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Australian children's views about food advertising on television

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Australian children's views about food advertising on television

1 Abstract

2 This study explored children's views about food advertising on television in the light
3 of recent public interest in childhood obesity and obesogenic environments. Thirty-
4 seven children aged between 8–11 years, discussed their perceptions of food
5 advertising, in focus groups. The children engaged as consumers of advertising,
6 noticing technical aspects, and expressing their likes and dislikes of particular
7 techniques. While they understood the persuasive intent of advertising, they
8 nevertheless desired products and made purchase requests. They particularly desired
9 energy-dense nutrient-poor foods. The children demonstrated sophisticated levels of
10 advertising literacy through their articulation of problems such as deception, impacts
11 on children's health and wellbeing, and family conflict. They revealed themselves as
12 sentient beings, with the capacity to react, respond and reflect on their experience of
13 advertising. This study makes a contribution to research on consumer socialisation by
14 introducing the perspective of Australian children. As stakeholders in the childhood
15 obesity problem, the views of children should also be of interest to health policy
16 makers.

Introduction

The prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity, as measured by international child-specific BMI cut-points (Cole, Bellizzi, Flegal et al., 2000) is increasing worldwide, and prevalence rates between 25-30% are now common in countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia (Wang and Lobstein 2006; Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2008). Childhood overweight and obesity is associated with many co-morbidities such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, musculoskeletal problems and obstructive sleep apnoea (Must & Strauss, 1999).

The marketing of energy-dense nutrient-poor foods to children, is well recognised as a probable factor in the complex aetiology of childhood overweight and obesity (WHO, 2003). A number of systematic reviews of the empirical research, have confirmed that food marketing does indeed influence children's food preferences, food choices and consumption (Hastings, McDermott, Angus et al., 2006; IOM, 2006). Australian children are exposed to high levels of food advertising (up to 30% of all advertisements during children's peak viewing times) and 50%-80% of advertisements promote energy-dense nutrient-poor foods (Chapman, Nicholas, & Supramaniam, 2006; Kelly, Smith, King et al., 2007; Zuppa, Morton, & Mehta, 2003). The highly advertised foods (fast foods, chocolates and confectionary) are characterised by the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating*, as 'non-core foods' to be eaten sparingly, for the very reasons that they are energy-dense and nutrient-poor, and can lead to weight gain if eaten in excess (Kellett, Smith, & Schmerlaib, 1998). Current high levels of advertising of unhealthy foods gives children the message that these foods are normative and desirable, and consequently contribute to an obesogenic environment (Swinburn, Egger, & Raza, 1999).

Television advertising comprises the greatest proportion of investment by food companies on promotion of branded food products to children (OfCom, 2004). In the US companies spend an estimated \$10 billion per year on television advertising to children (Schor and Ford, 2007). Food and beverage companies also use other media to promote their products to children; these include: the Internet, children's magazines, movie-toy tie-ins, school and sports sponsorships, product placement on television programmes and movies, and point-of-sale promotion (Hawkes, 2004). Advertisers see children as a lucrative market to be tapped (Linn, 2004). In 2002, children aged 4 to 12 years in the United States, spent \$30 billion of their own money, and influenced up to \$600 billion of household expenditure (Schor & Ford, 2007).

Australian children aged 5-14 years spend on average 20 hours a week watching television, videos or DVDs (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Out of these 3 screen-based activities, children engage in watching television more than they do videos or DVDs (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). It is little surprise then, that television advertising is the dominant marketing strategy used by food and beverage companies.

The processes by which children understand and are persuaded by advertisements, has had a long history of research. Piaget's (1960) work on children's cognitive development, provided the theoretical framework for early research which showed that only by the age of 7-8 years, did children develop the capacity to consistently discern the persuasive intent of advertising . Theories of information processing described children's incremental development of capabilities for storage and retrieval of information, for example, analysing persuasion motives and product quality, (Roedder, 1981). It wasn't until children were 12 years and over that they routinely

viewed advertisements analytically. Information processing theories also provided a framework for describing how younger children focussed more on perceptual (peripheral) elements of advertisements, such as colour, sound and imagery, while older children focussed more on informational (central) aspects of advertisements (Roedder, 1981). The research on advertising literacy therefore proposed a single-staged developmental process whereby children incrementally acquired capacity to distinguish advertising content and understand persuasive intent. This evidence has been cited as proof that advertising to children under the age of 10 years is inherently misleading, and that young children deserve to be protected from the harmful effects of advertising (American Psychological Association, 2004).

It was assumed that skills in literacy would give children cognitive defence against the persuasive effects of advertising (Bouchard, 2002; Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994), however, it was shown that children as old as 11 years of age, did not automatically invoke these cognitive defences unless explicitly reminded to do so (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988). The idea that young children are more susceptible to persuasion effects of advertising than older children, has been challenged by findings that children aged 7-16 years, in fact, showed more persuasion effects than younger children aged 2-6 years (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). Livingstone and Helsper proposed that older children are more likely to be persuaded by central processing route, of the product message, and younger children to be persuaded by peripheral processing route, of the visuals, sounds, special effects, cartoon characters etc.

Nairn and Fine (2008) take the arguments beyond cognition and skills, and draw on new findings from neuroscience and psychology, to propose that marketing techniques which link positive experiences to product exposure, result in consumers developing preferences for those products

in unconscious and non-rational ways. They distinguish between implicit (unconscious) processes and explicit (cognitive) processes and propose that implicit attitudes are stronger predictors of behaviour than explicitly held attitudes. Nairn and Fine, therefore reject age-based cognitive development as a benchmark for considering the ethics of advertising, and argue instead that questions about 'fairness' of advertising should rest on children's ability to resist implicit persuasion.

Food advertising to children is contested ground with public health practitioners and industry representatives debating causality of advertising in the childhood obesity epidemic. The food and beverage industry uphold their right to market their products and see children as a lucrative market to be exploited. They argue that children as young as four years of age understand the selling intent of advertising (Hanson, 2000). Public health groups, on the other hand, have defended children's vulnerability and rights to be protected, for example in Australia the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children has been a strong advocate in this area.

The policy debate in Australia on food advertising and childhood obesity, has included the views of health experts, politicians, industry protagonists and even parents (NSW Department of Health 2003; Ip, Mehta & Coveney, 2007). However the 'voice' of children has been notably absent. Children typically do not participate in the democratic process in spite of being the subject of much policy aimed at protecting their interests as a vulnerable group (Prout, 2000).

This research aimed to investigate young children's (8-11 years) views about television food advertising. The intention of the research was to bring the perspective of the 'target group (children)' into the debate on television food advertising and childhood obesity, by using

qualitative methods. Notwithstanding the enormous research activity on advertising literacy and effects with children, few studies used qualitative methods to investigate how children think about advertisements. Moore and Lutz (2000) used in-depth interviews with children aged seven to 11 years of age, to explore how children think about advertisements. The present study assumed that children are competent and insightful informants about their lives (Prout, 2002), and as stakeholders in the policy debate, their views would be of interest to policymakers, food manufacturers, and advertisers, in their considerations of a way forward to resolve the problem of food marketing and childhood obesity.

Methodology

There is a growing movement of researchers who are sensitive to children's own meanings of childhood experiences, and, who suggest that research should be embedded in an understanding of the sociology of childhood and the social construction of childhood (Alanen, 1992; Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley, & Davis, 2003). For example, MacDougall, Schiller, & Darbyshire (2004) in their investigation of children and physical activity, developed a child-centred research methodology allowing children to capture their own meanings of physical activity by assigning them cameras. A child-centred approach to research is also consistent with primary health care principles, which recognise the importance of working with community members in respectful and empowering ways (Talbot & Verrinder, 2004).

Qualitative research using focus groups was the methodology chosen for this project, in order to allow the 'voices' of children to emerge in relation to their experiences of food advertising on television. Focus groups are a child-friendly research method because they are less formal than

individual interviews and fit with children's ways of talking amongst themselves (Darbyshire, Schiller, & MacDougall, 2005). Focus groups with children are nevertheless complex and challenging, requiring careful attention to the power dynamics between researcher and children, peer relations between children, and each child's cognitive understanding of the questions being asked (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004; Owen, Auty, Lewis et al., 2007). The methods used by Mishna et al. (2004) were followed as a guide to undertaking research with children in particular to provide children with age-appropriate information about the research, to obtain their assent to participate, and to reassure them that they could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. Problems relating to power dynamics and peer relations, were averted as well as possible, with the skills of the principal researcher (KM), who brought to the research, more than twenty years of professional experience as a group facilitator. The focus group sessions were informal and encouraging, and there were no signs of tension or conflict observed in any of the sessions.

Sampling

Children (boys and girls) aged 8-11 years were recruited from two primary schools located in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. The age group 8 - 11 years, was chosen in recognition that by age 8 years, most children have acquired a cognitive understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising (John 1999; Kunkel, 2001). The schools represented different socio-economic strata, with one school situated in an area of relatively high socio-economic status and the other, in an area representing the mean for Adelaide (Public Health Information Development Unit, 1999). Two teachers from each school volunteered their classes to participate in the research project. In return for participating in the research, the classes were offered an education

session on 'television food advertising to children' that was provided after the research data had been collected, in order not to bias the children's responses.

Recruitment

The principal researcher (KM) and research assistant (TU) visited the respective classes, spoke to children about the research project, and invited them to participate in the focus groups.

Thereafter, letters of invitation were sent to parents and carers and those children who returned signed consent forms were eligible to participate in the focus groups. Children were given written information about the research project, in the form of a child-friendly pamphlet and were encouraged to make their own decision about participating in the study.

Data collection and analysis

Each class contributed 1 to 2 focus groups, each comprising 4 – 6 students (see Table 1). The focus groups were conducted in a dedicated room (not the classroom) in each of the 2 schools, and lasted approximately sixty minutes. Each focus group was facilitated by the principal researcher (KM), supported by research assistant (TU). Each child was assigned a letter and number corresponding to their focus group, for example A 1-6, B 7 – 11 and so on.

Insert Table 1

At the start of each focus group, the principle researcher went through the information pamphlet and ensured that children understood the purpose of the research, the methods for collecting

information and their rights to withdraw at any time. Before commencing the focus group session, each child signed an Assent Form that affirmed their understanding of the project, their agreement to take part and their understanding of their right to withdraw at any time.

Children were provided with a healthy snack (small box of dried fruit for each child), to eat during the focus group and they were encouraged to bring their own water bottle into the session. Half-way through the focus group, children were led in a stretching and jumping exercise to provide them with an opportunity to move around and defuse any discomfort caused by sitting down for an extended period. At the start of each focus group, students were given a hand-size 'squeezy ball' to play with during the interview; this also served as a 'gift of appreciation' for participating in the research. These strategies acknowledged the demands on children to sit and concentrate for an hour in the focus groups

The focus groups used a semi-structured interview schedule to explore how children experienced and responded to television food advertisements. The Interview schedule is described in Table 2.

Insert Table 2

The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the principle researcher in all instances except for two focus groups, one of which was transcribed by a transcription company, Outscribe (www.outscribe.com.au) and the other by research assistant (TU).

The data was subjected to systematic content analysis to uncover themes. Coding was developed from the line of questioning in the focus groups, for example, the question, '*What do you like about the ads?*' yielded the category: '*What children liked about advertisements.*' Each child's response under the categories was labelled to identify the child and focus group; in this way the total number of responses as well as the spread of responses across children and focus groups, was recorded. For example 'A1' represented the first Child in Group A. Themes were developed from responses that were shared by a number of children across focus groups.

Rigour and credibility of the data analysis was achieved in a number of ways. Four transcriptions of focus groups were cross-checked by the research assistant, thematic analysis was substantiated by all members of the project team through regular meetings to discuss findings and agree upon themes, and the findings were triangulated with published literature.

Pilot-testing

The interview schedule, child-information pamphlet and assent-form were pilot-tested on a group of 4 children aged 8-11 years. The material was modified in response to their feedback.

Ethical Matters

Ethics approval was obtained from the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of Flinders University of South Australia, and also from the Networked and Learning Community of Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia.

Members of the research team, (Kaye Mehta and John Coveney) declared their membership of the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), to teachers and parents as part of the research information process.

Communication of findings to children

An information sheet containing a summary of the research findings was provided to both schools for distribution to children and families.

Research Findings

Thirty-seven children, aged 8-11 years, participated in seven focus groups. All groups were mixed gender, with girls outnumbering boys in all groups (Table 1).

The children's responses as a whole, were subjected to qualitative analysis to identify major themes, representing their views about television food advertising. The data was analysed to distinguish any difference along gender, age or socio-demographic lines. This paper presents findings about children's views about advertisements, in other words, their advertising literacy, as well as their responses to advertising, that is to say, advertising effects. The comments made under each category are presented as: number of comments made and percentage of total number of comments for that category. As the focus groups were conducted in a conversational style, some categories collected more than thirty-seven comments and some categories collected less.

Quotes are used to illustrate the themes. Children are identified in their quotes, by the focus group letter (A-G) and their designated number (1 -37).

While the focus group sought to find out their views about food advertisements, the children nevertheless spoke about a variety of advertisements, including non-food advertisements.

What children noticed about advertisements

The children discussed television food advertisements which they remembered, and which they liked (n=61) or disliked (n=53). They described in detail their reasons for liking or disliking advertisements, invariably naming the advertisements to illustrate their points. The advertising features that appealed to children related mainly to creative and technical production. These were: story-line (n=21, 34%) visuals (n=14, 23%) and music (n=11, 18%).

“I remember one from McDonalds how there was the quarter pounder that’s like...And uhmm he asks her if she wants tea and he puts the kettle on the burger and then the kettle whistles ;Its a chilli burger” C.16

“Starburst Squirts; ... and when he bites the thing and it squirts out, and it pokes another guy in the eye, and he ...flings a big bit of meat in the air and it lands on a tennis ball thing, and the tennis balls shoot everywhere in the house and the...;[Children giggle/chortle]”. E.25

“ahh, I like the Cadbury favourites one cos it has like, singing in it and things, and yeah they have like, its well designed and things, and they have like rhymes and words and stuff; I think,I think its something like ...a Flake for Jake, and a dream for Jean”. E.22

The food advertisements that children named as most appealing (n=28), represented confectionary (n=15, 25%) and fast foods (n=13, 21%). Interestingly these have been found to be the most highly advertised food categories during children's peak viewing times (Chapman, Nicholas, & Supramaniam, 2006; Kelly, Smith, King et al., 2007; Neville, Thomas, & Bauman, 2005; Zuppa, Morton, & Mehta, 2003).

In describing advertisements that they did not like, the children suggested reasons, such as: repetition (n=10, 19%), boredom (n=7, 13%) and sound (n=7, 13%).

"...its like teasing you to get it, cos its showing over and over again, and you're not allowed to have it but its teasing you, because its right there in front of your face" B.9

"I think ads are too long in between the movies; yes, cos, like its really boring because you just want to watch the movie straight off and then the ads come on...". B.8

"...just that song, and it always come on and it annoys me" F29

Children's understanding of persuasive intent

The children in this study showed a clear understanding about the intent of advertising (n=36), namely to sell products and make money (n=12, 33%), and to stimulate the desire for consumption (n=9, 25%).

“...they want you to like, want you to eat their food, so they can get lots of money, and have more businesses, so then more people buy it;...To get children to, to get adults to buy the foods”. A.1

“...they try to make you feel happy about the ads ...and to buy it”; F.29

Usefulness of advertisements

The majority of children considered advertisements not to provide much benefit to children and their families (n=16, 84%). The main reasons offered were that advertisements promoted unhealthy foods and contributed to family conflict.

“... because if you like it some people would eat too much and then they might get fat; ...and when they grow up they don't need all that and they get fat” A.1

“its unhelpful for the parents;...little kids who like having a tantrum” C.17

Those children who considered advertisements to be useful cited product information as the main reason (n=3, 16%).

“... some of them, they'll be like, one of them could be saying 'that the other one's are full of this much fat', but they wont say their's, but then the other one will say, 'the other one is made of this much fat', so then you know what is in each one ...” C15

Truth in advertising

In response to the question “Do you think that ads tell you everything about the food product” all focus groups responded with a chorus of “No”.

Two themes emerged that described children’s scepticism about truth in advertising (n=28): omission of nutrition or ingredient information (n=17, 61%) and exaggerated positive representation (n=5, 18%).

“They put in probably the best details and the bad details like, if you had too many of em you could have like a heart attack or something cos they’re bad, like they wouldn’t say that, they would say ‘ohh, they’re just delicious, buy em’, something like that; ...like they leave out the negative and put in the positive.” B.8

“. ...and like they’re so colourful and they look so good to eat, it can’t be possible, its too colourful.” C.16

Premiums and competitions

Premium offers are defined as, ‘anything offered with or without additional cost that is intended to induce the purchase of an advertised product or service’ (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009). Competitions, toys and other give-aways are examples of premium offers. Premium offers were a special concern for some children (n=30). Those children expressed disillusionment and disappointment with competitions and give-aways in

advertisements. They felt enticed to enter competitions under false pretences because the actual chance of winning was actually slim (n=10, 33%).

“...with Picnics and maybe Cherry Ripes or something, it says there’s a chance that you find a picture of someone or something on the back of it then you can win \$250,000. Like if you’re really smart, you know that the chances are that you’re going to win it, is about 20 million to one, so there’s no point...”. F.29

They described feelings of disappointment at not winning competitions or not finding the promised toy (n=5, 17%).

“...another thing is people put competitions into food, like with King Kong in the Rollups, like the Special K two-way challenge thingy ... you can buy it for a CD; It’s good but if you don’t win, it kind of depresses”. G.36

“I got this Sultana Bran and it said you can get this King Kong watch, so I took it home and when I opened it there was nothing there, so I haven’t even eaten it since; cos I’m so angry at them; I’m not going to eat again; I’m so angry, they probably don’t even have any of them”.

F.29

The lack of feedback from competition organisers was a source of annoyance (n=9, 30%).

“About like getting those weird prize thingies, even if you do have a very high chance of winning, you don’t normally get like a reply ever again because once I wanted to get this thing,... but they

never replied so I didn't know if I had a chance of like being a runner-up or anything; [felt] like frustrated and anxious ... not upset but very frustrating". F.28

Ethics of advertising

Ethical issues in advertising, was another theme that emerged from some groups (n=15). The children discussed their concerns about the overriding objective of advertisers to make money and sell products (n=2,13%), manipulation of truth (n=7, 47%), vulnerability of young children (n=1, 7%) and development of consumerist values (n=1, 7%).

"I don't actually think that they really care about the ads what they make, all they really care about is the money they make". B.8

"Some big food companies often lie to make you buy it". F.32

"...many younger kids don't have minds like a few of the older kids, like, us, we are still young but we don't have, at least we have more mature minds, and uhmm like, because we know about chocolates and that, but little kids they just see it and they want it, and they don't realize like, we don't realize that the companies put TV ads on because of that reason, because little kids are still there and uhmm, like we don't want to buy them but the little kids will, and that's how they keep the companies still going". B.8

Responding to advertisements

The children in this study responded to food advertisements at either end of the continuum of ‘pester power’. The term ‘pester power’ was coined by marketers to describe the phenomenon of children nagging parents to purchase products they desire (Centre for Science in the Public Interest, 2003).

Purchase requests to parents and care-givers was the dominant response (n=31). Children described making their requests in the context of family food purchases (n=14, 45%), on general unspecified occasions (n=11, 35%) and, directly after advertisements (n=5, 16%).

“...when the ads are on I call them [parents] and say, ‘you know, buy it the next time we go to the shops’ and she’ll say yes or no.” A.5

“... straight after the advert; McDonalds or Hungry Jacks; I say, ‘ahh, can I please have McDonalds’.” E.23

The children named ten branded food products as targets of their purchase requests; these were: fast foods (n=5, 50%) and confectionary (n=3, 30%). As previously stated, fast foods and confectionary are the food categories most highly advertised to children (Chapman, Nicholas, & Supramaniam, 2006; Kelly, Smith, King et al., 2007; Zuppa, Morton, & Mehta, 2003).

The other class of responses made by children were at the opposite end of the ‘pester power’ continuum namely, repressing purchase requests (n=9).

“well if there’s something I likeI don’t ask my dad because I know he’ll never get it; and my mum will never get it or my step-mum wont; [I don’t ask] cos then I’ll get in trouble F.28

“sometimes I just change the channels because I know I’m not allowed to get it and I’ll just get grumpy if I want it” B.8

Overall the findings of this study showed that children related actively to food advertisements. They reacted to, and reflected on food and drink advertisements. They had likes and dislikes in relation to food advertisements, they understood how advertising worked, they took action in response to ads, and they reflected on the broader impacts of advertising.

Discussion

This study explored the views of children aged 8 -11 years, about food advertising on television. While the study aimed to explore children’s views about advertising directed at them, it became clear in the course of the focus groups that children did not distinguish between advertisements directed at them and those directed at adults. They discussed the broad range of advertisements that they were exposed to in the general course of their television viewing. In fact, children’s peak viewing time is not during ‘children’s programs’ as one might expect, but rather, between 6 and 8pm, when family or adult programs are aired (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007). Nevertheless, the majority of the advertisements that the children referred to, were those that were specifically targeted at them.

Advertisements aimed at children are characterised by specific features such as, story-lines, visuals, special effects, songs, tunes, jingles, prizes and give-aways (IOM, 2006). As with

previous research by (Gorn & Goldberg, 1980), and (Moore & Lutz, 2000), the children in this study engaged actively with advertisements, were entertained by them, and were attracted to the technical features that characterise successful advertisements directed at children. As consumers of advertising, they had their likes and dislikes of the medium. One particular advertising technique that came up for criticism, was the use of premiums, which are competitions or give-aways. The children saw through the hoax of many premiums and felt duped by them. Parents also disapprove of advertisers' use of premiums, and have called for these tactics to be restricted or prohibited (Choice, 2006; Morley, Chapman, Mehta et al., 2008). Premiums are a potent tool in marketing as they offer more than the product itself, and serve as an enticement to purchase the product. Government regulations enshrined by the Children's Television Standards, 2009 acknowledge the potential of premiums to exploit children's vulnerabilities, and consequently impose restrictions on their use.

The children in this study possessed media literacy and scepticism, to the extent that they clearly understood the persuasive intent of advertising, and considered that advertisements did not always tell the truth. Nevertheless they still described desire for the products and made purchase requests of their parents and caregivers. Focus group studies with children in the same age group but from other countries, by Marshall, O'Donohoe and Kline (2007) with New Zealand children, and Folta, Bourbeau and Goldberg (2008) with American children, also found them to understand the persuasive intent of advertising while nevertheless still being influenced by them. These findings support theories of advertising literacy (Selman, 1980; John, 1999), and information processing (Roedder, 1981), which propose that children aged 7-11 years, are aware of advertising intent but do not use these literacy skills unless specifically reminded to do so. Age and development of literacy skills does not confer adequate defence against advertising; we now

know that children over 7 years of age, are even more susceptible to persuasion effects of advertising than children aged 2 -6 years (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

The children described a diverse range of responses to advertising, from making purchase requests to repressing their desires. Those children making purchase requests simply conformed to advertisers' expectations that children will exert their second-hand buying power through pestering their parents to purchase products (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2003). The ability to repress their desires and adapt to parental refusal is also a skill that increases with age and would be expected to be evident in the middle years of childhood (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that those children who did not make purchase requests, still expressed desire for the products. In this way they were demonstrating persuasion effects in the form of positive attitudes to the product, even if they did not go so far as to engage in purchase-related behaviour (Hastings, McDermott, Angus et al., 2006).

Pester power leads to conflicts and stresses in families (Goldberg & Gorn, 1978). Parents have identified this problem (Ip, Mehta, & Coveney, 2007), and the children in this study were also sensitive to family conflict as a problematic outcome of advertising. In the fight against childhood obesity, considerable responsibility is placed on parents, to manage their children's food choices, however, children's persistent nagging and family conflict, would undermine parents' ability to carry out this role successfully (Gosliner, Madsen, & Strasburger, 2007). The development of consumerist values and materialism was also problematised by the children. While these advertising effects are considered secondary compared to the principal effects of increasing product recall, desire, consumption and purchase behaviour, they nevertheless have

powerful impacts on children's social and psychological development, family relations, and parental authority (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Kunkel, 2001).

The children's scepticism about the usefulness and credibility of advertising is consistent with their age, development of critical thinking skills, and their exposure to a wide range of information sources about products and nutrition, including parents, peers and school, as well as advertising (John, 1999). Those children who described advertisements as useful subscribe to the assistive or informational role of advertising. This perception is more common among children under 8 years of age, and its presence in this study confirms that cognitive development proceeds at different paces for individual children.

The degree of mistrust and scepticism expressed by the children in this study was stronger than that found by Moore and Lutz (2000), in their qualitative study of children aged 10–12 years, who understood the persuasive intent of advertising but were not critical of advertising. The children in this study demonstrated complex critical thinking skills through their articulation of concerns about the promotion of unhealthy foods, distortions of truth, exploitation of young children, creation of consumerist values, and contribution to family conflict. The ethical ideas expressed by the children are equal in sophistication to those found in documents such as, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, (UNHCR, 1989) and the *Recommendations for an International Code on Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children* (Consumers International and International Obesity Task Force, 2008). Through the focus group discussions, the children showed themselves to be sentient beings, capable of reflecting on the broader social dimensions of advertising, while at the same time responding to the persuasive effects of advertising.

While this study principally sheds light on how children think about food advertising, it is important to remember that the principal public health concern is the marketing of unhealthy foods to children, and how this contributes to an obesogenic environment (Harris, Pomeranz, Lobstein et al., 2009). It is therefore important to note that the advertisements noticed by the children and the products they requested represented those highly advertised categories of fast food, chocolate and confectionary (Kelly, Smith, King et al., 2007). Their desire for highly advertised products, notwithstanding their understanding about the poor nutritional quality of these foods, demonstrates the complexity of children's food decision, that incorporate social as well as health narratives (Rawlins, 2008).

Methodological issues

The sample size of 37 children, while small, was nevertheless acceptable for qualitative research and the focus groups yielded rich information about children's perceptions about and responses to, food advertising on television (Rice & Ezzy, 2000). The use of focus groups allowed children to speak freely about their experience and opinions of food advertising. The focus group method permitted children to roam beyond the semi-structured interview questions to discuss issues of concern to them, namely premiums and ethics of advertising.

The children's responses to focus group questions were analysed as a whole and were not subjected to further analysis against gender, age or socio-economic variables. While differences of opinions were expressed in the focus groups, negative case analysis was not chosen as part of

the method of analysis. Instead the data was analysed for dominant themes, shared by a number of children across focus groups as suggested by Rice and Ezzy (2000).

The limitations of focus groups, particularly with children must nevertheless be acknowledged in considering the quality of these research findings. Influence from peers, power relations between researcher and child, children's understanding of the questions, ability to communicate their meanings, and desire to please, can reduce the accuracy of the data (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004; Owen, Auty, Lewis et al., 2007).

What does this study add?

This study confirms our understanding of children as active objects and subjects of advertising. They reacted to the techniques used by advertisers to capture their attention and they made purchase requests in response to advertisements. While the children demonstrated a cognitive understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising, they nevertheless desired the advertised products and made purchase requests. Not surprisingly, they desired energy-dense nutrient-poor foods that are highly advertised. Moreover, children called into question the use of advertising techniques such as competitions and giveaways, as well as the ethics of advertising. As consumers, the children were acquisitive but not duped by advertising. They revealed themselves to be sentient beings, demonstrating the capacity to react, respond and reflect on their experience of advertising. This study makes a contribution to research on consumer socialisation by introducing the perspective of Australian children. The study findings confirm much of the research that has gone before and in this way, contradicts industry assertions that children are evolving as consumers, and able to 'see through' and resist advertising. Policy-makers

addressing childhood obesity should be interested to know that children continue to be influenced by advertising.

Table 1. Focus Groups

Focus Group	School	Age group	Gender Male (M), Female (F)	Number of children
A	1	8 -9 yo	3M, 3F	6 (A 1 -6)
B	1	8 -9 yo	1M, 4F	5 (B7 -11)
C	2	10 – 11 yo	1M, 5F	6 (C12 – 17)
D	2	10 - 11 yo	2M, 2F	4 (D18 -21)
E	1	8 -9 yo	2M, 3F	5 (E 22 -26)
F	2	10 yo	3M, 3F	6 (F 27 – 32)
G	2	10 yo	2M, 3F	5 (G 33 -37)

Table 2.

Semi-structured interview questions

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Source of food information, for example, <i>“How do you get to know/hear about new foods?”</i> 2. Context, for example, <i>“What TV programs do you watch?”</i> 3. Recognition, for example, <i>“What are your favourite food ads on TV?”</i> 4. Appeal of ads, for example <i>“What do you like/not like about the ads?”</i> 5. Understanding of intent, for example, <i>“Why do you think they make ads?”</i> 6. Credibility of ads, for example, <i>“Do you think ads tell you everything about the product?”</i> 7. Response to ads, for example, <i>“What do you do if you see an ad for a food that you like or</i>
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might want to try?”

8. Food ads and health, for example, “Are food ads helpful/unhelpful in any way?”

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