



Young people and food branding

- Branding is a very powerful form of marketing, because the meanings and values associated with particular brands are created by consumers themselves. This makes branding a potentially important influence on consumer behaviour in relation to food.
- Young people use brands, particularly clothing brands, to construct a desired image and to avoid peer disapproval and ridicule. Boys, younger teenagers and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds appeared to attach more importance to brands. There is strong stigma attached to being seen with economy and value brands.
- Although branding is less important to young people in the context of food than clothing, our study shows that having the right brand of snacks or drinks in a school packed lunch still matters. Premium food brands, particularly for crisps, confectionery and fizzy drinks, are associated with positive concepts such as popularity and trendiness.
- The influence of branding on food choices is concerning because the most heavily marketed brands tend to be for products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS).
- Non-HFSS brands tend to have more negative associations such as dullness, 'geekiness' and pretentiousness. However, some non-HFSS brands appeal to young people. Brand attitudes to *Volvic* (as an example of a non-HFSS brand) were almost as positive as those towards *Coca Cola*, and much more positive than attitudes to a low status economy brand of cola. This suggests there is the potential to create non-HFSS brands which positively engage young people and encourage healthier food purchases.
- However, young people's attitudes towards the concept of healthy eating are mixed and ambivalent. The healthy eating 'brand' as it is presented to them in the form of healthier school food does not always deliver benefits that they value, such as taste and value for money.

Background

Public health experts and nutritionists need to understand the nature and impact of commercial marketing if they are to develop appropriate policy responses, and also if they are to borrow learning from this field and apply it positively to efforts to promote healthier eating.

Branding is used by marketers to foster engagement and loyalty, and is one of the most powerful marketing tools. The power of branding rests in consumers' minds: in the meanings and values which they attach to particular brands. Research has shown that tobacco and alcohol brands deliver powerful emotional benefits to young people. The dominance of youth-oriented global brands such as Coca Cola and McDonalds point to the importance of understanding more about what branding means to young people and how it relates to their food choices.

Methods

A three-stage study was undertaken comprising:

- Twelve focus groups comprising 6-8 respondents per group. The focus groups used various imaginative techniques to probe attitudes to branding, including asking respondents to construct school lunch boxes for a 'trendy person', a 'popular person', 'an unpopular person', 'a healthy person', 'a rich person', and so on.
- Questionnaire development and piloting
- A survey conducted in schools with 1768 young people.

The study was conducted in the North East of England, and the sample for both the focus groups and the survey was 13-15 yr olds (English school years 9 to 11) of both genders and different socio-economic backgrounds. Survey respondents were recruited from 15 schools in seven different local education authorities. The focus group respondents were recruited from different schools in the same areas.

Multivariate analysis techniques were used to detect differences in the survey data by gender, school year and ACORN classification, while controlling for a range

of other socio-economic and lifestyle variables.

Full details of the review methods can be found on the PHRC website (www.york.ac.uk/phrc/).

Key findings

The importance of brands

Our focus groups found that young people rely on brands as markers of product quality and consistency, and use them to construct a desired image of themselves. They use the 'right' brands to secure peer acceptance and avoid peer disapproval and ridicule. They are particularly sensitive to the social risks and stigma of being seen with 'cheap' brands. The survey data indicated that brands are particularly important to boys and younger pupils and to those more disadvantaged (i.e. the poorer a young person's background, the more importance they attach to having premium brands).

The survey showed that young people judged it less important to have the right brand of crisps than trainers, although branding was still a factor when choosing crisps. It also showed that brand attitudes to *Coca Cola* were far more positive than attitudes to a generic brand cola. The *focus groups* confirmed this, finding that young people made consistent associations between well-known food brands and positive concepts such as popularity and trendiness:

[What would a 'popular person' have in their lunchbox?]

*"The Coca Cola and the Pepsi."
"Yes. All the fat foods basically."
"Crisps."*

(Girls, Year 9, C2DE)

They were sensitive to the embarrassment and stigma of being seen with low status food brands, commenting that peers would "*think [they] were poor or something*" if they had economy brands in their packed lunch.

HFSS and non-HFSS brands

Young people had high awareness of many food and drink brands, both for products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) and for 'healthier' non-HFSS products. The *focus groups* found that they formed positive relationships with premium HFSS brands such as *Cadbury's* and *Walkers*, which they described emotively as "gorgeous" and "lush". However, they could also be ambivalent about such brands; they were particularly negative and sceptical about *McDonalds'* recent attempts to reposition itself as a provider of healthier menus.

In contrast, they were less strongly engaged by non-HFSS food brands, and sometimes associated them with negative attributes such as dullness, 'geekiness' and pretentiousness. However, they found some non-HFSS food brands, such as those for water, yoghurt and snack products, appealing. When brand attitudes for *Coca Cola* and *Volvic* mineral water were compared in the survey, *Volvic* performed almost as well as *Coca Cola*, and better than a generic brand cola.

Factors influencing food choices

The focus groups suggested that a wide range of factors influenced young people's food choices, several of them bound up with branding, such as quality, taste, advertising and the ability to buy and consume food conveniently when socialising with friends. Although young people denied that peer opinions were a factor, it was apparent that they were very conscious that certain food choices might expose them to ridicule, as these Year 11 boys explained:

"They'd [your friends] care if you pulled out a Smart Price or Aldi or something"

"Yes, they'd laugh at you"

"They'd laugh at the banana too"

Considerable ambivalence was expressed about the image of healthy eating and its importance in food choice. In some respects young people find the concept of healthy eating appealing and aspirational, but at the same time they regard it as dull and socially risky, and a preoccupation of people not like them. The following example illustrates the tensions nicely: when asked what an 'unhealthy person' would put in their lunchbox, a group of Year 9 girls immediately selected the HFSS products and premium brands which they

themselves liked - *Coca Cola*, *Pepsi*, *Walker's* crisps, *Cadbury's* and *Asda* chocolate bars -, but when asked to select products for an 'unpopular person', they selected "the water, the banana and the yoghurt", on the grounds that "most unpopular people normally eat healthier".

Many young people were aware that recent changes to school food have been driven by concerns over childhood obesity and children's diet generally. However, their experiences suggest that the healthy eating options presented to them at school do not deliver on aspects that they value, such as taste, quality, affordability and choice.

The survey findings indicated that functional aspects of the food – taste and filling – were the most important criteria when young people were asked to rate the strength of different influences on their food choices. Convenience and visual appeal were also important. Girls were more likely than boys to indicate that they looked for healthy foods while boys were more likely than girls to want foods that fit into their lifestyle and can be consumed on the move. Interestingly, despite vividly demonstrating the appeal of brands when discussing them in the focus groups, particularly in the lunch box selection task, young people tended not to identify branding as an important food choice criterion when asked about this in the survey. This suggests that the survey method may have encouraged more 'rational' responses regarding food choice influences than the indirect questioning used in the focus groups.

Encouragingly, many considered healthiness an important criterion (although a minority said they deliberately looked for unhealthy foods). Being interested in healthy eating was associated more strongly with being female and with certain lifestyle and demographic characteristics such as living in a 'comfortably off' ACORN area and leisure time pursuits such as playing sport, reading and playing musical instruments. Lower interest in healthy eating was associated with truanting and exclusion, and also with watching television as a leisure time pursuit.

Conclusions

Food brands play a modest but important role in shaping young people's preferences and consumption. Well-known brands help address their concerns and needs in relation to image, reputation, and avoiding peer disapproval. The influence of branding on food choices is concerning because the most heavily marketed brands tend to be for products high in fat, salt and sugar: fast food restaurants, fizzy drinks, salty snacks, confectionery and sugared breakfast cereals.

Our study highlights the importance of emotion in consumption behaviours generally and in food choice in particular. Interventions and policy responses need to acknowledge that there are good – even rational – reasons why consumers look for emotional and symbolic benefits from their food choice decisions.

There are important nutritional and inequalities implications if the stigma attached to economy brands translates into pressure in low income households to buy costlier premium brands in preference to

value alternatives. This merits further research.

There are both problems and potential in the wider 'healthy eating brand'. Young people's engagement with the concept of 'healthy eating' is mixed and ambivalent. The healthy eating 'brand' as experienced in the shape of school food promises more than it delivers, and this potentially undermines the school food brand and the wider concept of health. There is a clear challenge for public health experts to position healthy eating as an unequivocally positive, desirable and appealing notion, and to ensure that the product behind the brand delivers meaningful benefits.

Our findings point to the importance of harnessing marketing in support of healthier eating. Although non-HFSS brands do not appear to engage young people to the same extent as HFSS brands, it is encouraging that some non-HFSS brands do appeal to them. Marketers and retailers should be encouraged to direct their skills at engaging young people towards the promotion of healthier brands

Details of the research team

Martine Stead¹, Anne Marie MacKintosh¹, Laura McDermott¹, Thomas Boysen Anker², Ashley Adamson³

¹Institute for Social Marketing (ISM), University of Stirling and The Open University;

²Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen; ³Human Nutrition Research Centre, Institute of Health & Society, University of Newcastle.

Address for Correspondence

Martine Stead, Deputy Director, Institute for Social Marketing, University of Stirling and The Open University, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK.

About PHRC: The Public Health Research Consortium (PHRC) is funded by the Department of Health Policy Research Programme. The PHRC brings together researchers from 11 UK institutions and aims to strengthen the evidence base for public health, with a strong emphasis on tackling socioeconomic inequalities in health. For more information, visit: www.york.ac.uk/phrc/index.htm

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the PHRC or the Department of Health Policy Research Programme.