Abstract:
Much of the current literature aimed at understanding the current childhood obesity epidemic tends to place a large proportion of the blame upon advertisements that promote unhealthy eating habits. In this paper, I do not intend to challenge this finding but rather add a new component to the analysis. Using a small sample of a larger study of media messages about family, food and love in Australia, I argue that it is not only marketing or junk food companies that circulate mixed messages about appropriate and healthy eating within the family context. Rather, mixed messages are circulated equally through advertising and editorial content. This is an important realisation, because understanding the multiple sources of these mixed messages is likely to make solutions to the problem more comprehensive and effective.

Introduction
Throughout June 2004, the Australian news media reported a debate between the Federal Government and the Opposition regarding the solutions to what both sides acknowledged to be a national (and indeed global) epidemic of childhood obesity. The Opposition argued that the solution to childhood obesity was the removal of junk food advertisements during children’s prime television viewing periods. The Government claimed that banning such advertising was ill-conceived and illogical — parents are ultimately responsible for what their children eat, not advertisements, and a ban would be indicative of a ‘nanny-state’. The Opposition countered that, by reducing advertising, they hoped to reduce ‘pester power’ and thereby assist parents in making responsible eating choices for their children. While the Opposition sought to reduce the temptation for children to desire to eat poorly, the Government sought to
counteract the effects of poor eating with additional, structured opportunities for exercise.

In spite of their disagreements, it was clear that both sides were in agreement regarding one crucial idea: that it is ultimately parents who are responsible for the diets of their children. Although each side located the solution in a different realm — the Government in school fitness programs, and the Opposition in regulating advertising — they agreed with the assumption that childhood obesity is created in the ‘family home’, and is ultimately the result of parent-child interactions regarding food consumption.

Indeed, this assumption is reproduced in some of the literature on childhood obesity. For example, in a discussion of the role of advertisers and advertising in childhood obesity, Hawkes (2005) identifies the high frequency of messages marketing unhealthy foods as a significant component in the epidemic. The logic that she reproduces appears so frequently that it is possible to recite the causal links without reference to any specific research results or points of contestation: 1. the goal of the marketing companies is to increase market share; 2. in order to increase market share, advertisers implement a wide range of marketing tools, including media advertisements, point-of-sale promotions, in-school marketing and product placement; 3. the frequency of messages regarding low-nutrition foods is so high that it overwhelms efforts to communicate healthy eating messages to children; 4. the desirability of low-nutrition foods is so effectively ensured by marketers that children regularly use ‘pester-power’ to acquire these foods from their parents; so 5. parents indirectly fall victim to marketing techniques as a result of their children directly falling victim to that marketing ensuring that, 6. children eat too much unhealthy food and become victims of the childhood obesity epidemic.

This agreement regarding the assumed site or cause of childhood obesity is despite the fact that many researchers in the field of childhood obesity agree that the factors contributing to the epidemic are complex and multiple (e.g. Gable & Lutz 2000; Green et al 2003). Yet, while health science researchers are able to document many of these factors as correlations, they have thus far been unable to come to an understanding of how those factors might operate in terms of either cultural beliefs and expectations or social practices. As McCalman (2004), has argued, ‘We’ve long known the medical fact that obesity in children represents a health risk … but to solve
these problems we must address resistant human behaviour’. In the case of childhood obesity, health scientists have been unable to understand the resistance to healthy eating choices on the part of both parents and children, which continues in spite of large-scale health promotion programs (see also Baur 2002; Schwartz & Puhl 2003).

**Aims**

In this paper, I will begin to explore some of the possible reasons for the so-called ‘resistance’ to health promotion messages aimed at combating childhood obesity. I will do so by considering one of the current theories of media influence on audiences. My goal will be to suggest that the current logical progression is insufficient to understand the complex role of media and marketing in contributing to childhood obesity. I will be offering an alternative perspective, which will be placing the issues within a much wider social and cultural context than has tended to be the case to date.

**Theoretical approaches to media influence**

Stuart Hall (1980) has documented the ways in which media producers ‘encode’ dominant messages within texts, which can be identified through careful content analysis of media texts. Hall (1980) also argued that audiences of media ‘decode’ those dominant messages in multiple ways, reflecting their diverse relationships with both the texts and the messages. This latter theoretical insight resulted in a series of important ethnographic studies of reception of media messages (e.g. Morley 1986).

However, what was lacking from both the analyses of media content and the investigations of media audiences was an understanding of the role of culture — both in terms of the content of media and in terms of the beliefs and practices of audiences — in motivating human actions in relation to those messages. As Strauss and Quinn (1997: 20) have argued, ‘How do we explain the force of culture (as both symbols and meanings) while acknowledging that culture (in whatever form it takes) does not make anyone do anything?’

Strauss and Quinn (1997) developed the concept of ‘cultural models’ to aid in answering this question. Cultural models are sets of interlinked ideas and symbols that inform the conscious and unconscious choices that people make on a daily basis. Cultural models are multiple, can be contradictory, and are internalised on a constant basis through a continuing process that relies on repeated experiences of associated concepts and emotions, rather than the learning of explicitly stated rules. One of the
innovative contributions of this conceptual model is to locate such processes of learning and internalisation within the neural pathways of the brain itself. That is, the associations between ideas, emotions and practices become so ‘taken for granted’ that the contradictions between specific pathways of such associations are not necessarily ‘seen’.

The media have been identified by Strauss and Quinn (1997) as an important source of repeated experiences of associating specific ideas and emotions. The media provide multiple opportunities for audiences to internalise associations of sets of practices and emotional states (i.e. cultural models) in such forms as product advertising, soap operas and sitcoms. Furthermore, these cultural models can be in direct contradiction with explicit statements made about the same practices in the same media – in contexts such as health-promoting education and advertisements. Thus, one hypothesis to explain the ‘resistant human behaviour’ referred to above is that alternative, non-healthy, cultural models regarding how parents and children interact in relation to food are appearing more frequently than are the health-promoting messages (see also Worsley 2002). Indeed, this is implicit in stage 3 of the logical progression I identified earlier. However, cultural models offer us an additional element to this discussion: that not only do such messages appear more frequently, but they are more consistently associated with emotional states that are culturally identified as desirable. In the context of childhood obesity, my hypothesis is that the marketing tools of low-nutrition food companies actually give more frequent messages to parents about love, and in particular, demonstrating that love to their children, than are available from other sources such as marketing of nutritional advice.

Methodology

In order to test this hypothesis, I have commenced a systematic analysis of media representations of parent-child interactions regarding food, aimed at identifying the dominant cultural models of parent-child interactions regarding food that appear within a broad range of media. I gathered media material from television and magazines, which is currently undergoing analysis. In this paper, I will be reporting on one test case from this data: an issue of Family Circle magazine from October 2005. This magazine has been selected for several reasons. First, Family Circle is
marketed as a ‘family’ magazine; this means that it includes specific discussions of parenting issues, as well as including attention to food and emotions. I thus anticipate it to be one of the richer sources of data for testing this particular hypothesis. Second, I selected the October issue because it is not closely associated with any specific festive periods of the year, such as Easter or Christmas, which would be likely to skew the results. Finally, my analysis of the media materials so far suggests that this is likely to be a fairly typical example of the frequency of specific messages regarding parenting and food within the media more generally, with the acknowledgement that my analysis is by no means complete yet and the results may indeed begin to shift as more materials are examined.

This issue of *Family Circle* is 164 pages long, including the front and back cover. I coded the magazine for frequency of both types of pages and representations of specific themes. Although every magazine is arguably 100% advertising (see McCracken 1993), I decided to draw a distinction between apparently editorial content and explicitly advertising content. In this distinction, 51 pages (31%) of the magazine are devoted to explicit advertising content. This percentage does not include pages such as ‘Check it out’ (p. 21), in which the *family circle* team provide a brief statement on six products they sampled, including, for example, Dove Firming Body Wash, about which they say ‘A shower is the ideal way to wash away your worries – and this little gem is the perfect companion … You may never want to leave the bathroom again’.

I coded each page for representations of a number of specific themes, three of which I will discuss in this paper: family, love and food. I coded family in two ways: first, when words such as ‘family’, ‘parenting’ and ‘children’ appeared; second, when images represented adults interacting with children without an alternative institutional context (e.g. school, medical). Love was coded only when specific words appeared, such as ‘love’, ‘affection’ and ‘loving’. Food was coded when either food words or images appeared. Below, I pay attention to the specific instances of the combined representation of all three of these coded themes.

**Family, love and food: frequencies**

Only five pages in the entire issue of the magazine were coded for all three themes: family, food and love. All five of these were editorial pages. A further ten pages of
editorial content combined references to family and love, a combination which appeared in one advertising page. Another four pages of editorial content featured combined reference to family and food, a combination that appeared in seven pages of advertising. Thus, 16% of the advertising pages included a combination of either family and love or family and food, while 17% of editorial pages featured a combination of either family and love, family and food, or family, love and food. Interestingly, this suggests a need to pay just as much attention to editorial content in media as is paid to explicit advertising content when considering messages about food for children. To date, the attention to advertising has not been complemented by broader attention to the range of media messages regarding food and children. Rather, an assumption prevails that editorial content will usually and automatically support healthy food choices, while advertising messages are incapable of doing so (see also Wilding 2006).

These figures provide us with some sense of the frequency with which representations of family are associated with representations of food and of love in this issue of Family Circle. However, what it fails to offer is an account of the content of these associations. Are they positive associations? Are they negative associations? Are they variable in the messages they present? A closer look at this sample of pages will help to answer these questions. I will first provide a brief analysis of the advertising pages, followed by a discussion of the editorial pages.

**Family, food and love in advertisements**

In the advertisements, a clear association between family and food occurs seven times. These are not necessarily food advertisements. For example, one page advertises the popular children’s toy Play-Doh, which features a ‘Play-Doh Dohville Ice-cream Truck’ to ‘Drive around town creating treats for the Dohville friends’ (p. 9), supporting an association between friends and ice-cream treats. Another advertises Freedom’s support of the Children’s Cancer Institute of Australia by offering tea-towels and aprons for sale and suggesting that children can use them to create ‘Smiley cookies’ decorated with lollies (p. 142). In two cases, the reference is to convenience food marketed as a healthy option for feeding families. For example, a pre-packaged salsa is advertised as fresh, versatile and ‘packed with taste and goodness’ (p. 129), and Asian sauces are presented as useful for a ‘weeknight family meal’ (p. 148). In
another two cases, the food being featured is clearly healthy. For example, an advert for Woolworths baby corn talks about the ‘fussy parents’ Woolworths had to become in order to bring the best fresh corn to the Australian consumer (p. 74), and another page features the Australian Government ‘go for 2&5’ promotion, offering tips and recipes to get kids to eat more fruit and vegetables every day (p. 131).

Other advertisements, not counted in this sample, do not directly refer to family or children but nevertheless imply a child as the consumer. These are the sorts of advertisements more commonly identified in the research literature as problematic, because of their ‘pester power’. For example, IXL Jam is offered in a set of four collectable Disney Winnie the Pooh glasses (p. 11). In spite of the significant research attention focused on such advertisements, in this issue of *Family Circle* only two pages featured this style of promotion. Occasionally, advertisers also appeal to the association between family and love. However, in this issue it only occurs once, with an advertisement for a Barbie that will enable young girls to learn how to ‘zip, pose, tie [shoe laces] and love’ (p. 163).

An analysis of the content of these advertisements suggests that, at least in the case of *Family Circle* magazines, advertisers are not a significant source of negative information regarding the food that parents feed their children. Indeed, the positive images seem to outweigh the negative ones. At the same time, the ambiguity of this imagery is also apparent. For example, the Freedom supports Children’s Cancer Institute promotion clearly identifies making sugary treats as a fun idea for children, and features a brightly coloured image of children making large cookies decorated with lollies. Although not usually a target for campaigns seeking to ban junk food advertising, in this magazine it is arguably the most problematic example of promotion of unhealthy foods to children, along with the IXL jam advertisement. Further, in both of these cases it is important to note that the advertisement is directed at parents, rather than children, by making an argument for ‘fun for a good cause’ in the first example and for the ‘huge fun’ of collecting glasses in the second.

**Family, food and love in editorial content**

Five pages were identified as featuring a combined reference to family, food and love in this magazine issue. Two of these provide a description of a ‘Mother of Invention’, a regular feature in which a high-achieving business woman’s pathway to success is
outlined (pp. 28-31). In this case, the busy mother of three describes balancing family, meals and work. Although successful in her work, this woman acknowledges that she is ‘time-poor’. As a result, her own mother is responsible for giving the three children their ‘meat and three veg’ every night, while she and her husband rely on frozen pre-packaged meals. This is somewhat ironic, given her claim that her decision to set up her own business was made in the interests of having more time with her children, and that the business she has established markets a healthy convenience food. The final page is another regular feature, in which a mother of four describes aspects of her daily life. On this occasion, she reflects on the importance of an expensive restaurant meal with her husband (and without her children) on their wedding anniversary as a means of cementing their relationship.

Family and love is a more common combination within this magazine issue. For example, a special feature on ‘How to stay married’ provides tips for maintaining good relationships, including spending time together and being willing to compromise. Another feature, ‘pampered parents’, describes products and services that families use to remain well groomed, including tonics, creams and massages. In other sections, advice is given regarding dealing with errant teenagers, books about good family life are reviewed, and astrological predictions are made regarding the success and happiness of family members.

Of more significance to this discussion are the less frequent but significant intersecting references to family and food. In most cases, these are editorialised versions of advertisements that appear elsewhere in the magazine. For example, the Australian Government’s ‘Go for 2&5’ promotion is repeated in editorial format in the opening pages of the magazine (p. 18), logos for organisations such as the Heart Foundation and Australian Dental Association are provided as a means of ensuring healthy food shopping for the family (p. 85), and a feature on vitamin supplements emphasises the preference for ensuring that all nutritional requirements are met by a varied and healthy diet rather than supplements (p. 96).

As with the advertising content, an analysis of the editorial content suggests that the messages being communicated are not straightforward. On the one hand, a significant amount of the editorial references to food and family are aimed at promoting the same healthy options that are promoted through government literature and policy. However, other messages do also filter through. The feature on the ‘mother of invention’ serves
to legitimise a form of eating for the adults, at least, that does not meet with government guidelines of preparing fresh fruit and vegetables. Also, without hearing from the grandmother who feeds the children, it is difficult to know whether the mother’s ‘meat and three veg’ assumption regarding her children’s diet is actually being fulfilled. In effect, here is one mother who has abandoned the supervision of her children’s diet in favour of pursuing her business career. At the same time, the references to food that are explicitly the product of the ‘family circle team’, including the pages of recipes, are overwhelmingly supportive of a diet high in fruit and vegetables and low in sugar and fat.

Conclusion

The childhood obesity epidemic has been identified as resulting from a number of intersecting causal factors, no one of which can be held completely responsible. In such a context, it is surprising to see that there is continued attention to the dangers of advertising and marketing as the most significant site of the problem, and one which needs to be addressed. In this brief analysis of one media product, it has become clear that advertisements are not the only source of ‘mixed messages about good diet and nutrition’ (Hawkes 2005: 374). Just as worthy of our attention are the messages being circulated in the media content that accompanies that advertising. The mixed messages, it seems, are central to the cultural models by which women such as the ‘mother of invention’ live their lives.

Footnote


References


