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# Advertising and Consumerism in the Food Industry

Marlene Keller

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, mek198@jwu.edu

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# Advertising and Consumerism in the Food Industry

Marlene Keller  
Honors Thesis

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## **Abstract**

The eating habits of society as a whole have drastically changed over the last few decades. The influx of technology, advertising, images in the media and changes within modern cultural and family values play a big role in the psychological evolution of consumers in the food service industry. My goal is to discover how the images in advertisements and media influence our desire to purchase food and alter our perception on what makes food appealing.

In this thesis paper, I will start off with an introduction of how consumerism has changed since the use of advertisements first began. I will reflect on the “traditional” value of food in comparison to the modernized concept of food, and introduce the emergence of fad foods and food trends in society. This introduction will allow me to further branch out into the topics of the psychological role in consumerism, as well as the roles of gender, socio-economic identity, cultural identity, and later on in the paper, the portrayal of health and beauty in the media.

Next, I will begin to analyze my sources to support my thesis. I will use scholarly articles, essays, statistics from scientific studies, and other reliable sources for analyzing information, and will elaborate on the main ideas to further solidify my argument. Each source will play a key role in providing the data necessary for me to create graphs and charts, if possible, to organize the information. I will also try to find graphs and charts in other sources as references.

My conclusion will focus on how our food choices have been negatively impacted by external sources, such as the media, and provide possible solutions for the problem.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Introduction**

Since the birth of marketing and consumerism in the food industry, the tactics used to sell food and beverage products have drastically changed over the decades. From as early as the period ranging from 1910-1920, the definition of marketing was very general and could be described as “all those activities involved in the distribution of goods from producers to consumers and in the transfer of the title thereto,” (Van Trijp). There were four main components to the earliest tactics of marketing: “selling, buying, transporting, and storing” (Van Trijp). By the 1930s, the food market started to develop into a buyer’s market as the competition for consumers’ money increased. Therefore, food suppliers began to come up with ways to stimulate sales to consumers to match or exceed the sales of their competition. This is where consumerism – the emphasis of using marketing and advertising techniques to obtain a consumer base – was born. With gradual advances in technology since that time, marketing standards started to shift, and advertising campaigns came into play in the marketing of food and beverages.

The concept of advertising began simply as a means of generating awareness of products and getting the company’s name into the public eye. Before and during the World War II era, food products were marketed to women; specifically, the mothers and/or wives of the household. Advertisements were kept simple, and the only real methods of advertising in the early times were through newspaper publications and over the radio. Today, we have numerous ways for advertisers to spread awareness of their products and promote sales to their consumers, such as – but not limited to – magazine ads, television commercials, movie ads, billboards, newspapers,

radio, etc. Advertisements in the past few decades have become much more clever in “luring” people into buying products, and are designed to target specific demographics that would be most likely to buy the product in question.

The problem with many of the advertisements in recent years is that they are almost *too* clever, and it is almost as if they contain subliminal messages telling people that they “need” to buy these products. The food industry and their marketing counterparts are capitalizing on their ability to pinpoint exactly what people of certain ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, genders, ages, religions, etc. look for in products to create advertisements accordingly. These marketing tactics become problematic when the product in question is unhealthy, and is being marketed and advertised to consumers with little to no education in nutrition, and with incomes that restrict them from being able to purchase food items that are healthier and often more expensive.

Pinpointing how, exactly, the media perpetuates the trends in consumerism – focusing mostly on the unhealthy eating habits of society – is the main purpose of this research paper. The psychology of food choice will be uncovered by looking at how the media produces and executes marketing tactics, specifically formulated to spark the interest of desired target markets and demographics.

By analyzing the food industry’s marketing strategies, many questions will be answered, such as: How and/or why has society become so unhealthy? What are some trends that consumers seem to be following? What makes a product appealing to consumers? What role does human psychology play in consumerism? How are food habits, trends, and traditions started? With these questions answered, we will be able to fully address the problems that the marketing and advertising industries bring forth in our society.

Society is at high risk of being exposed to images in the media that influence gender stereotypes, body image, racial and ethnic stereotypes, etc. These stereotypical images and messages that we are perpetually bombarded with by television shows, movies, music videos, and magazines are what create the demographics or “target markets” of consumerism that are so important to marketing companies and their advertising ploys. These target markets are recruited by marketing agencies conducting focus groups to find out exactly what their consumers look for in a product, what makes the product appealing, what could be changed to make the product even more marketable. By doing so, the agencies can effectively sell any product to mostly anyone by understanding the demographic that they fall under, and how those specific consumers buy products. For example, fattening foods could be advertised towards overweight people, because they would be less likely to worry about their weight, rather than a teenage girl, who might be more self-conscious about her weight and might not purchase a food product high in fat. A fruity alcoholic beverage might be advertised towards young adults and teenagers – even though the drinking age in America is 21 – because younger generations tend to enjoy sweeter alcoholic drinks more so than the more mature generations of consumers. With this in mind, it can be assumed that the media and entertainment industry perpetuate the unhealthy trends that occur in consumerism today.

The obesity epidemic, along with other health issues that are plaguing society – such as underage alcoholism and diabetes in children – are only worsened by the sly marketing tactics used by the marketing agencies in the food industry. The goal of this thesis project is to find ways to shape a more health-conscious society. By uncovering the driving forces behind consumers buying the products that they buy and proposing some actions that can be taken

within the marketing industry to put some restrictions on advertisements for unhealthy food and beverage products, we could potentially start to see a difference in our eating habits.

The question is, however, will today's society ever see a turning point? Has our generation reached a critical point where we cannot unlearn whatever unhealthy eating habits we have acquired? There are only so many restrictions that can be placed on advertisements and marketing campaigns, so what other options does society have to reverse the unhealthy eating habits that are forced upon them? By taking a look at the methods of the marketing industry, we will be able to determine if society will reach its downfall, being plagued with worsening food-related health problems, or if there are corrective measures that can be taken to improve our overall health.

The remainder of this thesis paper will expand on the different measures and approaches that food and beverage companies take to market certain products to specific demographics, and the psychological reasoning behind consumers' purchases of specific products. Surveys and statistics of consumers from different demographics will be reviewed and analyzed to support this information and further the understanding on the trends in consumerism. Gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and age are the social groups that will be focused on in the research.

The final portion of the paper will outline certain corrective measures that can be taken towards a healthier society. Possible health plans can be implemented nation-wide to try to fight food-related health issues that plague our society by looking at the trends in consumerism, and how they can be altered to benefit the well-being of our country.



## Chapter 2:

### Literature Review

In this chapter, the advertising aspect of consumerism in the food industry in relation to human behavior will be explained, as well as how each are directly correlated to each other; as well as how marketing companies use tactics accordingly to sell their products to specific groups of people, based on responses to advertisements and food. There are some potential negative effects that society could be faced with by the advertising strategies over the past few decades, which will also be examined.

The problem in question is, are the food industry's advertising tactics negatively affecting society? If so, how? How can we reverse any of the imposed negative effects? Advertising in today's media is loosely monitored, and is more clever than ever, with companies coming up with subliminal tactics to market their products to a broader target consumer base, and spending more money than ever to get consumers to buy those products.

“Almost everything influences food choice, at one time and place or another,” (Rozin) states Professor Paul Rozin, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in his scholarly article, “The Integration of Biological, Social, Cultural and Psychological Influences on Food Choice.” For humans, he explains, food is so important that it “engages and interacts with almost all of our activities: leisure, the arts, sex, [and] work...” (Rozin). All of these activities are used as elements in advertisements to capture the attention of potential consumers and entice them to buy a product. According to Rozin, there are four different influences on humans' food choice – biological (physiological and evolutionary/adaptive),

psychological, social, and cultural influences. By using these four types of influences, advertising agents are able to arouse consumers' interest in their products. The most common way to pinpoint exactly what will have the greatest influence on the product's target market is to conduct studies for "product optimization."

H.R. Moskowitz of Moskowitz Jacobs Inc. in Valhalla, NY describes product optimization as "the disciplined approach to product development, whereby the investigator systematically varies formula and processing conditions," (Moskowitz) in the scholarly article, *Product Optimization: Approaches and Applications*. Historically, Moskowitz explains, product manufacturers developed products without using product optimization techniques, using "tried and true" methods instead:

Modeling consumer reactions and relating these reactions to systematically varied formulations was rare, although research interest did focus on the quantitative relation between subjective reactions and physical measures of product characteristics. (Moskowitz)

With the introduction of computers, as well as a plethora of technological advances, the advertising industry has boomed since the 1970s and 1980s. Having new outlets for receiving and processing data, scientists and statisticians began working in accordance with marketing companies to design experimental tests for product optimization, which could later on be used to alter the company's marketing strategies to appeal to a wider group of consumers.

Moskowitz explains the standard 6-step process in which experiments are conducted by companies looking to optimize the sales of their products. The steps, which go from "formula development to testing analysis" (Moskowitz) include:

- Step 1. Selection of relevant variables and layout of levels by experimental design.
- Step 2. Questionnaire development for testing among respondents (and/or parallel instrumental measures).
- Step 3. Test implementation.
- Step 4. Data analysis and database development
- Step 5. Creation of models from the empirical data.
- Step 6. Use of the models for predictions of product fitting specific goals. (Moskowitz)

Step 1 allows the investigator (in the case of this thesis paper, the investigator would be a product developer working for a food corporation) to “identify the relevant independent variables” (Moskowitz) that are going to be tested in relation to the desirability of the product to the consumers within their target market. For example, a soft drink company looking to develop a new line of diet sodas might formulate an experiment using different artificial sweeteners in their recipe, with an independent variable being the kind of artificial sweetener that was used.

The formulation of questionnaires that Moskowitz explains in Step 2 allows the investigator to put together questions and rating scales for the consumer panelists to give them insight as to what they liked or disliked about certain attributes of the product. The consumer panelists will eventually rate the product based on “sensory ratings, liking ratings, image ratings, and directionals,” (Moskowitz). For sensory ratings, the panelists rate the product on “the degree to which a specific characteristic is present in the product,” (Moskowitz) including characteristics such as aroma, flavor, appearance, texture, etc. The liking attributes rate the degree to which the consumer panelists like each characteristic of the product, with the characteristic in question being rated from “acceptable” to “unacceptable,” or “satisfactory” to “unsatisfactory.” Image attributes are different than sensory attributes in the sense that they are

the impressions, rather than physical feelings, that the consumers receive from the product being evaluated. For example, if the aforementioned soft drink company described the product to the panelists as being “refreshing,” “brisk,” or “calorie-free,” the descriptions would be the image attributes. Also on the questionnaires are the sensory attribute directionals, of which the panelists rate “the degree to which a product under-delivers, or over-delivers a specific characteristic,” (Moskowitz). In the case of the exemplary soft drink company, the degree of sweetness could be one of the sensory attribute directionals seen on the questionnaire.

Finally, the tests are implemented for the product to be critiqued by the consumer panelists. A large panel is optimal for more accurate results in finding out what makes the product appealing to consumers. Once the questionnaires are in and the overall liking of the attributes are reviewed, advertisements can be created in accordance to what the general majority of the consumers found appealing. Moskowitz states that product optimization studies collect a great amount of data, and can be used to “divide consumers into homogenous groups, based upon how each of the consumers process the sensory information to generate ratings of overall liking,” (Moskowitz, 1994). Once the groups are established based on their specific likings of certain attributes of the product, the “target market” – group of consumers most likely to buy the product – can be identified, along with the attributes that they liked in particular, and the “optimized product” can finally be marketed to the public through commercials and advertisements according to the “likes” of the target market. For example, if the target market of the diet soda product was middle-aged Caucasian women, the advertisers might come up with ad campaigns and commercials featuring a thin white woman in her thirties, relaxing on her couch reading a book, while drinking the soda. The idea is to create an image of the product being

enjoyed by someone of the demographic or target market that the company is trying to sell to, and attract the consumer's attention to the product to make them want to buy it. Product optimization tests, in conjunction with focus groups – another type of market research – can be a very effective tactic for companies to come up with better and more clever ways to market their products.

Focus groups, in comparison to product optimization tests, are different in the sense that a small panel of consumers is involved, and, instead of rating a product that is in the process of being developed, the panel analyzes and discusses how a certain already-developed product that has not yet been put on the market might be perceived by consumers once it is put on supermarket shelves and advertised through the media. M.A. Casey and R.A. Krueger from the University of Minnesota explain the process of focus groups in their dissertation “Focus Group Interviewing.” They state that, “Successful focus group studies include careful designs, well thought-out questions, careful recruiting, skillful moderating, and appropriate analysis,” (Casey and Krueger).

The most important component of the focus groups is the group of recruited participants that are involved in the discussion of the product with the interviewer. To determine the type of people you need to conduct a successful focus group, one would establish the target market of the product, and seek out people who fit the demographic. For instance, a new snack for kids is about to be put on the market; a focus group interviewer might want to find children who watch a certain television channel on which the product will eventually be advertised, to participate in the focus group discussion because they would give the interviewer insight as to what children will look for in the product and in the commercial. These participants go through screenings before

the focus group is held, to ensure that their presence will be beneficial to the interviewer, and they must be willing to provide their full attention and honest opinions and thoughts on the product. Monetary incentives are usually given to focus group participants to reward them for their participation.

Focus group sessions are most often conducted by an interviewer and an assistant moderator, who will sit back, take notes, and sometimes record the discussion of the product. A series of questions about the product itself, the packaging of the product, and different methods of advertising (through television, magazines, etc.) are talked about among the participants, who will give insight to the interviewer and moderator as to what is appealing or unappealing to them, and what would make the general demographic more interested in the product.

Casey and Krueger have found that focus groups “offer a unique research methodology that can complement other types of food preference research,” (Casey and Krueger) such as product optimization tests, and they “[enable] researchers to get close to the customer and obtain information about preference and behaviors,” (Casey and Krueger). Once all of the data from the tests and focus groups are analyzed, the marketing process can begin.

“Marketing Parameters and their Influence on Consumer Food Choice” is a scholarly article by Klaus G. Grunert from the Centre for Research on Customer Relations in the Food Sector at the Aarhus School of Business, which talks about the tactics used by marketing companies to formulate advertisements after their marketing research is complete. In this article, Grunert notes that The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as “The process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods, services, and ideas to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives”

(Grunert). Though this is true, many marketing companies use the information gathered from the marketing studies to plan deceitful marketing tricks, or “measures to induce people to buy things that they neither need nor want,” (Grunert).

According to Grunert, the processes of marketing occur on the seller side, but deals with the wants, needs, and interests of the buyers and consumers. He explains that, in order to be successful and profitable in marketing, companies need “an understanding of what will make a potential buyer buy,” and have to “understand potential customers and then manage business processes in such a way that one is responsive to the understanding of potential customers one has generated,” (Grunert). Oftentimes, this idea calls for some companies to resort to trickery and unethical schemes to promote sales of a product. Grunert discusses marketing schemes through the classic distinction of four marketing parameters – “product, price, place, and promotion” (Grunert) – and explains them in the context of consumerism and food choice.

“Products come about based on analyses of consumer behavior, but once products are on the market they obviously have an impact on consumer behavior,” (Grunert). The consumer’s perception of these products is what drives them to purchase. Grunert describes the relationship of perception between the consumer and producer as such:

From the consumer point of view, quality is all that the consumer wants to get out of the product, and perceived quality, when traded off against price and other costs, will be a major determinant of food choice. From the producer point of view, it is necessary to translate quality as perceived by the consumer into technical characteristics of the product, so that production processes can be designed in such a way that will most likely result in product characteristics that consumers will perceive as high or desirable quality. (Grunert)

The consumer's perception of the product begins with the implementation of the advertisements that are formed around marketing research, and shown on television channels that are guaranteed to be viewed by the target market that the product is being sold to. From the consumer's perspective, quality is measured by four major aspects: sensory quality, health, convenience, and certain processing characteristics.

The role of advertising is most important to a product or food item when it is first being put on the supermarket shelves or on a restaurant menu. Companies must put extreme amounts of effort into finding the best ways to attract attention to their products and effectively spread awareness among the consumers in the target market, trying to prove to them that they *need* and *want* to buy their product. Grunert points out that there are roughly six distinguished "seller-controlled" types of marketing communication: advertising, labels, in-store communication (displays, posters, other stimuli), publicity in mass media, and sponsoring. Labeling and packaging are two aspects of advertising that should be paid special attention to, because it will visually attract a customer before they even know anything about the product. Packaging should be clever and visually appealing, Grunert insists, because "for the consumer, labels are potential quality cues, and as for any other quality cues, their effect on consumer choice will depend on consumer perception of whether the label is predictive of any relevant quality aspect," (Grunert). With that being said, the aforementioned four major aspects of quality that every consumer looks for should be expressed through the packaging.

Packaging and product placement in grocery stores go hand-in-hand when it comes to marketing strategies, because products are strategically placed on shelves and throughout the store. Influencing the consumers' food choices in the stores is just as important as influencing



their food choices through advertisements in the media, because the products are right in front of them for purchase. Large chain supermarkets use the most clever tactics to promote their product sales and sway consumer food choices and buying patterns. These supermarkets attract many customers because “store image is simply the consumer’s perception of the store, and is usually assumed to be multidimensional, with quality and variety of merchandise, price level, service, atmosphere and convenience being typical dimensions” and can therefore be “used as a positioning device by retailers” (Grunert).

Store environment also plays a large role in influencing what consumers might buy on impulse. In conjunction with television and magazine advertisements, these strategies are very effective. Grunert states that, “impacts of displays on purchasing in the shop are stronger when the product category is bought on impulse, when the brand advertised is strong, and when the display design arouses emotion” (Grunert). He also noted that some other aspects of environment in the store that are quite helpful in stimulating product sales are shelf space allocated to a product, background music, and even use of scents.

In this day and age, it seems, the most important aspect of marketing in the consumer’s perspective is convenience. Grunert states that, “Convenience, not only in preparation, but also in buying, storing, eating and disposing of, is a quality aspect the importance of which has been rising,” (Grunert). Americans are constantly looking for “on-the-go” options, or quick and easy meals to prepare for themselves or for their families during their busy days. Products such as Kraft Easy Mac, Campbell’s Soup At Hand, and Quaker Oatmeal To Go are a few examples of the “convenience foods” that can be marketed towards people who generally have a fast-paced, busy lifestyle - such as moms, teenagers, businesspeople, etc. The problem with these

convenience foods, however, is that they are typically not nutritious in any way, shape, or form, and are usually high in fat, calories, and carbohydrates. Unfortunately, these unhealthy foods make up the majority of the products that are being advertised on television, in magazines, and on the radios every day. To make matters worse, the marketing tactics used to sell these products easily entice consumers in their target markets to crave these unhealthy food options. This paper will take a look at how the strategies used to sell food to consumers might have a negative effect on the overall health and well-being of society in the United States.

Martin Caraher and Jane Landon from the Centre of Food Policy and the Department of Health Management and Food Policy in London examine how the advertising industry affects human food choice in the studies and reports that they examined and summarized in their study “The Impact of Advertising on Food Choice.” They argue that society is faced with too many advertisements for junk food, and these “unfettered” advertisements are a “means of promoting unhealthy eating practices and calls for its control and even banning” (Caraher and Landon). Caraher and Landon present results of a 1996 study done by Consumers International on the percentage of unhealthy foods being advertised during children’s television. The diagram shows two food pyramids: one that shows the actual recommended proportions of food groups for a healthy diet, and another that shows the proportions that are being marketed in actual advertising content.

The figure shows an “inverse relationship” (Caraher and Landon, 2006) between the recommended daily servings of the real food pyramid and the exposure of the unhealthy foods that are being marketed to children on a daily basis. The “fatty and sugary” category on food

pyramid based on “what the ads show,” consisting of items such as high-sugared breakfast cereals, ready-prepared foods, and fast food restaurant meals, takes up a disturbingly large percentage of the pyramid, when it should only account for a very small percentage of it, and should only be eaten sparingly. This diagram shows the lack of advertising censure in regards to protecting children from nutritional harm by being tempted by the advertisements of the fatty foods that they are presented with on television every day.

There are some debates on advertising to children, and evidence that it is adversely affecting the children in our society. Caraher and Landon list the key debates relating to and revolving around advertising policy and children:

- The rights of children
- The rights of an industry to promote its products, ideas, and communications.
- The place of advertising in a child’s life – whether it is seen as a normal part of growing up or an aspect requiring control and regulation.
- The impact of advertising on the attitudes, behavior, and health of children including “pester power.”
- The role of the state in public health protection and promotion.  
(Caraher and Landon)

In 2003, JP Morgan released a report with statements about food manufacturing, coming to multiple conclusions on these points of debate. All of the claims revolve around the main idea that the significant rise in obesity rates – and not only just among children – is mainly attributed to the popularity of the junk food advertisements, and the rising numbers can raise serious concerns and threats for the food industry, including:

- Food manufacturers face the risk of increased regulation and litigation.
- The food industry will have to review its marketing practices and adapt itself to address these concerns.
- The soft drinks and snacks sectors are in particular danger as they are identified by academic research as contributory factors to obesity.

- Global concerns with obesity create an opportunity for players focused on healthy segments of the industry and with food portfolios that are focused on the health side.  
(Caraher and Landon)

A joint report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) showed “consistent strong relationships between television viewing and obesity in children,” and that “this may relate to the food advertising to which they are exposed,” (Caraher and Landon).

The WHO/FAO report shows the children are increasingly becoming consumers, both directly and indirectly. When these junk foods are advertised to them, they gain purchasing power in their family because they are “responsible for stocking the family shelves and influencing purchases through ‘pester power’ as well as being consumers with their own buying power and access to money,” (Caraher and Landon). There are five categories that food-type advertisements can be classified under: cereals, sweet snacks, savory snacks, convenience foods, and fast-food outlets. In most of the national food pyramids and dietary guidelines, snack and convenience foods and carbonated sugary beverages are classified as the foods that one should “eat sparingly,” yet these are the food categories that are advertised most to children, receiving the most amount of airtime on television advertising (Caraher and Landon). The demographic of children most likely to encounter these advertisements on a daily basis are children from low-income families who can’t afford to spend a lot of money on healthier, more expensive options, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Advertisers realize this, and make it a point to deliberately market the cheap, unhealthy snacks to the children who don’t know any better. This results in a “double jeopardy effect of not having enough resources to buy food and feeling culturally isolated because of this lack of purchasing power,” (Caraher and Landon).

With this obesity problem comes the opposite problem of eating disorders that are triggered by the media's portrayal of people perceived as "fat" and the negative stereotypes and social stigmas that overweight people have gained in the past few decades. Another aspect of food culture that is seemingly shoved down the throats of Americans through advertising is weight-loss programs – including fad diets, complete "healthy" frozen meals, and "diet" beverages. Although they are so-called "better," "lighter," or "healthier" options, they are poor excuses for solutions to obesity.

Eating disorders have been at an all-time high in recent years, and have seemingly been perpetuated by images of the "perfect" body in movies, television shows, and magazines. Since the United States has seen a rise in obesity, the "average" physiques of American bodies have grown proportionally, making perfection seem more and more unattainable. Campaigns that use advertising to promote the diet foods and healthier lifestyles "should not use 'thinness' as an ideal as this can be defined culturally and has an interpretive aspect – thinner than what or who?" (Caraher and Landon). "Thin" does not always mean "healthy," but to most teenagers, "thin" means "beautiful." Unfortunately, these products are marketed as weight loss options, as opposed to being healthier alternatives to everyday meals, which can be misconstrued by the general public, blurring the lines between health and beauty.

To market these "diet" meals and food items, the companies will advertise their products using thin, attractive models to give consumers a false perception that they, too, will be thin if they buy the product. In reality, although most of these products have fewer calories, fat, and carbohydrates than most other products, they are also much smaller and less satisfying than a non-diet version of the product. This will most likely leave someone still hungry after

consumption, and they will be tempted to eat something else in addition, rendering the idea of “diet” food useless. Caraher and Landon recognize that many of the diet foods on the market provide consumers in their target market with a false perception of the product, and buy the product thinking that they will miraculously become thin, with little regard for the intent of the product – which is to simply be a “healthier alternative” to some of the other convenience foods on the market. They state:

Many health advocates wish for the power of advertising to be turned to the purpose of promoting healthy food without realizing the underlying processes informing advertising, such as the use of peripheral persuasion techniques, [and] the absence of a clear product... (Caraher and Landon)

Unfortunately, there are many weight-loss scams being advertised daily to consumers in society who are not properly educated in nutrition enough to realize how ineffective the products might turn out to be.

All of the literature that has been reviewed and cited and/or consulted in this section – books, dissertations, scholarly articles, etc. – only touched upon the surface of the possible effects that advertising has on swaying consumer purchasing and perception of food items. This author has examined how, exactly, companies get to know their target markets and how to optimize and stimulate their sales, and what makes consumers want to buy certain products. In the next section, this author will examine advertising in the social context even further, providing concrete information from the analysis of methodological approaches to study these effects on consumers in American society.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Statistics**

This chapter will analyze relevant surveys and questionnaires to find out how and why consumers buy certain products. Each statistical survey and questionnaire is relevant to the effects that marketing and advertising has on consumers, and studies and analyzes specific demographics and target markets in relation to the products that are marketed towards them.

The first demographical group that is considered in product development and marketing is age. Different age groups have different tastes in food and beverages, and look for different qualities and benefits in certain products. In the research, current trends in the eating habits of children, teens, and young adults of today's culture and society will be the focus.

Children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are growing up in such a technologically advanced era that many of them are beginning to stay indoors, watching television and playing video games and living an overall sedentary lifestyle, rather than playing outdoors the way most of their parents grew up doing. As a result of the overload of television watching among the younger generations, they are being exposed to a very high amount of commercials – a perfect opportunity for sugary products to be introduced to them.

Daheia J. Barr-Anderson from the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota surveyed the amount of television that the average child watches in a day, examining the effect that television and advertising has on today's youth, and how it could possibly affect their eating habits. Only 5% of 12-19 year olds in the mid-1960's were overweight, while in the 2000's, 17% of adolescents are overweight, and another 17% are obese (Barr-Anderson). The average adolescent today watches over 18 hours of television per week. Barr-Anderson's study

statistically shows the link between the hours spent watching television with high exposure to commercials promoting high-fat, high-sugar foods and the soaring numbers in adolescent obesity.

Barr-Anderson's Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) studied the amount of television viewed by teens (564 middle school students ["younger cohort"] and 1366 high school students ["older cohort"]) 5 years prior to the study (time 1), in relation to their present eating habits (time 2). She found that:

Among the younger cohort... 31.2% reported limited television use (<2 hours/day), 47.9% moderately high use (2–5 hours/day), and 20.9% heavy use (≥5 hours/day) at Time 1. Time 1 heavy television viewers reported lower fruit intake at Time 2 than Time 1 limited television viewers and higher sugar-sweetened beverage consumption than Time 1 moderately high television viewers. (Barr-Anderson)

Among the older cohort:

35.6% were limited, 48.6% were moderately high, and 15.8% were heavy television viewers at Time 1. Television viewing while in high school was associated with the consumption of several foods five years later... Time 1 heavy television viewers reported lower intakes of fruits and vegetables, and higher consumption of snack foods. (Barr-Anderson)

These results prove that, when a child is exposed to more television at a younger age, their future eating habits will be less healthy than their peers who watched less television when they were younger. Being bombarded with advertisements for foods like Lunchables, Kraft Mac & Cheese, Oreos and restaurant establishments such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's, children tend to grow up with a lack of knowledge in nutrition when it is not taught at home. Marketing companies take into account the large amounts of time that adolescents are watching television



these days and pinpoint the times of the day that they watch it the most, along with the most popular channels viewed by them to find out when exactly would be the most beneficial time to run a commercial on a product to increase its awareness in the consumer world. The marketing industry realizes that “repeated exposure to high calorie, low nutrient foods may increase desire for these foods and subsequently purchases and consumption of advertised products,” (Barr-Anderson).

The lack of knowledge on nutrition and good eating habits among children is one of the main reasons that the childhood obesity rate is skyrocketing, along with Type 2 Diabetes, which is becoming more prevalent in obese children. The products being marketed to these naïve young consumers are detrimental to their health, but the advertising companies know that they crave junk food, and they take full advantage of the high demand for snacks. According to the BlueCross BlueShield Association, “Type 2 Diabetes, once believed to affect only adults, is increasingly being diagnosed among young people. One in three U.S. children born in 2000 could develop diabetes during their lifetime,” (*Childhood Obesity and Diabetes Statistics*).

College students and young adults are also targeted by demographical marketing tactics. One of the most popular types of food and beverage products that are marketed towards college students are energy drinks. With high levels of sugar, caffeine, taurine, ginseng, and other energy-increasing supplements, these drinks are meant to provide consumers with a jolt of energy if they are feeling sluggish or lazy. In a study done by The Institute of Food Technologists, researchers found that “The popularity of energy drinks among the younger generation is evidenced by 34% of 18 to 24-year-olds being regular energy drink users,” (Heckman). The energy drink market is “the fastest growing segment in the beverage industry

since bottled water,” (Heckman) because of the large amount of young adults who rely on energy drinks to get them through the day when they are running on little to no sleep due to finals, studying, or partying.

Almost 25% of all college students who drink mix energy drinks with alcohol (Heckman). Most of these college students, however, are under the legal drinking age in The United States, and put themselves at greater risks of health problems because they do not know how to drink responsibly. In recent years, a beverage called Four Loko – an energy drink containing about 10% alcohol by volume – hit the shelves of liquor stores, and is already banned in some states. The cans are vibrant, colorful, and sure to attract the eyes of teenagers looking for their weekend buzz. The majority of the energy drinks on the market are “targeted at teenagers and young adults 18 to 34 years old” because this generation has grown up with the “on-the-go lifestyle and receptiveness to advertisements for these types of products,” (Heckman) and when you throw alcohol into the mix, the target market will go nuts over the product. Alcohol and its depressant effects, in combination with the stimulant effects of the caffeine and other herbal infusions, allows the consumers to get drunker, faster, and has serious side effects in conjunction with getting drunk, such as blacking out. In November of 2010, a reported 23 college students from Ramapo College of New Jersey and 9 students from Central Washington University in Washington were hospitalized as a result of consuming Four Loko (Wood). The Food and Drug Administration has asked the makers of Four Loko to remove the caffeine and two other ingredients from the beverage, because of the dangerous nature of the caffeine masking the effects of the alcohol (Tumolillo).

Advertisements also single out consumers based on gender. Foods that are most obviously marketed towards women often show women in their advertisements who are happy, thin, and attractive. This image of “beautiful” women in the media is highly unrealistic, yet so many women in society strive for this “perfection” which often times leads to a skewed self-perception, or worse, an eating disorder.

Foods and beverages that are typically considered “feminine” are diet products, low carb or low fat products, etc. Figures show that between 25% and 77% of adolescent girls are reported to be “dieting,” and across all age groups and economic groups, “women and girls report more concerns about body weight and make more attempts at weight control than men and boys,” (Trew). With our diet-conscious society in mind, products such as yogurt, desserts, flavored water, and soft drinks most commonly aim their “diet” products to be advertised to American women who are concerned about their weight.

Take Dannon’s “Light & Fit” yogurt for example: supermodel Heidi Klum is the face of the product to make the product appear that it will help you lose weight, based on the thin woman eating it in the advertisements. What remains unknown to most of the women who are chronic dieters and rely on these low-calorie, sugar-free, or fat-free products to control their weight is that, According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), “35% of “normal dieters” progress to pathological dieting. Of those, 20-25% progress to partial or full-syndrome eating disorders.” When women on a college campus were surveyed, 91% say that they are dieting or have dieted in the past, and 22% of those women either dieted often, or were chronic dieters (Statistics: Eating Disorders and Their Precursors). It is safe to say that the media has a huge impact on body image and on the way that some women choose to eat.

In contrast, food and beverage companies who aim to sell their products to men wouldn't advertise the product with words such as "light" or "diet," but would probably use "hearty" or "supreme." Men tend to be less health and weight-conscious than women, and look for food that is more filling and provides them with the energy that they need to get through the day. Foods and beverages such as hamburgers, beer, chips, or sports drinks are usually marketed towards men with advertisements containing images of men playing sports and/or kicking back with their friends, and the occasional "sexy" woman to attract their attention towards the commercial. One of the most successful ways that any food or beverage company can promote sales from male consumers is to advertise during one of the biggest sporting events of the year – The Superbowl.

With an average of 125 million Americans watching The Superbowl per year, it is a perfect opportunity for a food or beverage company to advertise their product and spread awareness. An estimated 15 tons of chips are consumed during The Superbowl, and the majority of the viewers are male (Davis). With these statistics, the Doritos company spends millions of dollars in advertisements during The Superbowl, all of which are targeted towards the male viewers. Each commercial portrays an average middle-aged man in strange but humorous scenarios, just so they could eat their chips. This shows that Doritos recognizes that their product is most widely consumed by the "average Joes" who would be most likely to watch The Superbowl.

Consumers of different races and ethnicities are also targeted by certain companies trying to raise product awareness in different groups of people who would be the most likely to spend money on their product. Fast food commercials and radio advertisements have recently become very racially driven in their marketing strategies. In larger cities where there is a diverse population of ethnicities, advertisements or commercials from, say, Burger King or McDonald's

might depict an African American family or a middle-aged, non-Caucasian man eating at the establishment. In a study comparing afternoon and evening commercials on Black Entertainment Television (BET) to commercials on the WB Network and the Disney Channel, nearly 1,100 total commercials were viewed, with about half of them advertising fast food, snacks, and soda. Out of the fast food ads, 66% were on BET, while 34% were on the WB and none were on Disney ("More Fast-food Ads Shown on Black-oriented TV"). Of the drink commercials, BET claimed 82%, the WB accounted for 11%, and 6% were on Disney, and of the snack commercials, 60% were on BET, none were on the WB, and 40% were on Disney ("More Fast-food Ads Shown on Black-oriented TV").

With the increasing amount of Hispanics in the United States, many food and beverage companies are producing advertisements, commercials, and packaging that are all in the Spanish language to profit from the influx of immigrants over the last few years. Data from a Hispanic market research firm, called Latinum Network, showed that, "the U.S. Hispanic segment made up more than 50% of real U.S. food, beverage and restaurant growth between 2005 and 2008," ("Hispanics Create More than Half of Food Growth"). By trying to integrate the Spanish-speaking population of the country into advertisements, companies such as McDonalds who advertise with Spanish billboards in areas that are densely populated with Hispanics, are taking the opportunity to expand their customer base by breaking down the language barriers that might hinder companies that haven't yet made accommodations for non-English-speaking U.S. residents. Fast-food restaurants are at an advantage because Hispanics outspend any other group in the food industry, since they are "eating out more while others are cutting back, driving growth in fast food," ("Hispanics Create More than Half of Food Growth") due to most of the immigrant Hispanic families' low-income households.

## Chapter 4:

### Solutions

This section will focus on pinpointing some of the negative impacts that the marketing industry has on consumerism and the overall well being of our society. After identifying the root of each problem, possible plans and solutions will be proposed in hopes of seeing an improvement in the course of a few years.

The first, and most recognized problem in our society is the growing obesity rate. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in January 2010, America's obesity rate has seemed to hit a plateau over the past five years, but the percentages at which it has hit the plateau are very high. Their studies show that "nearly 34 percent of adults are obese, more than double the percentage 30 years ago, and the percentage of obese children has "tripled during that time, to 17 percent," (Belluck). In addition, "68 percent of adults and nearly one-third of children are considered at least overweight," (Belluck). Dr. David Ludwig, director of the Optimal Weight for Life Program at Children's Hospital Boston, rationalizes the plateau by suggesting that the obesity in America has reached its "biological limit," explaining that, "when people eat more...at first they gain weight; then a growing share of the calories go 'into maintaining and moving around that excess tissue'," which would keep them from getting any heavier (Belluck).

The question that still remains is, *how* did America get to become so morbidly obese over the years? One of the main findings in obesity studies is that obesity is, in fact, a psychological disorder. But why has this only become an issue over the past decade? There are many theories about the causes of obesity, but one factor in particular seems to have perpetuated it: the

marketing strategies of junk food companies. As mentioned earlier, unhealthy foods are being advertised to children, low-income families who can't afford to purchase healthier alternatives, and people with little to no nutritional education.

As part of the research on the topic of advertising and how it affects consumers, this author chose to interview Christine Stamm, a Culture and Food (SOC2020) professor at Johnson & Wales University, via email on her views of marketing strategies and advertisements in the food industry and how they relate to consumerism and buying trends. She is very knowledgeable on the topic because, in each of her classes, she and her students dissect several articles on the way food is viewed in society, and how it relates to individual people of certain ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, religious groups, etc. Professor Stamm is a very credible source of information on the subject because of the relating subject matter that she teaches in class every day.

Professor Stamm expressed in what ways she felt that food marketing tactics have changed over the years in response to today's changing society. She explained that food manufacturers seem to be "preying on the lack of nutrition knowledge in parents as well as the parents' inability to have vision with how they want their children to eat," and gave multiple examples of her observation. Chef Boyardee's advertisements claim that it contains a full serving of vegetables, but urges parents "don't tell the kids!" implying that if the kids knew that it was good for them, they probably wouldn't eat it. Sunny D, various other juices, and Fruit Roll-Ups all advertise that they contain real fruit juice, making these products seem healthy and desirable for parents to buy, when in reality, they only contain about 5% of juice or less. Kool Aid compares itself to soda in its advertisements, explaining that it is the "better" option because it

contains less sugar. This may be true, but Professor Stamm argued, "...instead of comparing yourself to soda (the bad guy), why don't you make a product that is wholesome? In fact, why can't the kids drink water?" As a parent, she feels that more American families should be better educated in nutrition and how to buy healthier products and cook healthier meals.

Marketing restrictions should be put on unhealthy products such as fried foods, energy drinks, alcoholic beverages, and soda, according to Professor Stamm, who stated that she "[does] believe that it would be beneficial to the reduction of processed junk food being sold to consumers, but [doubts] that it would happen in our capitalistic society that allows every drug company to advertise on public stations." She believes that our society has to want to see a change in their individual health, adding, "It's a conundrum to me and I truly believe that self control and choice has to come from the citizens of the country, not from the government."

With some effort from the members of society *and* cooperation of the government, it could be possible to help reverse the effects that the food industry has had on us. Dr. Steven Gortmaker, a Harvard public health professor, explains, "obesity would decline only with new policies, like penalties and incentives to promote healthier foods and exercise," (Belluck). Nutrition classes should be implemented as required classes for students in elementary in middle schools, where obesity is becoming most problematic. With the absence of parental figures in many homes due to long work hours, children need nutritional education to be reinforced in school since many are not receiving it at home. Another possible solution is to set some restrictions on daytime commercials advertising unhealthy snack foods, beverages, and fast food restaurants. Dr. Gortmaker noted that, when smoking was a problem in America, "substantial change didn't really happen until there were bans on advertising and limits on consumption



through things like taxation,” (Belluck). If the government were to pass laws limiting the amount of ads on TV, and the extent to which they push their products on people who don’t know any better than to eat those foods, we might be able to see a gradual decline in the sales of those foods.

For low-income families unable to afford healthier alternatives to convenience foods and value meals at fast-food restaurants, the government can offer food stamps that will only allow the members of low-income households to purchase items with well-balanced nutritional value, and prohibits certain processed foods and snacks. Food banks across the country can be forbidden to give out high fat foods, and required to provide a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grain options. Diet centers and weight counseling therapy should be covered by health insurance companies, so more people would be able to receive the medical attention and help that is necessary for them to begin a weight loss program, and lead them to a healthier lifestyle. Public schools with students mostly of low-income households should provide the option of having a health counselor there during the day to help students looking to lose weight with diet plans.

The next problem that needs to be addressed is the prevalence of negative body image among women and men in our society. There is a significant difference between the media’s portrayal of the ideal “attractive” body type and the reality of the average American’s stature. Models seen in magazines, movies, and even on TV commercials promoting diet foods, are thinner than 98% of American women (Statistics: Eating Disorders and Their Precursors). With the prevalence of obesity in society, and the negative connotation that is associated with it, anorexia, bulimia, and excessive unnecessary dieting are some disorders that are increasing in

percentage among many young women today who have skewed perceptions of what their bodies are supposed to look like. Statistics from The National Eating Disorders Association show that Americans collectively spend about \$40 billion on dieting and diet foods each year, when most of them are at a completely normal weight.

Drs. Jennifer L. Derenne and Eugene V. Beresin, in affiliation with with the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital and McLean Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, researched the differences in self-image of the American population in the past, in comparison to today, and found:

Twenty-five years ago, the average fashion model was 8% thinner than the average woman. Today, that number has risen to 23%, likely reflecting a combination of rising obesity rates in the general population and progressively thinner ideals.  
(Derenne and Beresin)

These findings prove that advertisements in the past focused less on the image of the model being used to sell the product, and more on the actual product itself. Advertisements today, such as commercials for “diet” foods and beverages, focus more on the overall image of the product and models and actresses selling them, and less on the actual product. The “diet” labels on these products often lead consumers to falsely believe that, by consuming them, they will begin to lose weight and look more like the models in the advertisements. The consumers who purchase diet foods associated with fad dieting are often unsuccessful at their attempts to lose weight, because the commercials and advertisements do not promote exercise in addition to regular consumption of their products.

With negative body image often comes depression and eating disorders, which are both more prominent in today’s society than ever before. “Excessive media consumption... may be

correlated with the rate of childhood depression,” Drs. Derenne and Beresin examined, adding that depression is found to be “a function of negative body image, or may reflect the tendency of depressed kids to spend more time in front of the TV because of diminished energy,” (Derenne and Beresin).

Steps toward combating the media’s perpetuation of negative body image and eating disorders are similar to the steps that can be taken to prevent the obesity rate from growing. Government regulations can be set on commercials, requiring the models and actresses that are endorsing the products to be more “average” looking, depicting a more typical stature and body type than the emaciated models that are in advertisements today. With less exposure to the unrealistic images of “beautiful” women and the pressure to be thin, the percentages of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among Americans could decrease. Advertisements for “diet” products, like SlimFast, 100 Calorie Packs, and calorie-free soft drinks and flavored waters should recommend exercise in addition to the consumption of their products to provide the consumers with better results to try to promote success in their diet, and to avoid the need for them to become “chronic dieters” when they are dissatisfied with their results.

One of the last solutions – and perhaps the most beneficial – is buying produce and meats from local farmers and purveyors whenever possible. Not only are the products healthier for you, but you are supporting your local community as opposed to shopping at supermarkets promoting big corporations who are only there to trick you into buying products that you do not really need. In the book *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America’s Food Movement* the author, Sandor Ellix Katz, talks about a variety of ways to purchase and utilize food in such a way as to live a healthier lifestyle and to support the well-being of the economy and the

environment. Katz explains, “Buying food directly from the farmers who grow it not only ensures that your food is as fresh as can be; it also means that those farmers are receiving not nineteen cents on the consumer food dollar but the full dollar,” (Katz).

Katz describes one form of local food systems that is growing in popularity in The United states and around the world, called community-supported agriculture (CSA), and how it operates and benefits local communities:

CSA farms operate by subscription, linking producers directly to consumers. Subscribers pre-purchase a share in the farm’s production and receive boxes of mixed seasonal produce each week throughout the growing season. CSAs benefit consumers by giving them fresh, seasonal food, as well as a direct personal connection to a farm. They benefit farmers by giving them predictable income and reducing the time they must spend marketing their produce.  
(Katz)

The absence of marketing by the CSA farms proves that their products can essentially sell themselves through word of mouth around the town. The farmers have no need for marketing tactics or advertising schemes to sell their products, because the quality of their products are perceived through the good word spread by the customers that they are connected to.

Unfortunately, it would take a while for the idea of CSA farms to really take off in our society, as this kind of revolution does not happen overnight. In order for the revival of local markets for agriculture to happen, it would take “organizing and networking to bring consumers and producers together,” (Katz). However, Katz notes that change is slowly occurring in our nation and, “more and more regions can now boast of extensive famers’ markets, CSAs, and other innovative connections between local growers and local consumers,” (Katz). There is great potential for these kinds of food options in The United States, but these linkages take a lot of

time and work to develop.

Katz recognizes that people with very little disposable income in both urban and rural areas have fewer options in buying food that was grown or produced locally. Community activist Mark Winston Griffith of Brooklyn, NY was quoted in *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America's Food Movement* about the lack of healthy food choices for low-income families, saying, "One of the great, often unspoken, forms of oppression that low- and moderate-income communities suffer through is the lack of access to healthy food," (Katz). Activists are needed to help these families gain some access to wholesome food that is not in their price range. Katz realizes this and writes

There is nothing fair about poverty and the gross inequalities of resources and opportunities that are reflected in every aspect of our society, food choices included. Some activists are working, and many more are needed, to bring access to fresh, wholesome food to poor people and undeserved neighborhoods, as a part of a movement for food justice. (Katz)

America has the capability to gradually reverse some of the prevalent health issues in our society that the marketing tactics in the food industry have enabled. Drs. Derenne and Beresin propose that the government "needs to allocate funds to produce exciting, media-driven advertising campaigns to provide information to kids and families about good nutrition, exercise, and healthy self-esteem," (Derenne and Beresin). With the government's help, and the cooperation of the rest of society in educating ourselves on the ways that we can live a healthier life according to our individual lifestyles, it is possible to lessen the problems in American consumerism caused by deceitful tactics of marketing and advertising companies.

## Chapter 5:

### Conclusion

It is clear that there has been a gradual shift in the marketing tactics used in the food industry since the first implementations of marketing. Advertisers use a wide range of tactics to target certain demographics that will be most inclined to have a “need” for their products, and their motives are shown in the various forms of literature that I have reviewed for this thesis paper.

It can be concluded that advertising is one of the main factors contributing to the obesity epidemic in children by marketing products to them that are utterly lacking in nutrition; therefore making the products seem appealing to them with their lack of nutritional knowledge. There is an overall lack of nutritional knowledge among consumers in America in general. This can be seen in the obesity epidemic, and is also apparent in the various eating disorders that seem to have skyrocketed in the last few decades. Advertising *does* seem to have a negative effect on the overall health and well being of society, which can be seen in the statistics and data that have been reviewed. Fortunately, there are definitely plenty of solutions and steps that can be taken by different people to help change the direction in which advertising is going.

With shelp from the government by setting limits on nutritional content of some junk foods, or setting restrictions on what foods can or cannot be advertised – and to what extent – society may be able to start seeing a positive shift in overall health. Elementary and middle schools must instill better knowledge in students to make healthier meal choices, and influence them to get more exercise than they already may or may not get. With hope, this generation will start to become more health-conscious, reversing the problems that have been brought upon society by unhealthy foods that have become so ingrained in our culture and daily lives.

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