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Corporate fast-food advertising targeting children in South Africa

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The health implications of children's increasing consumption of fast foods have been a subject of growing national and global concern. This chapter explains why critically examining corporate fast-food advertising to children is equally important. As we show, fast-food advertising compromises children's rights to health. It also undermines their rights to protection from exploitation through persuasive media messages and rapidly changing foodways.ⁱ

Children's relationships to foods have traditionally been mediated by parents, caregivers, authority figures in schools and other institutions or the communities in which they live. In the context of the world food system,ⁱⁱ fast-food advertisements may have become more influential than these traditional mediating agents.

This chapter addresses the following questions:

- Why does fast-food advertising targeting children warrant research and action?
- How does fast-food advertising manipulate children?
- What is the impact on children's tastes and eating habits?
- What are the political, social and ethical implications, and responses?

Why does fast-food advertising targeting children warrant research and action?

The growing dominance of global foodways and fast-food advertising

South African children's fast-food consumption rates are high. In a 17-country study completed in 2014, researchers found that fast-food consumption among South African children and adolescents was more frequent than in even high-income countries such

ⁱ Foodways are the cultural and material flows of food items and tastes within families or communities or within societies and across national borders. In the current world food system, these flows are significantly influenced by the production, sale, and marketing of highly processed food produced through corporate-controlled industrial agriculture.

ⁱⁱ The world food system currently involves large corporations controlling the food access and consumption of most of the world's population – from the production of food through industrial agriculture to its sale in globalised supermarkets and other food outlets.

as Japan and Belgium.¹ Fast foods are produced by local and global companies, although global corporations are the dominant drivers of child-oriented food and marketing. Transnational corporations are increasingly targeting children in developing countries because their own markets have become saturated. Moreover, regulations in these countries have made sales and advertising more difficult.² Global companies such as Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), McDonald's, and Spur are therefore intensifying marketing strategies in India, China, Brazil, and South Africa, and it has been found that South Africa and India are more receptive markets than Brazil, Russia, and China.³

The dominance of corporate-driven foodways is unique to the present world food system. Within this system, North American food corporations are the most economically powerful. These corporations identify children as lucrative markets because children are highly responsive to new tastes. They also often influence the food tastes and purchasing of their parents and communities.⁴ Like children in other parts of the world, therefore, South African children are instrumentalised as consumers of unhealthy foods in order for corporations to generate enormous profits.

The exploitation of children

Food companies and advertisers realise that children with “pester power” (or influence over adults)⁵ will significantly influence adults’ food buying. They are also aware that cultivating fast-food tastes among children will shape their future consumption as adults. Companies’ tactical interest in children is reflected in research showing that the global fast-food industry spends over USD 5 million daily in marketing unhealthy foods to children.⁶ Fast-food marketing to South African children is swiftly penetrating different media. Remarking on this situation in Malaysia, some researchers show that existing research and regulations have “focused on traditional media...although...digital or new media marketing expenditure saw a three-digit percentage growth from 2005 to 2009”.⁷

Fast-food advertising directed at children has been analysed extensively in high-income countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. This has not been the case in South Africa, where research has prioritised malnutrition linked to stunting and undernutrition.⁸ Yet, Lize Mills notes that “overweight and obesity, which show a greater increase in low- and middle-income countries, are linked to more deaths

in the world than underweight”.⁹ With corporate fast food becoming increasingly affordable and accessible, many of the processed products that lead to overweight are fast foods.

The need for regulation and research

At a global level, the advertising of fast food to children has provoked strong opposition and action. This has entailed self-regulatory mechanisms for advertisers and corporations, such as the Advertising Regulatory Board in South Africa. Organised and funded by the marketing industry, the Board is meant to protect consumers through the self-regulation of advertising. Global efforts to regulate marketing have also included industry performance indicators, community and school-led advertising literacy campaigns for children, individual or class action litigation, and local and national regulations.

In 2010, the 192 member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) endorsed recommendations to restrict unhealthy food marketing to children through actions including national legislation.¹⁰ The WHO’s comprehensive and intersectoral recommendations for member states are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Key recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children

- Food and beverage companies, food outlets, marketing industries, and the media and entertainment industry should promote healthy diets for children and youth.
- Governments should partner with the private sector to create long-term programmes to support adults in promoting healthy food for children.
- State and local educational authorities should support healthy food for children in school environments.
- Government should use available public policy levers at all levels to foster healthy diets for children and youth.
- National multi-disciplinary research capacity should address the influence of food marketing on children and youth.

Source: World Health Organization. *Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children*. 2010. Accessed 17 November 2020; <https://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/recsmarketing/en/>.

As a member of WHO, South Africa has still not enacted legislation on this issue, even though draft legislation exists. Considering the scale of advertising to children, media coverage, public awareness and research in South Africa has been limited. The small pool of academic research has focused mainly on televised adverts.¹¹ By concentrating on government legislation and self-regulation by industries, South Africa has also

neglected the intersectoral responses recommended by the WHO.^{4, 9, 12} In contrast, fast-food companies have invested enormous amounts into research for effective marketing. They “employ child psychologists and cultural anthropologists, review academic literature...send experts into homes...study children's drawings, dreams and fantasy lives, and apply the findings to ads and product designs”.¹³

How does advertising manipulate children?

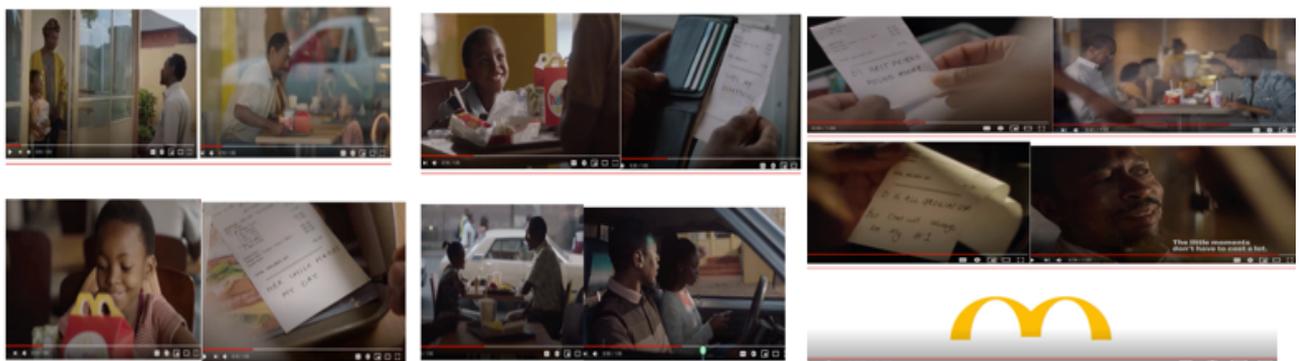
The WHO states that the impact of advertising on children results both from their level of exposure and from its persuasive techniques.¹⁰ The adverts analysed below are powerful in terms of both these criteria.

Manipulating children through promises of “home”

Many fast-food adverts use fantasies of “home” to mould children’s perceptions of food. For example, an advert from McDonald’s “Momentsoflovin” campaign (see Figure 1) tells the story of a young girl sharing “lovin’ moments” with her father, from early childhood to adulthood.

The emotional power of the advert comes from the intimacy of these shared moments at McDonald’s. The intensity of these moments is enhanced by the fact that the two do not speak: emotions are conveyed by their expressions and written notes to one another. The advert emphasises how the corporation is an integral part of the child’s journey to adulthood, and this association between fast food and her valued memories will lead to her long-term brand loyalty. The advert exploits children’s elemental need for parental love and home, positioning a fast-food brand as central to fulfilling these needs.

Figure 1: McDonald’s “momentsoflovin” advert



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru0pz4jXJfs>

Promoting valued identities

Another McDonald's advert tells a story about a schoolchild who chooses an uncomfortable cheap seat in a taxi in order to save money to buy a "Quarter Pounder with cheese". The advert concludes with him triumphantly showing off his McDonald's meal to his ice-cream-eating friends and joining the table of adult men eating burgers.

The child in this advert is portrayed as an enterprising agent of change. While he is obviously poor, he strategically saves the money his grandmother gives him for taxi-fare. Buying, displaying, and eating McDonald's food become a means through which the boy acquires valued gendered and classed identities.

His school friends' immaturity in eating (unbranded) ice-creams is contrasted with his precocious manliness in buying a burger, seating himself among men, and greeting them with the words, "Yebo, Madoda". Considering that this is an advert for food, it is striking that no reference is made to his appreciation of its taste.

Figure 2: Advert for McDonald's cheese burger



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgB0IiZTLak>

Exploiting children's rights to decision-making

As the largest fast-food chain in South Africa, KFC has addressed demographics that other food advertisers tend to neglect. This is evident in a KFC social media advert with the slogan, "There is nothing more annoying than having your head used as a

napkin by your elders” (see Figure 3). The advert is set in a rural context where a poorly dressed boy interacts with his stereotypically traditional grandfather. After eating, the old man routinely wipes his hands on the boy’s shaved head. Frustrated by this, the boy buys a KFC meal to share with his grandfather, whose enjoyment of the meal leads him to lick his fingers instead of wiping them.

This advert creates two troubling messages. First, it implies that a poor rural South African child has the resources to purchase fast food spontaneously. Consequently, it completely obscures how poverty compromises many South African children’s food choices. Secondly, it exaggerates the agency of children in creating valuable eating patterns.

Figure 3: KFC’s finger lickin’ good advert



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj_F-N2iKNo

The advert plays on the KFC slogan of “finger lickin’ good” in its story of how a rural child transforms the eating habits of a traditional patriarch. This crude popularising of children’s agency and right to participate in decision-making has been used to serve the profit-making interests of many companies advertising products to children.

What are the effects of advertising’s on children’s tastes and eating habits?

As the KFC example shows, adverts often define children as the active shapers of their own – and others’ – food tastes. The following analysis discusses the effects of advertising on 5–8-year-old children in a community of South African diaspora Indians

living in Durban.ⁱⁱⁱ

Displacing family foodways

Research revealed that children and parents in this sample study often negotiated meal choices. On one hand, adults were the overall gatekeepers of children's food consumption. On the other hand, they allowed discussion about which foods will form family meals for family celebrations, and children usually chose fast foods. Although this may not be adults' intention, this further reinforces a manipulative advertising message: namely, that fast foods are always special and fun, whereas healthy and home-cooked meals are dull.

According to adult respondents, their young children are creating new patterns of influence around food eaten in the home because of their fascination with fast food. Fast foods have also had an influence on local foods such as those in Figure 4, as well as meals prepared at home. Interviews indicated that home-cooked meals include at least one fast-food item alongside other traditional dishes. Sometimes traditional dishes are infused with fast-food favourites such as melted cheese and French fries. These blended meals illustrate how family foodways in the sample have been transformed, often as a result of children being influenced by advertising. Interviews with parents in Durban therefore confirmed findings by other researchers that "the degree to which parents perceive fast-food consumption as socially normative are associated with children's greater fast-food consumption".¹⁴

Figure 4: A popular blended dish of curry and French fries wrapped in a roti



<https://www.google.com/search?q=sunrise+foods+durban&tbm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Telephonic interviews were conducted with parents of children during April 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period). Purposive sampling was used to identify parents whose children were between the ages of 5 and 8 years. Five adults were interviewed about their own observations of children and their memories of past and evolving patterns.

Manipulating children's emotions

Children in the sample study were frequently exposed to television and to brand logos and animated characters in adverts. They also often engaged with fast-food marketing through social media. Some children who played “advergames” were unaware that these games promoted McDonalds and that children were being targeted through embedded advertising messages. This confirms Sandra Calvert’s claim that children under eight are especially responsive to stealth techniques in advertising, including the use of digital interactive technologies.¹⁵ For example, the use of Instagram allowed some children to follow a food brand by liking, sharing, or commenting on posts. Consequently, in ways that parents may not realise, their children are developing intimate and loyal attachments to fast-food brands through social media advertising.

Parents stated that children want to recreate the social milieu that adverts connect to fast foods. Because of advertising’s enticing effects, children feel that they are almost part of the popular Disney movies and television shows often associated with these meals. Interviewed parents explained that their children attached feelings of longing and excitement to fast-food consumption, often mimicking the enthusiasm and excitement demonstrated in adverts.

Children’s widely advertised ability to select from a variety of options was another reason for their enthusiasm about fast food. As Jennifer Patico and Eriberto Lozada explain, choice has become a hallmark of children’s acquisition of a sense of “modernity” through globalised fast foods produced by corporations such as KFC.¹⁶ This “modernity” signals a paradigm change in liberal democracies, where children are socialised as the bearers of human rights. They are regarded not only as subjects of parental authority, but also as individuals with choices of their own. In her North American study, Amy Best describes how one fast-food advert capitalised on this. The advert depicts a child being told when to get up, being forced to do her homework, and being reprimanded for wearing certain clothes. She feels free to choose only when she stands in front of a fast-food counter to order and declares: ““But at Subway I have the power to choose, and I eat it all up.””¹⁷

Parents also stated that children were drawn to imagery depicting fast foods in relation to family entertainment and bonding, and adverts encourage children to locate fast foods as a central part of their fantasies and thoughts about home and family life.

What are some of the political, social and ethical implications and responses?

It is unsurprising that both McDonalds and KFC donated food to needy South Africans during the country's lockdown response to COVID-19.¹⁸ Philanthropic marketing strategies are designed to increase the popularity and growth of fast-food companies. They market themselves as generous supporters of families and communities, offering choices in a world where all individuals, including children, are free to make them. Yet analysing fast-food adverts and their effects on children reveals how they restrict children's scope to make healthy, age-appropriate, and informed choices.

Children are a special category, requiring both the right to freedom and the right to guided development. Fast-food advertising, which compromises their health, exploits their consumer status, and manipulates their behaviour, therefore demands multiple, coordinated responses. A legislative route would be guided by the best interests of the child as a principle enshrined in the South African Constitution and by the country's ratification of various treaties.

South Africa seemed ready to meet the WHO's call for state action when it introduced amendments to its Foods, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act in May 2014. As explained by Mariaan Wicks, the Department of Health's proposed R429 regulations aimed to prohibit the advertising of unhealthy food to children. They were also intended to ban celebrity endorsements and promotions of unhealthy food to children under the age of 18.¹⁹ Since the draft regulations have still not become law, the delayed legislation around fast-food advertising to children urgently needs to be enacted.

Critical responses beyond legislation also warrant attention. At present, the regulation of advertising to children in South Africa relies mainly on self-monitoring by food industries and marketing companies. Because their primary goal is to make profits through lucrative child markets, they cannot be relied on to address children's needs and rights. In fact, critical research has established that even when food industries formally commit themselves to responsible advertising, unethical and unhealthy advertising targeting children can continue. For example, Oliver Huiszinga and Michaela Kruse show that European food industries' signing of the self-regulating EU Pledge programme did not stop them from continuing to market unhealthy foods.²⁰

Children's lively interest in food rituals, tastes, and novelty has helped to make child-targeted fast-food advertising so effective. But this interest can be channelled in empowering ways. Moreover, responses can actively enlist children's decision-making, curiosity, independence, and creativity. Viveke Glaser illustrates this in his account of holistic strategies for educating children through their active participation in meal preparation.²¹ Pursuing a similar theme, Farber and Laurie show how gardening projects involving children in South Africa can promote children's interest in producing healthy food.²²

The promotion of enticing and healthy food-growing and preparation in schools, communities or homes could help counter the way that fast-food advertising captures children's imaginations in relation to food. As researchers have shown in a study in Soweto, outdoor advertising in many South African contexts is "obesogenic",²³ and even schools and their environments often actively promote unhealthy foods. Child-centred measures would therefore need to be fully supported by adults, paying concerted attention to the intensity and scope of advertising targeting children.

Avenues for critical public discussion through the print or social media, campaigns by communities or parents' groups, and increasing policy, academic, and media research are further ways of driving public and civic action. Such action would allow legislation and self-regulation to be complemented by the more sustainable strategy of internalising knowledge of healthy food within the broader context of critically confronting the current global food system.

Conclusion

As indicated by the WHO's recommendations over two decades ago, responses to the harmful impact of fast-food advertising on children should be wide-ranging. They would need to curb companies' and marketers' promotion of unhealthy foods through government policies and laws, as well as through self-regulation by industry. Interventions should also actively encourage healthy food tastes and interests, especially since marketing has done so much to foster desires for unhealthy foods and social habits around consuming them.

Yet is also important to consider how responses will always be affected by the economic and political power of dominant interest groups and by the availability of resources. The delayed enactment of a law regulating fast-food marketing for children in South Africa speaks volumes about the political influence of the corporate food industry in this country. Moreover, for many South Africans, healthy food resources are not available or accessible. This inaccessibility, as well as the limited time, means, and support mechanisms for encouraging healthy eating can severely undermine responses to unethical advertising. It is therefore clear that substantive solutions to fast-food advertising need to confront the exploitative nature of the food system as a whole. While fast-food advertising warrants careful critical scrutiny, it must also be connected to the broader economic system that controls how and what people eat.

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