

# **Parents' and children's perceptions of food and beverage marketing to which children are exposed**

**Kaye Mehta**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

September 2013.

Discipline of Public Health

Flinders Prevention, Promotion and Primary Health Care

Faculty of Health Sciences

Flinders University

---



# Contents

Summary .....	i
List of Tables.....	iii
Declaration.....	iii
Research output arising from this thesis .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1: The problem of children’s exposure to food marketing.....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1.1: Distinguishing exposure .....	2
1.1.2: Detrimental effects on food choice and childhood obesity .....	2
1.1.3: Detrimental effects on family relations and parenting .....	5
<b>1.2: Policy responses to the problem .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.2.1: Policy discourse .....	10
1.2.2: Community voices in the public policy debate.....	12
1.2.3: My own motivations for studying this subject .....	13
<b>1.3: The research .....</b>	<b>14</b>
1.3.1: Research question .....	14
1.3.2: Research aim .....	14
1.3.3: Research objectives.....	14
1.3.4: Scope of research .....	14
<b>1.4: Structure of the thesis .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.1: Marketing within the context of consumer society.....</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1.1: Consumer society.....	18
2.1.2: Consumption and identity.....	20
2.1.3: Brands as signifiers.....	23
2.1.4: Links between the literature and my research .....	23
<b>2.2: Neo-liberalism, governance and responsibility .....</b>	<b>24</b>
2.2.1: Neo-liberalism .....	24
2.2.2: De-traditionalising governance from state to individual and family.....	25
2.2.3: Technologies of governmentality.....	27
2.2.4: Governmentality and health .....	30
2.2.5: Links between the literature and my research .....	32
<b>2.3: Children and consumerism .....</b>	<b>32</b>

2.3.1: Commercialization of childhood .....	32
2.3.2: The child consumer .....	35
2.3.3: Children’s secondary consumption through influence on parents .....	36
2.3.4: Development of the child consumer .....	37
2.3.5: Problematising the child consumer .....	41
2.3.6: Links between the literature and my research .....	43
<b>2.4: Food marketing to the child consumer .....</b>	<b>43</b>
2.4.1: The problem of food marketing to the child consumer .....	43
2.4.2: Marketing to children on non-broadcast media .....	44
2.4.3: The mechanisms by which children are persuaded .....	55
2.4.4: Links between the literature and my research .....	57
<b>2.5: Parenting the child consumer .....</b>	<b>57</b>
2.5.1: Modern families .....	57
2.5.2: Parental regulation of the child consumer .....	59
2.5.3: Parental regulation of children’s diets .....	61
2.5.4: Regulating purchase requests and family conflict.....	65
2.5.5: Links between the literature and my research .....	66
<b>2.6: Ethics and food marketing to children.....</b>	<b>66</b>
2.6.1: Ethics in modernity.....	66
2.6.2: Ethics in neo-liberal societies .....	68
2.6.3: Business, marketing and ethics .....	69
2.6.4: Public health and ethics .....	71
2.6.5: Public health instruments .....	73
2.6.6: Marketing to children as an ethical concern .....	74
2.6.7: Links between the literature and my research .....	76
<b>2.7: Gaps in the literature addressed by this research .....</b>	<b>76</b>
2.7.1: Research questions, aims and objectives.....	77
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>3.1: Epistemological ideas informing the research.....</b>	<b>78</b>
3.1.1: Qualitative methodology.....	79
3.1.2: Qualitative research with children .....	81
3.1.3: Summary .....	83
<b>3.2: Methods .....</b>	<b>83</b>
3.2.1: Aim and objectives .....	83
3.2.1.1: Aim .....	83

3.2.1.2: Objectives .....	83
3.2.2: Data collection .....	84
3.2.2.1: Semi-structured interviews .....	84
3.2.2.2: Sampling and recruitment.....	84
3.2.2.3: Interview process .....	86
3.2.2.4: Demographic data .....	89
3.2.2.5: Summarising data collection .....	90
3.2.2.6: Sensitivity to child participants .....	91
3.2.2.7: Pilot-testing .....	91
3.2.3: Data Analysis .....	91
3.2.4: Rigour .....	96
3.2.5: Ethical matters .....	98
3.2.5.1: Communication of findings to families .....	98
<b>3.3: Summary .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>4.1: Framework for presentation of findings .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>4.2: Socio-demographic profile of families .....</b>	<b>100</b>
4.2.1: Parents .....	101
4.2.2: Children .....	101
4.2.3: Families.....	101
<b>4.3: Interviews with parents.....</b>	<b>102</b>
4.3.1: Marketing.....	103
4.3.1.1: Understanding of marketing in general .....	103
4.3.1.2: Awareness of marketing on a range of non-broadcast media .....	105
4.3.1.3: Marketing effects .....	106
4.3.1.4: Opinions and concerns about marketing .....	112
4.3.1.5: Summary of findings on marketing .....	121
4.3.2: Regulation .....	121
4.3.2.1: Parental regulation of children’s food choices.....	121
4.3.2.2: Educating children about nutrition .....	124
4.3.2.3: Involvement of children in family food activities .....	124
4.3.2.4: Strong parental regulation .....	125
4.3.2.5: Challenges and obstacles to parental regulation .....	128
4.3.2.6: Parental regulation of children’s media .....	131
4.3.2.7: Education about marketing.....	132
4.3.2.8: Co-shopping .....	132

4.3.2.9: Parenting paradox .....	133
4.3.2.10: Summary of findings on regulation .....	134
4.3.3: Responsibility .....	134
4.3.3.1: Parental responsibility for mitigating the effects of marketing .....	134
4.3.3.2: Children’s responsibility .....	137
4.3.3.3: Corporate responsibility .....	138
4.3.3.4: Government responsibility .....	139
4.3.3.5: Children’s rights .....	140
4.3.3.6: Parents’ rights .....	141
4.3.3.7: Rights of corporations .....	142
4.3.3.8: Responsibility, regulation and power .....	143
4.3.3.9: Summary of findings on responsibility .....	143
<b>4.4: Interviews with children .....</b>	<b>144</b>
4.4.1: Marketing .....	145
4.4.1.1: Understanding what marketing is .....	145
4.4.1.2: Awareness of marketing on a range of non-broadcast media .....	146
4.4.1.3: Marketing effects .....	148
4.4.1.4: Opinions about marketing .....	154
4.4.1.5: Summary of findings on marketing .....	156
4.4.2: Responsibility .....	156
4.4.2.1: Corporate responsibility .....	156
4.4.2.2: Other responsibility .....	158
4.4.2.3: Changes to marketing .....	160
4.4.2.4: Summary of findings on responsibility .....	162
4.4.3: Consumerism .....	163
4.4.3.1: The meaning of brands to children .....	163
4.4.3.2: Brand consciousness and consumer choice .....	165
4.4.3.3: Purchase behaviour .....	167
4.4.3.4: Summary of findings on consumerism .....	170
<b>4.5: Overall summary of findings .....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>5.1: Overview of discussion .....</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>5.2: Reflecting on the research .....</b>	<b>174</b>
5.2.1: Quality in qualitative research .....	174
5.2.2: Summary .....	181
<b>5.3: Neo-liberalism and responsibility .....</b>	<b>181</b>

5.3.1: Neo-liberalism and individual responsibility .....	181
5.3.2: Regulation and responsabilisation .....	183
5.3.3: Governmentality and modern parenting .....	185
5.3.4: Summary .....	188
<b>5.4: Ethics .....</b>	<b>189</b>
5.4.1: Parents' views on ethics .....	189
5.4.1.1: The marketing of EDNP foods .....	189
5.4.1.2: Materialism and pester power .....	190
5.4.1.3: Marketing on the Internet.....	191
5.4.1.4: Marketing through supermarkets .....	193
5.4.2: Children's views on ethics .....	195
5.4.3: Responsibilities and rights .....	195
5.4.4: Summary .....	196
<b>5.5: Marketing and consumers .....</b>	<b>197</b>
5.5.1: Children as consumers .....	197
5.5.2: Parents as consumers .....	202
5.5.3: Summary .....	203
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>222</b>
Appendix 1: Information sheet for potential participants .....	223
Appendix 2: Demographic survey .....	225
Appendix 3: Child-friendly pamphlet .....	229
Appendix 4: Children's activity sheet.....	231
Appendix 5: Interview Schedules Round 1 and 2 with Parents.....	1
Appendix 6: Interview Schedules Round 1 and 2 with Children .....	5





## Summary

### Introduction

Children's exposure to marketing for energy-dense nutrient poor (EDNP) foods is considered to be a contributory factor to childhood obesity. A trend has been observed for marketing communications to move from traditional media (such as television advertising) to non-broadcast media (such as, the Internet). The influence of EDNP food marketing on children's food preferences and consumer behaviour (pestering) is also considered to undermine parental authority to regulate children's food choices, and add to the stress of parenting.

This doctoral research investigated the perceptions of parents and children, about food and beverage marketing to which children are exposed.

### Review of literature

The following literature was reviewed in order to elicit the theoretical frames and empirical evidence that could inform the research: marketing within the context of consumer society; neo-liberalism; children and consumerism; food marketing to the child consumer; parenting the child consumer; and, ethics.

### Methodology & methods

This research investigated the perceptions of parents and children, about food and beverage marketing to which children are exposed. The research conducted interviews with parent-child pairs (one parent and one child from each family; children aged between 8 -13 years), to discover their awareness of, responses to, and opinions about food and beverage marketing that children are exposed to.

The research objectives were to examine children's and parents': general understandings and perceptions of marketing and its effects on children; awareness of marketing on non-broadcast media; opinions and concerns about marketing; consumer identity; and, perceptions of responsibility, regulation and governance in relation to marketing.

The research was based on the epistemology of constructionism, the theoretical perspective of interpretivism and, qualitative methodology. The research used semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups to explore parents' and children's perceptions of food marketing to which children are exposed.

### Findings and discussion

The findings from my research emerged out of two rounds of interviews with the thirteen parent-child pairs.

The parents and children in this study exemplified neo-liberal citizenry who accepted food marketing as part of modern capitalist society, and who individualised the problem of unhealthy food marketing that children were exposed to. They considered that parents were primarily responsible for mitigating the adverse effects of unhealthy food marketing, and parents did this by regulating children's food choices and media use. The parents applied authoritative parenting principles to regulate their children's diets and media access, and their children in turn appeared to comply with parenting rules and practices.

The parents and children portrayed a complex mixture of idealistic and pragmatic views about the ethics of food marketing to children. They appeared to be caught within the paradox of problematizing unhealthy food marketing to children, both as a social problem and as an individual problem.

The children's responses as consumers of marketing demonstrate the strong 'social' power of marketing vis a vis children's sense of belonging within society and their peer group. Parents also were enmeshed in a complex relationship with marketing, as primary purchasers of their children's food; they both resisted marketing for ethical reasons and engaged with it for pragmatic reasons.

### Conclusion

This research revealed the perspectives of parents and children on some of the central elements in the policy debate on EDNP food marketing namely, ethics, responsibility and regulation. In this way, the research can make a positive contribution to the current policy debate in Australia on restricting children's exposure to EDNP food marketing.

## List of Tables

Table 3.1: Summary of data collection.

Table 3.2: Analysis of parent interviews into codes, categories and themes.

Table 3.2: Analysis of child interviews into codes, categories and themes.

Table 3.4: How interview data informed coding for parents.

Table 3.5: How interview data informed coding for children.

Table 4.1: Socio-demographic make-up of parents in the two rounds of interviews.

Table 4.2: Socio-demographic make-up of children in the two rounds of interviews.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

## Research output arising from this thesis

### *Peer-reviewed publications*

1. Mehta K, Coveney J, Ward P, Handsley E, 'Parents' and children's perceptions of the ethics of marketing energy-dense nutrient-poor foods on the Internet: implications for policy to restrict children's exposure', *Currently under review by Public Health Ethics*.

### *Conference presentations*

1. Mehta K, 2011, 'Media, marketing and how children think about food', Invited speaker, *Education for Health Conference*, Singapore.
2. Mehta K, 2011, 'Neo-liberal parenting and reservations about restricting unhealthy food marketing to children: Implications for public health nutrition advocacy', Oral presentation to *The Nurture and Nourish colloquium: emerging methodologies and theoretical aspects of public health nutrition*, The Australian Public Health Nutrition Academic Collaboration, Adelaide.
3. Mehta K, Coveney J, Ward P, Handsley E, 2009, 'Parents' and children's awareness of food and beverage marketing on non-broadcast media', *European Congress on Obesity*, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

### *Commissioned reports*

1. Mehta K, Coveney J, Ward P, Handsley E, 2010, '*Children and Food Marketing Research Project*', Final Report to SA Health.
2. Mehta K, 2009, '*Review of Literature on Marketing Food & Beverages to Children on Non-Broadcast Media*', Report to SA Health.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank the following people for their contribution to this thesis.

My supervisors – John Coveney, Paul Ward and Elizabeth Handsley - who provided regular and timely intellectual feedback, and most importantly, conveyed their confidence in me.

The South Australian Health Department Strategic Health Research Priorities grants scheme, which provided funding for data collection.

The Nutrition and Dietetic Department at Flinders University which granted several periods of absence from work to enable the research and writing to be carried out.

The parents and children who generously participated in the research.

My dear friend Elizabeth Becker who enthusiastically discussed many of the ideas in the thesis and always encouraged me.

And finally, my precious family Mark, Ben and Toby, who supported me with their love, encouragement and patience; who have always believed in me and who have generously accommodated the demands that a PhD places on family life.