Contemporary Young Consumers and Food Consumption—Implications for Social Marketing Research

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Abstract Marketing has undergone profound changes during the past 30 years with a shift from television advertising to digital marketing and development of more engaging campaigns between brands and individuals. This change has also affected young consumers (i.e. children aged less than 13 years), who attracted marketers' attention in the mid-1980s, who have ever since been marketing aggressively to this group across multiple media channels, engaging in the so-called "cradle-to-grave" marketing. Research shows that exposure to food advertising is associated with biased product evaluations extending into adulthood and the last two decades have also noted a substantial increase in the rates of childhood obesity and overweight levels worldwide. Although research about young consumers and their food consumption started more than 40 years ago, current discussion centres predominantly around the impact of food advertising on children and extant knowledge remains fragmented and inconclusive in relation to a number of *external,* as well as *internal influences.* In particular, it is still unclear how children choose healthy and less healthy foods under the influence of different socialisation agents and their own consumer knowledge about advertising or nutrition. Extant gaps impede effective policy development and successful social marketing campaigns since the full extent of children's susceptibility to food advertising remains unclear. This paper was inspired by work conducted under PhD candidature supervision by Prof. Pascale Quester and provides a review of social marketing literature to highlight the gaps in our knowledge and delineate important directions for future social marketing research in relation to young consumers' food consumption.

Keywords Young consumers · Food consumption · Gaps · Review

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Introduction

Transformation of Food Industry

In contrast to other products, food not only represents a vital source of sustenance, but also has symbolic value (i.e. being a vegetarian) as well as being the occasional indulgence (Rappoport 2003). Over the past 40 years, economic development and advances in agricultural practices have lead to an increase in the variety of available foods (Drewnowski 1997), resulting in an improved capacity to produce crops irrespective of seasonality (Kearney 2010). In fact, the number of grocery items available for consumption nowadays has increased threefold, and contemporary children consume foods which did not exist when their parents were young (Rappoport 2003). The nature of meals has changed—that is, where and with whom they are shared (Benton 2004; Livingstone 2005). Lifestyles have become more hectic—individuals are more mobile; they look for foods which are easy to eat on a move (Grocer 2008), resulting in steady annual growth rates for the snacking product category globally ("Snack Attack" 2014). Frozen, canned or packaged convenience foods nowadays are easily accessible through supermarkets, replacing to some extent, traditional food preparation and cooking (Osman et al. 2014). Parents who are especially busy during weekdays can dine out or buy take away foods for their families (Osman et al. 2014). Additionally, diets have changed towards more energy dense foods which contain higher amount of fats, added sugars and saturated fats from animal sources (Drewnowski and Popkin 1997) and average daily calories available for consumers have increased by approximately 600 calories (Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010). This trend has been accompanied by a reduced intake of complex carbohydrates, fibre, fruit and vegetables (Drewnowski and Popkin 1997) and an increase in portion sizes (Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010).

Changes in the food industry have coincided with a worldwide increase in the rates of adult overweight and obesity (Benton 2004). Overall, it is projected that by 2030 around 60 % of the worldwide adult population will be overweight or obese (Kelly et al. 2008c). From the public health perspective, the cost of obesity is high and likely to double by 2025 (Aitken et al. 2009). Alarmingly, the younger generation is gaining weight faster than their parents (Hebden et al. 2012) and there are significant health implications relating to the development of overweight and obesity amongst children which have been widely documented (WHO 2015). Obesity has both genetic and environmental origins, where the latter represents an outcome of prolonged poor lifestyle habits (Caroli et al. 2004). Although having obese parents certainly represents a risk factor for young children who have not yet developed obesity (Wardle et al. 2001), scholars seem to agree that the worldwide increase in rates of childhood obesity support an environmental rather than genetic explanation for current obesity trends in the younger population (Hill et al. 2003).

Young Consumers and Food Industry: A Segment Worth Conquering

The changes in the nature of the food industry have coincided with significant shifts in the role of children in the market space. Before the 1950s, much of the advertisers' attention while promoting products designed for children was aimed at adult consumers, in other words their parents (McNeal 1994). However, the advent of television and children's programs have dramatically changed the nature and the scope of advertising to children (Schor 2004). Over time, marketers' perceptions of children have changed—in the 1930s, they were perceived as growing machines, which needed education; in the 1950s, they were novelty seekers (Cook 2000). In the 1960s, children's market potential was still not considered seriously (McNeal 1999), but from the 1990s onwards, children have been treated as autonomous and savvy individuals (Cook 2000).

Children are important to marketers for a number of reasons—they influence their parents' consumer behaviour; they will be future consumers (Martin and Bush 2000); and they already exercise considerable spending power in the market space and influence their parents (McNeal 1999). Although young consumers are targeted by the manufacturers of multiple products, *foods* are more accessible to children through their own pocket money and purchase requests addressed to their parents (Harris et al. 2009). Worldwide, children aged 8–14 years spend and influence a market worth $1.88 trillion (Lindstrom and Seybold 2003). Hence, from the commercial point of view, childhood represents an important stage to build brand loyalty, where "cradle-to-grave marketing" is considered to represent a key to a long and sustainable relationship between food manufacturers and children (Hastings et al. 2003).

Because children represent a fast-growing and attractive market segment for the food industry (Livingstone and Helsper 2006), food advertising to children has substantially increased in the last decades (Byrd-Bredbenner 2002) outnumbering other product categories especially on television (Hastings et al. 2006). Food and beverage companies currently heavily invest in a promotion of their brands through interactive social media and mobile marketing (Montgomery et al. 2012), capitalising on capabilities of these technologies. Food advertising landscape has significantly changed over time showing an increase in non-core food categories (Roberts et al. 2013). From the public health perspective, childhood represents an important period not only for the development of obesity (Venn et al. 2007), but also food and consumer preferences (Birch 1999; Nestle 2002). Hence, it is not surprising why research, as well as obesity prevention policies, have recently focused on children (Reisch and Gwozdz 2011). Despite long research efforts in this area, our knowledge about factors that influence children's food consumption leading to weight gain still remains fragmented (Hastings et al. 2003), impeding policy development. Twelve major gaps still exist in our knowledge, which have been identified through a literature review of studies conducted between 1970 and 2014. These gaps are

discussed in detail below, delineating important directions for future social marketing research, contributing to the current discussion about children's food consumer socialisation.

Gaps in Knowledge About Young Consumers' Food Consumption

Of all factors suggested as in the literature as possible causes of childhood obesity, which relate to reduced physical activity, snacking, and food advertising—the latter represents the most widely debated factor (OfCom 2004). Numerous studies have exposed the intensity of food advertising targeting children (Cairns et al. 2009; Desrochers and Holt 2007), highlighting their poor reflection of dietary recommendations (Byrd-Bredbenner 2002). Typically, if a child watches two and a half hours of commercial television every day, he or she would be exposed to 11 "junk" food advertisements per day, and to around 77 of them per week (Neville et al. 2005). Past research has shown that exposure to advertisements in childhood can be associated with biased product evaluations in adulthood (Connell et al. 2014) and the current discussion of childhood obesity frequently evolves around the issue of food promotion, where children are typically depicted as being susceptible to advertising (Buijzen et al. 2010). As a result, restrictions on food advertising have been nominated as one of the most effective interventions to fight the obesity pandemic (Haby et al. 2006). Although several ecological studies tend to support such an approach (Dhar and Baylis 2011; Lobstein and Dibb 2005), stricter regulations of food advertising are challenging due to a number of reasons.

First, any policy restrictions on food marketing targeting children need to have a precise definition of the types of foods that are considered inappropriate, which can be provided by the government or industry self-regulation policies (Hawkes 2007), where the latter is still missing in many countries (Hebden et al. 2010). National policies regarding the control of food advertising aired on television also vary substantially (IASO 2010), and even more work is required to regulate promotion on the Internet and other channels used by marketers (mobile phone apps, etc.). Second, advertising represents only one of the many *external (social level) factors* that influence children in addition to *individual level factors* (Livingstone and Helsper 2004), highlighting the complexity of the obesity problem. In particular, children start learning about foods first from their parents (Benton 2004) and as they grow up, food marketing (Brand 2007) and peers become influential(Birch and Fisher 1998). While the presence of influencers operating both on *individual and social levels* was highlighted a decade ago (Livingstone and Helsper 2004), the determinants of children's food choices have not yet been studied while controlling for both *social* and *individual level influences* (*gap 1*, Fig. 1). Recently, empirical studies looking at the magnitude of influence of different *external influences* have been assessed, and the impact of food advertising on children's food consumption

has been evaluated as a modest, but not as a significant independent determinant (Cairns et al. 2013). So far, only five studies have looked into the influence of several factors on children's dietary behaviour (Baker et al. 2003; Bolton 1983; Buijzen et al. 2008; Norton et al. 2000; Stoneman and Brody 1981). They vary substantially in terms of methodology used (experiment vs. survey) and have not assessed the influence of all relevant *social level* factors simultaneously, leaving a gap in our knowledge about the *overall magnitude of the influence* of food advertising compared to *parents*, *peers*, and *school* (*gap 2*, Fig. 1).

Furthermore, past research has predominantly concentrated on behavioural outcomes in children (food preferences or food consumption) (Halford et al. 2007) and more insights are required about *children's nutritional* and *persuasion knowledge* in food consumption decision making—the *individual level factors*. Both nutritional and persuasion knowledge increase with age (Tallarini et al. 2013; Wiman and Newman 1989) and designate more *rational* and *logical approach to* food selection. Nutritional knowledge is related to better understanding of nutritional information (Grunert et al. 2013), but empirical results about its influence on children are still mixed, providing inconclusive support for its potentially positive effect on children's diets (Gibson et al. 1998). Furthermore, It is generally assumed that persuasion knowledge would act as a filter, protecting children from advertising

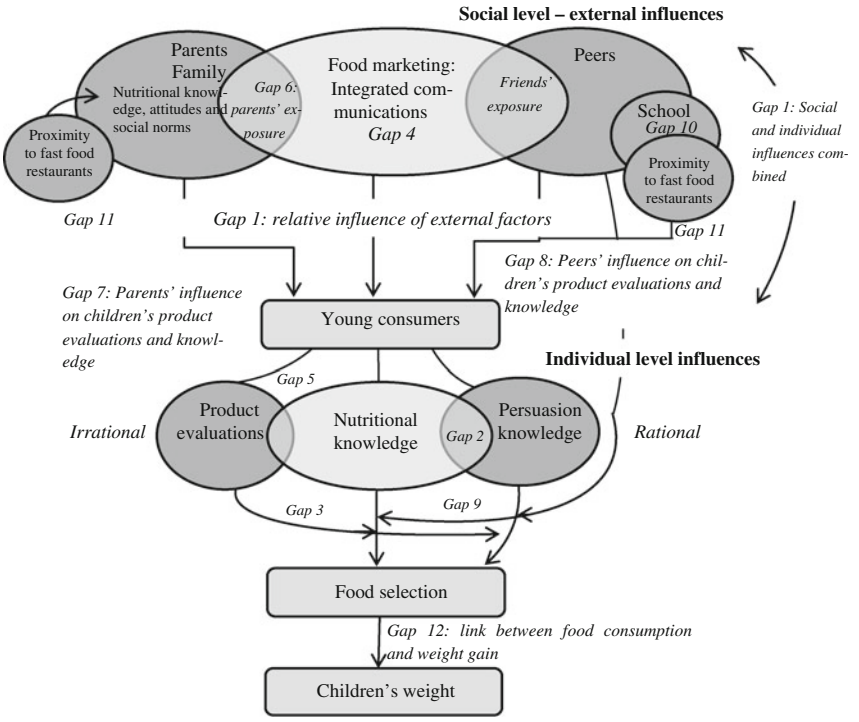

Fig. 1 Extant gaps in knowledge relating to young consumers' food consumption

(Rozendaal et al. 2009). Older children are generally expected to be less susceptible to persuasive tactics due to more advanced cognitive and social development skills that help them grasp bias in advertising (Seiders and Petty 2007). Although children's persuasion knowledge has always been central to the debate about the influence of food advertising on young consumers (Martin 1997), currently more is known about the age at which understanding of advertising intent emerges, rather than its application by children (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007; Rossiter and Robertson 1974). Currently, experimental literature suggests that advertising influences children's post-experimental food preferences (Borzekowski and Robinson 2001), however, whether children's nutritional knowledge combined with persuasion knowledge can mitigate the effects of promotion on dietary behaviour is still missing (*gap 3*, Fig. 1). Future studies in this area need to be carefully designed because extant research suggests that adult consumers do not always utilize their nutritional knowledge when they select foods (Saarela et al. 2013). Consumers may still choose to purchase a brand even when they are fully aware of marketers' persuasive intent due to positive brand or product evaluations (i.e. *emotional influences*). *Product evaluations* that are likely to influence children's food consumption relate to *taste, social appeal,* and *fun*, which represent the themes that are consistently deployed by the food marketers (Cairns et al. 2013) and may impact on children's liking of unhealthy food advertisements (Tarabashkina et al. 2011). Emotional mood enhancement and food craving are typically used for the promotion of less healthy product categories (Pettigrew et al. 2012) and it has been suggested that emotional advertising may distract children from other aspects of advertisements, such as nutritional disclaimers or product information (Wicks et al. 2009). While it is logical to expect that *product evaluations* have a potential to undermine persuasion and nutritional knowledge, their *moderating effects* have not yet been examined calling for a more holistic understanding of factors that influence young consumers where assessing both rational and irrational components of food consumption represents an important direction for social marketing. Hence, future research needs to broaden the scope of enquiry by examining the potential moderating influences of product evaluations on the relationship between nutritional and persuasion knowledge on young consumers' food choices (*gap 4*, Fig. 1).

Literature review has also revealed a number of gaps in relation to *external factors.* Scholars consistently report that the food media environment has become more diversified (Cairns et al. 2009) where children are exposed to food promotion across multiple channels, including not only television (Morton et al. 2005), but also magazines (Kelly et al. 2008b), supermarkets (Chapman et al. 2006), websites (Kelly et al. 2008a), and more recently, smartphones. Contemporary young consumers have access to digital technology not experienced by previous generations (Schor 2004). Yet, the assessment of the influence of *integrated marketing communication* is still missing (*gap 5*, Fig. 1). More research is required about children's susceptibility to new, non-traditional marketing techniques, such as advergames and social media on children (Montgomery et al. 2012). Whether advertising is capable of altering children's nutritional knowledge, impacting positively on product evaluations represents another unexplored area (*gap 6*, Fig. 1).

Next, *parents' role* in the childhood obesity problem represents another area for exploration because both children and parents are exposed to food advertising (Grier et al. 2007). Research about parents' susceptibility to food promotion suggests that advertising can influence parents' product perceptions (nutritional benefits, taste, fun, and social appeal) (Jones and Fabrianesi 2007), likelihood of consumption of the commonly advertised energy-dense foods (Pettigrew et al. 2013), and selection of energy dense products over healthy alternatives when products are advertised using sport celebrities or nutritional messages (Dixon et al. 2011). Advertising of energy dense and low in nutrient foods aimed at children has recently shifted towards parents (Dixon et al. 2011) and their inability to withstand food advertising may be harmful for young consumers. In particular, research has shown that parents' *attitudes* (favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an object or behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, p. 6)) and *social norms* about less healthy foods (beliefs about what constitutes an appropriate behaviour amongst people (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975)) are associated with more frequent consumption of fast foods by children, where a positive association was also observed between parents' exposure to fast food advertising and social norms (Grier et al. 2007). Because younger children depend on their parents for food provision, it is logical to assume that exposure to unhealthy role models may predispose them to unhealthy lifestyles, which is supported by the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 2002). Although favourable attitudes and social norms can reinforce misconceptions about specific behavioural patterns (Hawkins and Pingree 1982), the literature does not explain how parents' attitudes and social norms may influence *children's product evaluations, persuasion and nutritional knowledge* (*gap 7*, Fig. 1).

Another external factor, which requires further research is *peers.* Extant literature suggest that pre-schoolers' vegetable choice can change within four days after children start having lunch with peers who have different vegetable preferences (Birch 1980) and there is also support for perceived food consumption resemblance between friends for soft drinks (Perkins et al. 2010) and less healthy foods (Feunekes et al. 1998). The above-mentioned influences, however, have been examined in relation to behavioural outcomes. As a result, peers' influence on young consumers' *product evaluations, nutritional* and *persuasion knowledge* remains under-researched, limiting our understanding of potential pathways of peer influence on the formation of favourable attitudes amongst young consumers (*gap 8*, Fig. 1). Futhermore, although peer influence may undermine children's use of their persuasion and nutritional knowledge as a result of conformity when foods are consumed with friends, this potential moderating effect has not yet been tested (*gap 9*, Fig. 1).

In the context of food consumption, *school* represents another location where learning about foods and nutrition may take place, not only as a result of educational programs, but also due to *foods' availability* in canteens. Although consumption of snacks and soft drinks is higher when they are available at schools (Wouters et al. 2010), more research is encouraged to investigate how schools contribute to the development of unhealthy lifestyles and *favourable product evaluations* amongst young consumers (*gap 10*, Fig. 1). Likewise, *proximity to fast*

food restaurants represents another area for investigation—there is some evidence suggesting an association between proximity and consumption of fast foods in disadvantaged areas (Forsyth et al. 2012). Children belonging to low socio-economic background also tend to have higher weight (O'Dea et al. 2014) and consume less healthy foods more often (Ambrosini et al. 2009; Larson et al. 2008). Yet, it is still not clear how availability of fast foods impacts on *wider social norms* and *perceptions of less healthy foods' acceptability* both amongst *parents* and *their children* (*gap 11*, Fig. 1).

Finally, the influences of food advertising have been previously studied in relation to two separate variables—food preferences or food consumption (behavioural outcomes) (Utter et al. 2006) and weight (health diet-related outcome) (Proctor et al. 2003). At the moment, the extant literature suggests only an association between children's weight and TV watching and the link between the consumption of less healthy foods and children's weight is still tenuous (Jolly 2011) (*gap 12*, Fig. 1). The absence of such conclusive evidence has been frequently used as an argument against a ban of "junk" food advertising aimed at young consumers (Jolly 2011). Should the influence of food advertising as a precursor to children's weight be proven, this relationship needs to occur through food consumption (food advertising → consumption → weight) (IOM 2006) and should be assessed controlling for the influence of *external* and *internal factors*.

Conclusion

This review has identified a number of important gaps in our knowledge about young consumers' food consumption, delineating several directions for future research. As shown above, food choices represent a complex consumer and social phenomenon, where factors that are likely to influence food consumption may not only operate on *individual* and *social levels* (Livingstone and Helsper 2004), but may also be *moderated* by individual (product evaluations) or external factors (peers). In agreement with the childhood obesity and social marketing literature (Livingstone 2004), there is an urgent need to examine a wider range of factors influencing children's food choices—such an approach would be able to examine the strength of each external agent affecting children's dietary behaviour and finally provide evidence as to whether food advertising exerts a small influence on children, as previously claimed by marketing professionals (WFA 2010). Since food advertising continues to use integrated marketing techniques reaching out to children, their parents, and peers (Cairns et al. 2013), more research is encouraged to assess the influence of new non-traditional methods of advertising, as well as *integrated marketing communications*. Based on the gaps outlined in this review, scholars are encouraged to develop a comprehensive, yet parsimonious conceptual framework of the factors that influence children's dietary behaviour leading to obesity. The absence of a conceptual framework impedes research in social marketing, as well as the development of effective obesity prevention strategies. The role of research

remains crucial in advising public policy-makers, parents, and health practitioners about the strategies to improve young consumers' diets. Yet, the translation of research into policy, unfortunately, lags behind and remains substantially outpaced by the innovation and development in the food industry. This review has provided a detailed assessment of extant gaps about the factors that have not yet been examined, but may be related to children's food consumption, providing a clear guidance for future research to make original contributions to the field of social marketing.

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