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Bachelor of Psychology (honours)

A mixed method examination of food marketing directed towards children in Australian supermarkets

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The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.
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Abstract

Scope: Food marketing toward children is evident across many forms of media and at the point-of-sale. There is little previous research into children’s requests for food/drinks in the supermarket and the influence of promotional strategies on these requests.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of children’s food/drink requests made whilst grocery shopping with a parent/caregiver. The study also aimed to gain further understanding of parents’ experience of food marketing directed towards children in the supermarket environment and dealing with food/drink requests whilst shopping.

Method: A mixed methods design was used. Intercept interviews (N=158) were conducted with parents/caregivers accompanied by a child/ren on exiting 9 supermarkets in the Newcastle region, New South Wales. Parents were asked about the prevalence of food requests by child/ren generally and during the most recent supermarket visit. Information about the types of food/drinks requested and whether parents purchased any of the requested food/drinks was sought. Food/drink requests were categorised into food groups and then more broadly defined as core or noncore foods. Additional demographic information was collected. Focus groups (n=13) and telephone interviews (n=3) were conducted to explore parents’ experiences of supermarket shopping with children and children requesting food/drink items. These discussions sought further information on the impact of marketing directed towards children on food/drink requests in the supermarket and dealing with pestering for food whilst grocery shopping.

Results: Of the 158 intercept survey participants (30% response rate), 73% of respondents reported a food/drink request by their child during the supermarket visit. Most requested food items (88%) were unhealthy foods, with chocolate/confectionery being the most common food category requested (40%). Most parents/caregivers (70%) purchased at least one food item requested during the shopping trip. Parents/caregivers purchased a food/drink item regardless of whether they perceived the request to be healthy or not. There was a tendency not to purchase a requested product for
a younger child. Qualitative interviews identified themes associated with food requests and prompts in the supermarket. Discussions established the following themes: parents’ experience of pester power in the supermarket; prompts for food requests in the supermarket; parental responses to pestering in the supermarket environment; and strategies to manage pestering and minimise requests for food items.

**Conclusions:** Food/drink requests from children are common during supermarket shopping. Despite the majority of the food/drinks requested being unhealthy, parents often purchase these foods. The healthiness of the food/drink item did not influence the decision to purchase the requested product. Parents/caregivers reported that food promotion impacted on children’s requests for food/drink items whilst grocery shopping. They suggested that point-of-sale tactics and television advertising had the greatest effect on children’s food/drink requests. Parents reported difficulties dealing with constant requests for food/drink items throughout the supermarket and expressed desire for environmental changes to reduce pestering including confectionery-free checkouts, minimisation of child-friendly placement of products, and reducing children’s exposure to food marketing in general.

**Implications:** Parents are likely to benefit from being provided with skills to deal with food/drink requests and pestering when shopping. Changes to current regulations around food promotion aimed at children need to be made to reduce exposure and protect children from the effects of unhealthy food marketing.

The thesis has 3 main sections. Section 1 examines background nutritional knowledge prior to conducting a critical review of the relevant literature, section 2 presents empirical findings in the format of a manuscript submitted for publication in the journal Health Promotion International, and section 3 presents an extended discussion of the findings.
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