Socially Constituted Food Consumption of Adolescents: the Retail Environment

Tim Burkink, University of Nebraska - Kerney, USA

Energy-dense high-fat foods and sugared beverages have become meal replacements for many adolescents in the United States where 30 percent of all adolescents are overweight. Apart from availability and access to these products on school premises, their consumption is socially reinforced at fast food restaurants and convenience stores where adolescents routinely congregate. Such consumption represents an indispensable part of many adolescents’ “grab-and-go” lifestyle that is reinforced by aggressive promotion from the food and food-service industry. As a part of a multi-stage research project, this ethnographic study investigates the effect that various in-store promotions used by retail outlets have on adolescents’ actual food purchases.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13016/volumes/ap07/AP-07

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
ABSTRACTS

SOCIOALLY CONSTITUTED FOOD CONSUMPTION OF ADOLESCENTS: THE RETAIL ENVIRONMENT
Timothy Burkink, University of Nebraska, Kearney, USA

The rising rate of obesity is a major threat to public health and increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and numerous other serious illnesses (Kennedy and Olfut 2000). Approximately 30 percent of adolescents in the U.S. are overweight (National Center for Health Statistics 2004). There are many reasons being proposed for this weight increase, but food producers and retailers must be examined for their potential role in this escalating problem.

Convenience and time constraints are two key determinants driving these adolescent food choices (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002). One place adolescents make food choices is at school, but adolescents have many other opportunities for eating outside the home (Brownell and Battle 2004). Many of the places where adolescents have access to food are where they gather socially, such as fast food restaurants and convenience stores. When adolescents gather in these places, eating and drinking are usually part of the social experience. The food industry has provided increasing availability and promotion of energy-dense foods and increasing portion sizes, often in these locations (Brownell and Battle 2004). Given that adolescence is the first time that disposable income allows them to consume what they want without parental supervision, this can lead to overconsumption of fast food and other high-fat foods and underconsumption of foods considered more nutritious (Dietz and Stern 1999; Lin et al. 1999; Lino et al. 1998; Munoz et al. 1997; Neumark-Sztainer 1998; Subar et al. 1998).

Existing guidelines and messages that promote healthy eating compete with food industry marketing and the social situations that promote “grab-and-go” eating and congregation at fast food outlets and convenience stores. Eating healthy is a lifestyle, and adolescents may be learning that it is acceptable to buy fast food or products from convenience stores or vending machines for a meal. The food industry is aware that adolescents purchase beverages and food independently of their parents. With adolescents, “if it goes into their mouth, it needs to get past their defenses” (Siegel et al. 2001). Target marketing and marketing communications are the methods used to achieve this. Marketing is a major expenditure for the food and food-service industry. In 2000, the food industry spent 11 billion on direct media, advertising in magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and billboards (Schlosser 2001). Therefore, research is needed on adolescents’ independent purchase of food outside the home. Clearly, “research on environmental influences is needed” (Booth et al. 2001), and an objective of the United States Department of Health and Human Services “Healthy People 2010” (USDHHS 2000) is to “Improve Child and Adolescent Health by reducing the number of children and adolescents who are overweight or obese from 11 percent in the year 2000 to 5 percent.”

This paper describes a part of a comprehensive multi-stage, multi-method research project designed to clarify the social aspects of adolescents’ nutrition behavior outside the home and the influence of food marketing. The long-term goal of this study will help produce conceptual models of food and nutrition behavior so that strategies can be designed to improve the nutrition education of adolescents.

THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL FOOD POLICY ON ADOLESCENT OBESITY
Bree L. Dority, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Mary McGarvey, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

According to a recent study, the proportions of overweight children in North and South America and in the European Union are expected to increase from one third to one half and from one fourth to one third, respectively, by the year 2010 (Wang and Lobstein 2006). This worldwide obesity crisis shows an obvious imbalance between the energy children consume and expend with an estimated 155 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 as overweight and 30 to 40 million of those being obese (International Obesity TaskForce). Further, studies have shown that overweight and obese children lead to overweight and obese adults (see Bouchard 1997; Dietz 1991, 1997; Vuille and Melbiri 1979). This cause for concern has spurred many public health groups to advocate policies aimed at promoting healthy eating and increased physical activity among children.

The causes of obesity range from genetic, metabolic, and hormonal to environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic. Because childhood obesity is more prevalent in the United States with approximately 31 percent of children ages 6 to 19 overweight and 16 percent obese (Hedley et al 2004), many studies have examined the risk factors using U.S. data. Authors have documented the influence of the types of foods children eat on obesity (Birch and Fisher 1998; Klesges et al. 1991), the relationship between fast food and body weight (Binkley et al. 2000; Chou et al. 2004; French et al. 2000, 2001), and the connection between school finances and availability of junk food in schools (Anderson and Butter 2005). This paper focuses on the influence of the school environment on childhood obesity. Since schools are one of the primary locations where children make their food choices, those choices should reflect the education children receive about nutrition. Although many state legislatures are considering