The Role of Body Image and Self-Esteem in Adolescent Consumers' Use of Marketing Communication Messages As Input For Food Choices

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The global obesity problem has become especially alarming in younger age groups worldwide. In the United States, 30 percent of all youth aged 12 to 19 are obese, and although the causes of this epidemic are many, critics point to marketing as a major source of the problem. Given that adolescence is one of the critical life periods during which conceptions about the self are formed and purchases independent of parental influence increase, the role of self-esteem and body image in adolescents' use of marketing communication information in their food-related consumption decisions is examined.

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SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW

In 2000 for the first time, the number of overweight people in the world matched the number of undernourished people at 1.1 billion each (Nestle 2002), and in 2004, the number of overweight adults reached 1.7 billion worldwide exceeding the number of the undernourished populations (WHO 2004). The escalating obesity epidemic (Hamdy 2003) has become global in scope, afflicting affluent nations such as the United States, but also developing countries (Witkowski 2005b). In the United States, the most alarming aspect of the epidemic is the increasing obesity levels among vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that 30 percent of all adolescents aged 12 to 19 years are obese (Seiders and Petty 2004).

Given these alarming statistics, it is imperative for marketing researchers to study the possible marketing-related causes for the increasing incidence of obesity (e.g., Mick 2003). Adolescence is a particularly important time of life; consumption habits and skills acquired and reinforced during this life period have a lasting affect on individuals’ long-standing tastes and preferences (Ganley 1989; Shepherd 1999). In order to begin exploring some of the marketing-related issues that may be involved in the increasing obesity among adolescents (e.g., Witkowski 2005a), this study examines the role of body image and self-esteem in adolescent responses to food-related marketing communications messages, and how those messages impact adolescent consumers’ food choices.

Based on the work of Coley (1902) on the “looking glass self,” and James’ (1982) conception of self-esteem as captured by the ratio of one’s successes to one’s pretensions, Harter (1991) defines self-esteem or self worth as “the level of global regard that one has for the self as a person.” Harter (1982, 1985, 1986) has determined that children develop domain-specific evaluations, in addition to a global concept of their self-worth, at about eight years of age. Harter (1991) also found that the relevant domains for children included scholastic competence, athletic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. Body image falls within the domain of “physical appearance.” Cash (2004) defines body image as “subjective perceptual and attitudinal experiences about one’s body, particularly one’s physical appearance.” Thompson and Hirschman (1995) contend that the “mind observes its body, critiques its appearance and form, and engages in activities – such as exercise, surgery, dieting – to transform the body into a more desired form.”

Many researchers in various disciplines, primarily in psychology and sociology, have investigated self-esteem and body image across different contexts and with a range of samples. The role that self-esteem and body image play in consumer choices has been given much less attention by marketing researchers. In addition to the Thompson and Hirschman (1995) study, marketing researchers have examined how self- and body-esteem moderate indulgent food choices when mortality is made salient (Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005). Bloch and Richins (1992) explored the relation of adornment usage to evaluations of attractiveness; and Schouten (1991) explored the motives and self-concept dynamics underlying the consumption of plastic surgery to alter aspects of physical appearance. A few studies examined interactions between social comparison and body image through advertising contexts (Bearden and Rose 1990; Martin and Kennedy 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Richins 1991, 1992). Based on the existing theoretical and empirical work, our study fills an important gap in the research addressing the relationship between adolescents’ self-esteem and body image and their food consumption choices. Our investigation is guided by the following research questions: 1) How does body image affect adolescents’ food choices? 2) How does self-esteem affect adolescents’ food choices? 3) How does marketing communications mediate these relationships?

Adopting a multi-method, multi-stage research approach, in the initial stages of the research, surveys are administered to both junior high-school and high-school students in four separate regions of the U.S. The surveys consist of a section on eating habits, a section on advertising influences, the Harvard Medical School Eating Survey, a self-esteem section (DuBois et al. 1996), and various demographic questions. At the end of the survey the researchers ask for volunteers to take part in an extended ethnographic study (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Students in the extended study take part in in-depth interviews (McCraken 1988); are given disposable cameras to take pictures of food-related situations and marketing messages; and take part in various on-line activities such as chat rooms, a body-image questionnaire, and additional questioning by the researchers. Additionally, parents of the participating students and school officials are surveyed concerning food, advertising, and related issues.

Preliminary results suggest that there is a relationship between body image, self-esteem, adolescents’ use of marketing communications messages, and their food choices. Adolescents’ more realistic and favorable perceptions of their body image are positively related to higher self-esteem. The higher self-esteem adolescents are less reliant on marketing communication messages for information about food, and the healthier their food choices. The preliminary findings are compelling, and will shed new light on the relationships underlying adolescents’ food-related consumer behavior.