



Exposure and Influence of Food Marketing on Australian Secondary Students

Background:

The National Secondary Students' Diet and Activity (NaSSDA) survey 2009-10 is jointly funded by the state Cancer Councils, Cancer Council Australia and the National Heart Foundation of Australia. The study fills a significant gap in existing data in Australia by establishing an ongoing commitment to the standardised monitoring of adolescents' body weight, and dietary and physical activity behaviour at both a state and national level.

Methods:

A nationally representative sample of 12,188 secondary school students from year levels 8 to 11, from 237 schools was surveyed. Data on students' dietary, physical activity and sedentary behaviour were collected via a web-based questionnaire, and anthropometric measurements of students' height, weight and waist circumference were taken by trained researchers in a confidential setting. Active parental consent was required for students to participate in each component of the study. An audit of the school food and activity environment was also conducted.

This research memo reports on the impact of food marketing on Australian secondary school students. Students were asked a series of questions to gauge the extent to which they are exposed to food marketing in their everyday life and to assess the potential influence of marketing on their food choices in the last month.

Data were weighted by state, year level, sex and education sector to the population of students enrolled in Australia and the reported prevalence estimates are based on these weighted data.¹ Analyses adjusted for school level clustering using Stata SE 11.1. Logistic regression analyses were used to test for significant differences ($p < 0.01$) in proportions by sex.

Exposure to food marketing:

Overall, the most commonly reported non-broadcast food marketing techniques students were exposed to in the last month were a special offer competition or giveaway for a food or drink product in a magazine (58%) and food or drink offers on public transport (55%). In addition, just under half of all students (49%) had bought an extra food or drink product that was displayed at the supermarket checkout.

As illustrated in Table 1, males were more likely than females to have bought food or drinks from a vending machine, seen a special offer for food or drink products at school, received an email or text message related to a food or drink product, entered a competition on a food or drink pack, and played a game on the Internet related to a food or drink product.

Table 1: Exposure to food marketing in the last month by sex

| | Males | Females | All |
|--|-------|---------|-------|
| See a special offer, competition or giveaway for a food or drink product in a magazine | 55.9% | 60.0% | 57.8% |
| See a special offer, competition or giveaway for a food or drink product on public transport (e.g. bus, train, tram) | 55.8% | 53.5% | 54.7% |
| Buy an extra food or drink product on display at the supermarket checkout | 49.3% | 48.1% | 48.7% |
| Buy food or drinks from a vending machine | 51.9% | 36.7%* | 44.7% |
| See a special offer, competition or giveaway for a food or drink product at school (e.g. canteen, sports event) | 43.5% | 36.9%* | 40.4% |
| Receive a free sample of a food or drink product at a train station, shopping centre, supermarket, etc. | 31.4% | 28.0% | 29.8% |
| Receive an email with a special offer, competition or giveaway related to a food or drink product | 25.1% | 17.9%* | 21.7% |
| Enter a competition you saw on food or drink packaging | 20.7% | 13.4%* | 17.3% |
| Receive a text message (SMS) with a special offer, competition or giveaway related to a food or drink product | 18.5% | 10.0%* | 14.5% |
| Play a game or enter a competition on the Internet that was related to a food or drink product | 15.9% | 9.5%* | 12.9% |

* Significant sex difference at $p < 0.01$

Influence of food marketing:

Over half of all students (55%) had tried a new food or drink product in the last month that they had seen advertised, while 44% of students had asked their parents/carers to buy a food or drink product they had seen advertised. The promise of a premium offer and product links with popular personalities showed some influence on food choices in the last month while the influence of competitions was generally low, and males were more likely than females to have been influenced by these marketing methods (see Table 2).

Table 2: Influence of marketing on food choices in the last month by sex

| | Males | Females | All |
|---|-------|---------|-------|
| Try a new food or drink product that you had seen advertised | 56.5% | 54.0% | 55.3% |
| Ask your parents / carers to buy a food or drink product that you had seen advertised | 44.0% | 43.1% | 43.6% |
| Choose a fast food outlet because it had a special offer or giveaway with the meal | 28.9% | 20.7%* | 25.0% |
| Choose a food or drink product (e.g. cereal) linked with a movie or sports personality you like | 24.1% | 15.0%* | 19.8% |
| Choose a snack food or soft drink in order to enter a competition or win a prize | 16.2% | 10.4%* | 13.5% |

* Significant sex difference at $p < 0.01$

Summary:

Australian secondary students are exposed to food marketing via a number of non-broadcast avenues, most commonly in magazines or on public transport. Food marketing is a driver of adolescents' purchase decisions, with many students prompted to try a new food or drink product or request their parents make such a purchase in response to seeing advertising. The influence of marketing on young people's food and drink choices is particularly important given they are at an age where they are beginning to have their own disposable income (e.g., from a part-time job or pocket money), thus allowing them to make independent purchase decisions. With the majority of food advertising promoting unhealthy products,^{2, 3} tighter restrictions are needed to limit the potential negative impact of marketing on adolescent diets.

References:

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2010). *Schools Australia, 2009*. Catalogue No. 4221.0. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
2. Chapman K, Nicholas P & Supramaniam R. (2006). How much food advertising is there on Australian television? *Health Promotion International, 21*: 172-180.
3. Neville L, Thomas M & Bauman AE. (2005). Food advertising on Australian television: the extent of children's exposure. *Health Promotion International, 20*: 105-112.