

# Children's Food Consumer Socialisation: The Impact of Food Advertising, Parents, Peers, and Social Norms on Children's Food Preferences, Food Consumption, and Obesity

### by

### Liudmila Tarabashkina

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#### **Abstract**

This study addresses an ongoing debate about the influence of food advertising on children through the development of a comprehensive, yet parsimonious conceptual framework which pulled together extant gaps from the public health and marketing literatures and integrated the influence of external agents and child-related factors on children's dietary behaviour and weight. The framework has undergone an extensive validation process, including qualitative refinement and quantitative assessment, relying on a randomised controlled experiment with children, a survey of children, and a survey of their parents. The analysis of variance shows that when children were exposed to a food advertisement, their preference for an advertised snack was influenced by their brand evaluation and friends' preferences for a similar snack. Understanding of the advertisement's selling and persuasive intents and nutritional knowledge did not reduce preference for, and evaluation of, the advertised product. This most likely occurred because most respondents grasped advertisement intent, resulting in insufficient variance for empirical analysis. In contrast, preference for a healthier snack (apple) amongst children exposed to the experimental advertisement was influenced by an evaluation of healthier snack's taste, higher preferences for a similar snack amongst their friends, and more frequent parent-child communication about foods and food advertising. Overall, no statically significant differences were detected between experimental and control groups, suggesting that research which solely relies on experimental exposure while investigating the effect of food advertising on children does not account for a bigger picture of factors influencing children.

Structural Equation Modelling showed that while parents' social norms about fast foods, friends' preferences for burgers, and social acceptability of burgers were related to children's consumption of less healthy foods, more frequent parent-child communication about foods and food advertising and parents' higher nutritional knowledge reduced unhealthy dietary behaviour. Exposure to fast food advertisements resulted in more positive evaluation of burgers, French fries, and soft drinks, which, in turn, were related to less healthy dietary behaviour. Nutritional knowledge and understanding of selling and persuasive intents in food advertisements (advertising literacy) exerted small, mediating effects on children's dietary behaviour through attitudes, confirming the importance of these cognitive defences. A positive relationship was also detected between children's dietary behaviour and weight. Across all models, brand evaluation/evaluations of food exhibited the strongest influence on

children, followed by peers (experimental data) or parents' social norms about fast foods (cross-sectional data), pinpointing parents' crucial role in fight against childhood obesity provided that parents hold less positive social norms, possess higher nutritional knowledge, and communicate with their children about food and food advertising. The current study shows that parents who are frequently exposed to fast food advertising, or have lower education, or reside in an area where residents hold lower education and occupations, tend to exhibit more positive social norms about fast foods, which, in turn, are related to children's more frequent consumption of a number of less healthy foods. This study has identified important indirect pathways to childhood obesity through parents, peers, social norms, food advertising, and children's attitudes that have important implications for public policy and social marketing.

**Statement of Declaration** 

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any

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Liudmila Tarabashkina

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#### **Abbreviations**

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics

BMI – Body Mass Index

CQ - Children's Questionnaire

CFA – Confirmatory Factor Analysis

EFA – Exploratory Factor Analysis

ERST – Event Rates Estimation Tool

EST – Ecological Systems Theory

IPT – Information Processing Theory

IRT – Item Response Theory

HREC - Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide

GNKQ - General Nutrition Knowledge Questionnaire

NKT – Nutritional Knowledge Test

PQ – Parents' Questionnaire

SEM – Structural Equation Modelling

SES – Socio-economic status

WFA – World Federation of Advertisers

WHO – World Health Organization