almost all students, especially during meals and before bedtime, but students still found the time to be physically active. Most of them mentioned going to sports classes and engaging in active play regularly. No attempts by the parents to regulate TV viewing in the household were mentioned. The habit of eating while watching TV, together with the students' behavior as primary consumers of food products, pointed to the need for strategies that will reduce TV viewing and educate the children as consumers.

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Introduction

This article examines the behavior of a group of Brazilian children regarding their food choices, television (TV) viewing, and physical activity habits.

Nowadays, children's food preferences seem to influence food selection in ways that are inconsistent with dietary guidelines (Birch, 1999). Dietary patterns that result in high intakes of fat, saturated fat, and refined carbohydrate as well as low intakes of fruit, vegetables, and complex carbohydrate are becoming increasingly common, escalating the risks of coronary heart disease, certain cancers, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity (Coon & Tucker, 2002). Excessive TV viewing during childhood and adolescence plays an important role in this matter, since it has been associated with higher intakes of energy, fat, sweet and salty snacks, and carbonated beverages as well as with lower intakes of fruit and vegetables (Coon, Goldberg, Rogers, & Tucker, 2001). One of the reasons why TV has such effect is

because food is the most frequently advertised product category on children's TV programming, and it has been established that exposure to food advertisements effectively promotes consumption of the advertised products (Halford, Gillespie, Brown, Pontin, & Dovey, 2004). TV also contributes to sedentarism, displacing more energetic activities that could help in burning the excessive calories contained in nutritionally unbalanced diets (Gortmaker et al., 1996; Hancox, Milne, & Poulton, 2004).

The average American child spends 5.5 h per day with a variety of media, mostly TV (Strasburger, 2004). In Brazil, the situation is not different. In 2005, Brazilian kids aged 4–11 years watched TV around 4 h and 52 min per day (Instituto MídiaTiva, 2006). In a study about TV programming in Brazil, Almeida, Nascimento, and Quaioti (2002) analyzed 432 h of advertising in Brazilian commercial TV during weekdays and 216 h during Saturdays; they found that foods were the most advertised category of products, especially those rich in fat and sugar.

The fact that children can be very sensitive to the effects of advertising has led to a large body of research. In Chile, the high percentage of children watching TV and the

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marked influence of commercials over their food preferences convinced researchers that an urgent educational strategy was necessary to promote healthy eating habits (Olivares, Albala, Garcia, & Jofré, 1999). In a study with Spanish students, Ruano and Pujol (1997) concluded that unhealthy dietary habits clustered in high consumers of TV. In Turkey, Arnas (2006) reported that TV advertisements affected young children's unhealthy food consumption. In the United Kingdom, Halford et al. (2004) concluded that the ability to recognize food advertisements significantly correlated with the amount of food eaten after exposure to them. In the United States, Coon et al. (2001) verified that watching TV during meals negatively affected the dietary patterns of children and their families.

As one can see, TV viewing can certainly influence the behavior of children to an extent that can cause concern. Throughout the world, children do not only influence family purchase decisions in a variety of product categories, but also have considerable amount of money to spend with their own needs, which qualifies them to be an important primary market (McNeal, 1998). It is estimated that children between the ages of 4 and 14 living in urban environments spend approximately US\$ 300 a year in their personal wants and needs. In the US alone, children spend more than US\$ 7 billion a year in food and beverage (McNeal, 2000).

Although it is likely that some aspects of children's consumer behavior are universal across cultures, local studies provide valuable opportunities to generate information about what is happening in different settings. There have been no studies about the consumer behavior of Brazilian children, or how their TV viewing habits affect their food choices.

The present pilot study, which is exploratory in nature, aimed to obtain preliminary data about this relevant and yet unknown situation in Brazil. We expected that the students from the sample, who only attend school for half periods (like virtually every student in Brazil), dedicated most of their leisure time to watching TV, and that this would negatively influence their eating habits and physical activity levels. We expected to find high consumption of snack foods, together with low intakes of fruits and vegetables, and low levels of exercise.

Methods

Study design

The study was conducted in a primary private school in Florianópolis, Brazil. The protocol was approved by the Federal University of Santa Catarina Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol # 293/05). All 141 students from the seven existing classrooms of 1st to 4th grade were invited to participate in the study, and received informed consent forms to be signed by the parents. This age group was chosen because some of the most important consumer knowledge and skills are developed during this period.

Also, starting at the age of eight, kids already have money of their own to spend, and sometimes spend it independently (John, 1999). Since this is a relatively unexplored area, we chose to apply a qualitative approach to promote idea generation via group interaction. Bringing children together to discuss an idea or concept minimizes direct inquiry and produces richer responses because the children are not only responding to the researcher, but to other members of the group as well (McNeal, 2000; Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

Participants

A total of 57 students (28 male, 29 female), aged 7–10 years (mean age: 8.9 years), returned the consent forms signed by their parents. The participants' response rate (40.4%) fairly represents the overall student population. The participants were composed of 43% of the 1st graders, 28% of 2nd graders, 38% of 3rd graders, and 49% of 4th graders. Additional data about the sample are presented in Table 1. No children had special needs. The majority of the students were white and from middle-class families living near the school. Nonparticipation in the study was due to failure in returning the signed consent forms or absenteeism on the day of the focus group interview.

Focus group interviews

The students participated in 12 focus group sessions. Participants were divided into groups on the basis of grade and gender with an average of about five students in each focus group (range of 4–6 students per group). Two focus groups were formed from 1st grade students (one with boys and one with girls, $n = 9$), two from 2nd grade students (both mixed, $n = 9$); three from 3rd grade students (two with boys and one with girls, $n = 15$) and five from 4th grade students (two with boys and three with girls, $n = 24$). The mixed groups with 2nd-graders were formed because there were not enough participants to create female or male only groups. Interviews were conducted within the school setting, during school hours, in a special room with little furniture and distraction.

Table 1
Characteristics of interview participants

	Boys ($n = 28$)	Freq. (%)	Girls ($n = 29$)	Freq. (%)	Total (n)	Freq. (%)
<i>Age/grade</i>						
7 years (1st grade)	05	9	04	7	09	16
8 years (2nd grade)	04	7	05	9	09	16
9 years (3rd grade)	10	18	05	9	15	26
10 years (4th grade)	09	15	15	26	24	42
<i>School period</i>						
Morning	13	23	06	10	19	33
Afternoon	15	26	23	40	38	67

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