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**Food Marketing: The Adverse Effects of Food Advertisements and Media Messaging on
Men, Women, and Children**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of food marketing on different segments of the population in the United States. Specifically, the study focuses on the effects of food advertising on men, women, and children, with an emphasis on the ways in which marketing messages influence their food choices, attitudes, and behaviors. Through a comprehensive review of the literature and a survey of various participants, the thesis analyzes the various techniques used by food companies to target these groups, including packaging, labeling, and promotional strategies. Furthermore, it reviews studies on the effects of food advertising and media messaging on the physical and mental health of men, women, and children. The results suggest that food marketing has a significant impact on the food choices and attitudes of all three groups, with children being particularly vulnerable to persuasive marketing messages. The findings also highlight the need for greater regulation of food marketing practices to promote healthier eating habits and reduce the prevalence of obesity and related diseases in the United States.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the food industry has become one of the most lucrative and competitive sectors of the American economy. With the rise of globalization and digital technologies, food manufacturers and retailers have developed sophisticated marketing strategies to promote their products and increase their market share. As a result, food marketing has become an omnipresent and ubiquitous presence in American society, shaping the way people eat, drink, and think about food.

While food marketing has been widely studied in recent years, much of the research has focused on its impact on specific populations, such as children or low-income individuals. However, the effects of food marketing on men, women, and children as separate groups have been understudied. Therefore, this thesis aims to fill this gap by examining the influence of food marketing on these three groups.

Food marketing strategies take many forms, including packaging, labeling, and advertising, and these techniques can affect people's food choices, attitudes, and behaviors in various ways. For example, food companies use packaging and labeling to create brand recognition and promote product differentiation. Meanwhile, advertising and promotional campaigns aim to establish an emotional connection between consumers and products by associating them with certain lifestyles, values, or aspirations.

In the United States, food marketing has been criticized for contributing to the country's obesity epidemic and related health problems. In recent years, a growing body of research has shown that exposure to food marketing can lead to overeating, poor dietary choices, and an increased risk of obesity, particularly among children. The issue is particularly pressing given that approximately 40% of American adults and 18.5% of American children are currently classified as obese (Hales et al., 2017).

Moreover, the effects of food marketing on different segments of the population may vary. For example, men and women may be influenced by different types of advertising, and their attitudes towards health and nutrition may differ. Similarly, children are often targeted through advertising that appeals to their desires and emotions, and their ability to discern between fact and fiction is limited. Studies show that food marketing results in adverse effects on the mental and physical wellbeing of consumers. This includes a propensity for obesity and related diseases, predisposition to mental illness, body image and self-esteem issues, and more.

Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the influence of food marketing on men, women, and children, with the goal of understanding the unique ways in which marketing messages impact their food choices, attitudes, and behaviors. The study will explore the various marketing techniques used by food companies to target these groups, as well as the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to their susceptibility to these messages. Ultimately, the research will provide insights into the potential health implications of food marketing and inform policy and regulatory efforts to promote healthier eating habits in the United States.

Literature Review

What is Food Marketing?

Currently, there is no agreed upon formal definition for Food Marketing, though the term is generally defined as the promotion of food products, brands, or services with the intention of gaining consumers. This type of marketing can be promoted through advertisements, television shows, the internet, social media, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and more. Food, which falls under one of the four types of consumer products, is one of the most highly marketed

products in the world. In the United States, food marketing takes up about a 16 percent of mass media advertising, with only the automotive industry surpassing it (Gallo, 1999). Though it is referred to as food marketing, it also encompasses the marketing of beverages including alcohol.

The History of Food Marketing

Food marketing has been a market segment of consistent change, first beginning with the inception of printing and only gaining popularity since then. In fact, in the year 1990 alone, food marketing costed advertisers over four-hundred billion dollars (Manchester, 1991). These advertisements have continued a path of growth as technological innovations like digital media, social media, and the internet have taken the world by storm. In this digital age, corporations can expose millions of consumers to their marketing messages daily through the internet and media, allowing them to have a significantly wide reach.

The Power of Food Marketing

Food marketing is a powerful tool that various businesses and other entities utilize to influence consumers and their behaviors. These advertisements are created with a variety of persuasive techniques to catch the attention of consumers and convince them to buy certain products. There are also many marketing and media channels through which food marketing messages are dispersed to audiences around the world. Due to this employment of various strategies, food marketing reaches a wide audience to promote their products and influence consumer behavior. One commonly used strategy in the realm of food marketing is the use of persuasive techniques to create positive associations and emotional connections with food products (Hawkes, 2007). This can entail enticing visuals (such as appetizing food images), vibrant packaging, catchy phrases and/or words, and appealing colors to stimulate cravings and desire for the advertised product. Advertisers understand that creating a positive link between the advertised food and the consumer will lead to consumers being more likely to purchase certain products or from specific brands. In addition to the aforementioned method, another study published in the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity found that food marketers often utilize celebrity endorsements to enhance their product credibility and engage consumers (Boyland et al. 2016). By associating their products with famous or popular people, marketers aim to leverage the influence and trust that consumers have in them in order to encourage the consumption of their food. Another commonly utilized strategy is the act of product placement in popular media channels such as movies, TV shows, video games, and social media posts. Each of these marketing methods is employed in the hopes of gaining more consumers to purchase the advertised food and beverages, and this can have adverse effects. Various research has illustrated that exposure to food and beverage placements in media can significantly influence food choices, particularly among children and adolescents. These strategies highlight the efforts made by food marketers to create compelling messages that resonate with consumers and drive product sales. Many of these techniques incorporate emotional appeals, which food advertisers frequently use to create a subconscious link between their products and positive feelings in their consumers. According to a study by The Journal of Public Health Nutrition, emotional marketing techniques like evoking feelings of joy, well-being, increased energy, or coziness can significantly impact consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Hawkes, 2007). Examples of this include coffee companies connecting their product with feelings of being fully energized and excited to take on one's day in the morning, a chocolate company tying their product to feelings of warmth and comfort, and more. Food marketing has the power to influence consumer behaviors, especially in children, and cause poor health, mental illness, and other adverse effects in the general populace of consumers.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility is the responsibility of businesses to their stakeholders and the promise to benefit society. In a nutshell, CSR means that companies should be profitable, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen that improves the quality of life for their stakeholders (Stoll, 2019). The corporations involved in the production, distribution, and marketing of food and beverage items have many stakeholders that suffer from adverse effects due to food marketing and media messages. However, this is not necessarily an easy feat due to the current grim state of CSR in the United States. This is due to a general lack of trust in all United States' institutions with an emphasis on big businesses. A study conducted by Gallup concluded that "a record low 13% of Americans are satisfied with the way things are going in the U.S." (Jones, 2022). The same study also concluded that a mere 23% of Americans have confidence in big businesses. Due to the lack of trust and confidence in big corporations, the mistrust in food marketing is only exacerbated. With CSR being an increasingly important topic to consumers, food advertisers need to regain the trust of consumers and work towards reducing the negative effects of their advertisements and messaging.

The Core Issues of Food Marketing

Company usage of food marketing for products has steadily increased since World War II, with a large jump due to the modern innovations of the internet and media. Because of this, millions of people are exposed to this marketing daily whether they are scrolling through social media, driving on a highway passing billboards, or simply watching a television program. Though they may not think twice about seeing food advertisements in the moment, people are subconsciously influenced by these ads each time they view them. Thousands of new products are introduced into the food industry each year, with only a handful of snacks, meals, beverages, etc. being able to produce sales and stick around long term. Due to the competitive nature of this billion-dollar industry, a handful of large companies control most of the advertisements people see. This results in a harsh climate for small businesses and the ability of large corporations like Coca-Cola and Nestlé to control the food industry and its marketing messages. In fact, in North America alone, ten companies manufacture and sell most of the food and beverages American's see on the shelves of every store (Mattison, 2023). This monopolization is dangerous and provides large companies with an unfair advantage and amount of influence over the American public, even brands perceived as "healthier" that tout messages like "organic" like Annie's Homegrown Pasta are owned by one of the ten big companies. Despite their pervasiveness, most consumers are unaware of the extent of what these brands produce and that many of the "smaller" brands they purchase are owned by a large company.

Despite people of all ages being exposed to food marketing messages, studies have found that an unproportionate number of children and adolescents are targeted by this marketing, with specific "disproportionate appeals to Black and Hispanic youth, likely exacerbating health disparities affecting their communities." (Harris et al., 2020). A core issue that arises out of this marketing technique is how impressionable children and teens are, making them more susceptible to the influence of advertisements, the media, and the people they view as influences. Not only that, but the past use and continuation of food marketing directly targeting minority and low-income communities with their messaging results in negative effects both short and long-term. In addition to this, food marketing advertisements have a history of promoting sexism and harmful gender stereotypes which have adverse effects on the consumers exposed (Parkin, 2011). Many studies have proven that food marketing not only causes adverse mental health issues, but also physical health issues in consumers as well.

Mental Effects

Food advertisements and media have a largely negative effect on the mental health of consumers. This marketing begins to take effect on a person's brain as young as five years old, sometimes even younger. This results in children developing neural responses to the food advertisements they have been exposed to, mostly fast-food, foods with a high caloric content, and foods and beverages with a high number of processed sugars. In a study conducted on children ages 5-7, researchers found that "Food advert exposure produced a significant increase in total food intake in young children" (Halford et al., 2006) The same study also details how BMI plays a role in how the brain is affected by these adverts, influences a child's brand choice in food, and encourages the over-consumption of food in children. This study exemplifies how brands who use food marketing techniques effectively prime and influence young children, impacting their diet choices, brands, and consumption as children and well into adulthood. In similar study conducted on adolescents, the results found that "Adolescents exhibited greater activation in regions implicated in visual processing (e.g., occipital gyrus), attention (e.g., parietal lobes), cognition (e.g., temporal gyrus and posterior cerebellar lobe), movement (e.g., anterior cerebellar cortex), somatosensory response (e.g., postcentral gyrus) and reward [e.g., orbitofrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)] during food commercials." compared to other visuals such as television shows (Gearhardt, et al., 2014). Food marketing activates the reward centers in a person's brain and begins in childhood, creating habits and trained responses to the exposure of food of certain brands and nutritional content. This neural effect of food marketing lays the groundwork for eating disorders, obesity, food-related diseases, and body image issues. Food marketing has direct ties to the reward sectors of people's brains, brand and food preference, attitudes on food, body image, and eating disorders.

Physical Effects

In continuation of the previous section, the mental effects of food marketing can quickly turn into physical effects. Due to its impact on the brain, food marketing leads people to over-indulge on food, consume foods with a low-nutritional value, and prefer specific brands over others. Many studies conducted on food advertisements and their effect on varying age groups have discovered similarly alarming results: exposure to food advertisements increases food and beverage consumption (Gearhardt, et al., 2014). This over-eating can lead to issues such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and more. A study conducted to compare the neural activation of food marketing in those who are overweight and those who are lean found that overweight participants experienced greater brain activation when observing food advertisements (Gearhardt, et al., 2014). Low-income communities of color are the most targeted group of food marketing that promotes food and beverages that are high in sugars, sodium, and fats. These communities are also the most affected by diseases like diabetes and other health issues related to nutrition (Quintero, 2020). These studies exemplify how food marketing has a direct correlation with being overweight, over-eating, and nutrition-related illnesses.

Targeted Peoples and Products

Typically, groups targeted by food marketing are minority groups with lower-than-average household income, children, and teenagers. Most brands target children and adolescents because of their susceptibility to outside influences, spending power, and potential to form habits and preferences that carry on into adulthood (Story & French, 2004). Studies have shown that children and teens of color and from low-income households are exposed to food advertisements that promote sugary foods and fast foods in a disproportionate amount (Quintero, 2020). Low-income areas are often targeted by large corporations and fast-food chains offering cheap foods

with a lack of nutrition because these groups often cannot afford a wide array of nutritious food and beverages. Novel studies have results that show “Advertising for fatty, salty and sugary food and drink is disproportionately aimed at Black and Hispanic children, teens and adults” (Kim, 2022). Brands who target these minority groups and communities are perpetuating underlying societal racism and stereotypes, as well as negatively affecting the health of these groups.

Women

Food marketing can also have a significant impact on the health of women. Listed below are some ways in which food marketing affects the health of women. Food marketing can contribute to the development of negative body image in women and young girls. Advertising often features images of thin, attractive models that can make women feel pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. This pressure can lead to unhealthy dieting behaviors, disordered eating, and other negative health outcomes. The exposure of women to ultra-thin models and often-edited photos/videos on social media advertisements, food commercials, and on magazines promoting diets has resulted in women feeling “depression, guilt, shame, and body dissatisfaction regardless of their current manifestation of bulimic symptoms or predisposition to disordered eating” (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). Because of these produced negative feelings, food marketing has the ability to influence the dietary choices of women. Women are often targeted with advertising for products that are marketed as low-calorie, low-fat, or otherwise "diet friendly." These products may not be as healthy as they are marketed to be and may contain ingredients that can be harmful to women's health. This “diet” marketing also increases the chance of women developing restrictive eating habits (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). Not only can women follow an unhealthy restrictive diet, but food marketing can also lead to increased consumption of unhealthy foods among women and an increase in the prevalence of binge eating disorders. Advertising for foods high in sugar, fat, and salt can be particularly appealing to women who are experiencing stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions. Binge-eating disorder is often-times tied to feelings of embarrassment and can be very prevalent in women with restrictive eating practices (Mayo Clinic, 2018). Overall, food marketing can have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of women and oftentimes results in eating disorders, adverse mental affects, and nutritional deficiencies.

Men

Food marketing affects men in both similar and diverse ways than it does women. Food marketing can influence the dietary choices of men through the promotion of certain gender stereotypes. Whereas women are targeted with ads promoting thinness, men are often targeted with advertising for products that are marketed as high protein, "manly," or otherwise appealing to traditional masculine ideals. These products oftentimes include red meats, pre-workout, protein shakes, and more, all of which can result in adverse physical affects. (Missbach et al., 2015). This promotion of harmful gender stereotypes can cause men to develop a preference for foods that are high in protein and low in other important nutrients, which can lead to imbalances in their diets. Men are targeted by food trends and advertisements that promote gaining muscle and working out, which can cause men to develop eating disorders, and body image issues.

Children

As mentioned, due to their vulnerable nature, children are often the main food marketing targets. This leads to many adverse effects that continue through a consumer’s adolescence and adulthood. A 2007 study conducted by the Federal Trade commission found that 98% of food products marketed to children are sugary drinks, fast food, and processed snacks, which can lead to obesity and other health problems (Harris et al., 2009). This promotion of foods with a lack of

nutritional value leads children to develop preferences for unhealthy foods and brands, have early-onset signs of nutrition-related diseases, and more. Research also suggests that children as young as three can begin to develop negative body image as a result of the media they consume (PACEY, 2016). The adverse mental and physical effects of food marketing on children can prove to be detrimental to these children and carry on well into their adult lives. A negative relationship to food or beginning unhealthy food habits at a young age can perpetuate a life-long battle with mental and physical health as a result of food marketing. Many concerned researchers suggest that food marketing be more heavily regulated to protect children from its adverse effects and link to mental and physical ailments.

The Future of Food Marketing

The future of food marketing in the United States is constantly evolving as consumer behavior and preferences change. According to a study by the Journal of Consumer Research, there is an increasing demand for health and wellness products, and consumers are more willing to pay a premium for foods that are perceived as healthier (Biswas et al., 2014). This trend is likely to continue in the future, as more consumers become health-conscious and prioritize nutrition in their diets. As a result, food marketers will need to shift their focus towards promoting products that align with this trend.

Another trend that is likely to impact the future of food marketing in the United States is the rise of e-commerce. With the growth of online shopping, consumers have become accustomed to the convenience of shopping from home and having products delivered to their doorsteps. A study by the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services found that consumers are more likely to buy food products online if they perceive the process to be easy and convenient (Lee & Kim, 2018). Therefore, food marketers will need to invest in online marketing strategies and improve the user experience of their e-commerce platforms to meet the demands of this growing trend.

The importance of sustainability is also likely to impact the future of food marketing in the United States. A study by the Journal of Business Research found that consumers are more likely to purchase products from companies that demonstrate social and environmental responsibility (Hultman, Brown, & Hartman, 2009). This trend is likely to continue as consumers become more aware of the impact their purchasing decisions have on the environment. As a result, food marketers will need to incorporate sustainability into their marketing strategies to appeal to this growing consumer demand.

In addition to the constantly changing trends and a renewed sense of urgency for sustainability, food marketing will continue to have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of consumers. As the world becomes more digital and new technological innovations/social media apps are created, people will have more exposure to these advertisements and messages. The United States is also in a mental health crisis and 90% of adults agree (McPhillips, 2022). Despite the severity of this crisis and increased rates of suicide, mental illness diagnoses, and prescriptions for mental health drugs, the lack of action from large corporations and the government means that the crisis will continue to grow. This will make the population more susceptible to the implications of food advertising and media messages.

In conclusion, the future of food marketing in the United States will be shaped by a variety of factors, including the demand for health and wellness products, the growth of e-commerce, the importance of sustainability, and the ongoing mental health crisis. Food marketers will need to adapt their strategies to meet the changing needs and preferences of consumers to stay competitive in the market.

Promoting Healthier Food Choices

Though obesity and mental health rates have more-than tripled since 1975, there are ways to combat the negative effects of food marketing. If government regulations increase and corporations like Coke follow their pledges to be more beneficial in educating their consumers on nutrition, food marketing's adverse effects on men, women, and children will decrease. Companies have offered increasingly large food and beverage portion sizes that typically exceed the recommended daily amounts, discounts on unhealthy food options, the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages instead of healthy options. Because of this, consumers are more likely to be persuaded into continually buying unhealthy options. So, how can food marketing become less harmful to consumers and other stakeholders? By placing nutrition labels on the front of food and beverage packages, researchers found that consumers are more likely to choose healthier options (Dubois et al. 2021). Government regulations on portion size, healthy vs unhealthy food discounts and/or price, food and beverage labels, and food marketing can also help lessen the negative effects of food marketing. Though companies and the government can implement certain tactics to combat this, consumers need to be educated on the extensive effects of food marketing, the methods food marketers use to draw them in, and how to eat and drink healthier products. The presence of food marketing will continue to grow in the expanding digital age; however corporations, the government, and consumers can prepare for and prevent or slow down the negative results of food marketing.

Conclusion

As exemplified with a review of various studies and survey results, food marketing in the United States has a significant impact on consumer behavior and public health both mentally and physically. Corporate social responsibility is an important factor to consider in food marketing strategies as consumers increasingly prioritize social and environmental responsibility in their purchasing decisions. However, the negative effects of food marketing on mental and physical health cannot be ignored. Studies have shown that the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages can contribute to obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health conditions. These same studies also exemplify key differences in the way males and females respond to the adverse effects of food advertisements. Not only that, but many food advertisers target specific groups that are more likely to fall victim to the marketing messages of the advertisements themselves. It is crucial for food marketers to promote healthy and nutritious foods while also being transparent and ethical in their advertising practices. Overall, the future of food marketing in the United States must prioritize both consumer health and corporate social responsibility to create a more sustainable and equitable food system.

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