

## **Parental mediation of food marketing communications aimed at children**

### **Abstract**

Children spend the majority of their leisure time watching screens of various kinds (television, computer, mobile phone, tablet) through which they can potentially be exposed to many commercial messages. Marketers also reach children through more traditional channels, such as on-pack, sales promotions, sponsorship and so on. Given the proliferation of channels and communication methods for reaching the child audience, we ask how parents approach the task of mediating/restricting their child's exposure to marketing communications should they wish to do so. In a qualitative study investigating parents' and children's understanding of food marketing communications in the UK, we found that parents attempt to counter food marketing messages across a wider range of communications than previously identified but that newer media such as advergames and websites are not fully recognised as channels of food marketing.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, we examine parental strategies employed to counter the perceived effects of food marketing communications on children. With a third of 10-11 year olds overweight or obese (Campbell 2013), the UK has the second highest rates of childhood obesity across Europe (Polmark Project 2010) and strong marketing by the food industry has been identified as a potential contributor to this problem (Charry & Demoulin 2012). As An and Kang (2013) point out, there is evidence for a link between food advertising and children's dietary behaviour, which becomes a focus for attention when much of that advertising is for high calorie and low nutrition foods (Spielvogel & Terlutter 2013). Indeed, the effects of advertising unhealthy foods on children's food preference and choice have been well documented (Boyland & Halford 2013). Even though marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) have been restricted since 2008 during and around children's television programmes in the UK (Ofcom 2007), children

(defined as under 16) are still exposed to such products during adult programming and in other media. By implementing some form of mediation, parents can attempt to influence the potential harmful effects of such food marketing communications (Buijzen 2007).

Traditionally, mediation has been discussed in the context of television advertising, which is understandable given the historical dominance of this form of communication in the children's market (Gunter *et al.* 2005). However, in recent years this dominance has been somewhat weakened by legislation which has restricted television advertising in various countries, particularly for unhealthy foods (Oates & Newman 2010). Additionally, marketers have become arguably more sophisticated in their targeting of the child audience, aided by newer channels such as advergames (Blumberg *et al.* 2013), online advertising in general (Shin *et al.* 2012) and a more holistic approach via the integration of marketing communications (De Pelsmacker *et al.* 2013) which may also encompass packaging, licensing, speciality food etc. Thus, one might question whether parental mediation strategies, developed in an era characterised by television, have also moved on to correspond with increasingly dynamic and integrated communications. We address this issue in a UK context by asking parents what kinds of food marketing communications they recognise and attempt to mediate against, how this mediation is achieved, and whether newer media has made any impact. First, we situate our discussion in the context of child socialisation and parental mediation styles, before introducing the present study and findings. We conclude with a discussion of how parental mediation is taking place and the gaps in parents' knowledge of current marketing communications aimed at their children.

## **Background**

The stages which traditionally characterise children's cognitive development (Smith *et al.* 2011) have been usefully developed and adapted by Roedder John (1999) to provide a model of consumer socialisation. In this model children move from being limited processors (under seven

years, with a basic and egocentric perspective) through cued processors (7-11 years, with increasingly thoughtful information processing abilities) to strategic processors (12 years and older, demonstrating sophisticated and reflective reasoning skills). Roedder John suggested that only when children are over 11 years of age do they exhibit the ability to assess marketing messages independently and critically – before this age, they are generally either incapable of doing so or require prompts or cues. This cognitive development perspective is complemented by the work of Friestad and Wright (1994; 2005) who proposed the persuasion knowledge model (PKM), which illustrates how children develop knowledge and skills to enable them to cope with persuasion attempts by marketers. According to the PKM, agent knowledge (i.e. knowledge about the brand or firm behind the persuasive attempt) and persuasion knowledge (i.e. knowledge of advertising and marketing tactics used to persuade) are critical determinants of consumers' responses towards persuasive attempts. Activation of persuasion knowledge entails scepticism and suspicion about the marketer's ulterior motives and perceptions of agents as deceptive or manipulative. Such suspicion then leads to resistance to persuasion, resulting in less favourable brand attitudes (Campbell & Kirmani 2000) unless the message is perceived as appropriate or ethical (Wei *et al.* 2008).

It is not until late adolescence that children gain sufficient persuasion knowledge through market place experiences, enabling them automatically and effortlessly to execute their persuasion coping behaviour (Wright *et al.* 2005). For example, An and Stern (2011) found only one of the 8-11 year olds in their study possessed sufficient persuasion knowledge to recognise the commercial purpose of an advergame. In an attempt to overcome children's lack of knowledge, the negative effects of exposure to marketing messages may be addressed by enhancing children's media literacy (Brucks *et al.* 1988). In the UK the Media Smart programme is designed for use in primary schools, teaching children what the goal of advertising is, and how advertisers try to influence them (Buckingham *et al.* 2007). Children who possess a more

advanced understanding of the persuasive intent of commercial messages are thought to process those messages in a more critical fashion, for example by developing counter argumentation as suggested by Friestad and Wright (1994). In a media literacy intervention taught in schools, Buijzen (2007) explored the effects of giving 5-10 year olds factual information about media content compared to an evaluative approach which provided them with negative comments about media messages. She concluded that for children over six years both methods increased their negative attitudes towards commercial messages and reduced purchase requests. However, Buijzen (2007) also pointed out that due to their limited experiences and cognitive abilities, children of this age are unlikely to apply their persuasion knowledge in a spontaneous manner, leaving them open to attractive commercial messages. It seems likely therefore that the cognitive limitations as outlined by Roedder John (1999) and the need to use coping skills as suggested by Friestad and Wright (1994) indicate that younger children may be particularly vulnerable to credible marketing messages, a view that underpins UK regulation of television food advertising to children as mentioned earlier (Ofcom 2007). This situation then places some responsibility on parents to mediate their children's responses and/or exposure to marketing communications, particularly where the child has yet to reach a strategic/knowledgeable stage of development, and also where the commercial message may yet be infrequently encountered e.g. advergames.

Forms of mediation or interventions are able to modify children's reactions to advertising, for example by reducing purchase requests or increasing critical responses (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003). The amount of mediation parents use tends to be related to the age of the child, with mediation being more often directed towards younger children (Nathanson 2001). There are three main styles of mediation: restrictive; active (sometimes called instructive mediation); and social co-viewing (Borzekowski & Robinson 2007; Valkenburg *et al.* 1999). Restrictive mediation aims to restrict the number of advertisements children come into contact with by placing limits

on the amount of media they watch (Harrison & Marske 2005). Parents in Australia turn off the television or switch to non-commercial channels as ways of controlling the amount of food advertisements their children see (Ip *et al.* 2007). Whilst overall there is an inverse relationship between the amount of restrictions and the age of the child (Nathanson 2001), for very young children (up to six years old) the opposite is true with the amount of restrictions increasing as the children age (Vandewater *et al.* 2005). Parental influence over children's television viewing diminishes as they grow older, for example children watch television in their bedrooms (Buijzen 2009). However, it appears that restrictive mediation does not reduce the amount of purchase requests children make (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2005), but it is commonly used by parents to minimise their children's exposure to violence in both video games and on the Internet (Nikken & Jansz 2006; Clarke 2002). To a certain extent the UK government has attempted to implement restrictions by banning HFSS food advertising on children's television (Ofcom 2007).

With active mediation, parents can reduce the unwanted effects of advertising by talking to their children about the content of media (Buijzen 2007) in an effort to enhance a child's cognitive defences, allowing them to develop their understanding of advertising, and therefore be more critical (Chan & McNeal 2006). A younger child's analytical capabilities will still be somewhat constrained by cognitive development (Roedder John 1999); however it is suggested that where parents discuss advertising this can reduce or even neutralise its effects (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003; Chan & McNeal 2003a). The impact of advertising exposure on purchase requests is significantly less for parents who use active mediation as opposed to those parents who do not, suggesting that active mediation is effective in reducing the number of purchase requests made by children (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2005). Parents who are comfortable with the positive effects of television advertising viewing are more likely to employ co-viewing, the third form of mediation (Chan & McNeal 2003b; Vandewater *et al.* 2005), especially with younger children (Nathanson 2001). However, there are suggestions that by co-viewing parents are endorsing

and reinforcing the content of the media (Nathanson 2001), which also includes the advertisements and their messages. Valkenburg *et al.* (1999) found that co-viewing is predicted by children's viewing time, therefore the more television children watch the more they view with their parents.

These three forms of mediation are not exclusive with some parents employing multiple styles simultaneously (Borzekowski & Robinson 2007). Also, mediation may arise from different motives according to the media in question, for example it is suggested that video games are monitored for their violence rather than commercial content (Nikkken & Jansz 2006; Nikken *et al.* 2007). Generally, much of the literature on parental mediation relates to television advertising; newer media habits, including the propensity of marketers to integrate marketing communications across a range of promotions (De Pelsmacker *et al.* 2013) suggest that traditional forms of mediation may no longer be sufficient to shield children from unwanted commercial exposure. Newer methods of communicating to children are also less familiar to them (and their parents), thereby reducing children's market experience and their interaction with such persuasion episodes. Indeed, the Institute of Medicine in a report published in 2006 explicitly stated that

“[b]usinesses are increasingly using integrated marketing strategies to ensure that young consumers are exposed to messages that will stimulate demand, build brand loyalty, and encourage potential and existing customers to purchase new products. A variety of measured media channels (e.g. television, radio, magazines, Internet) and unmeasured media channels (e.g. product placement, video games, advergaming, in-store promotions, special events) and other venues (e.g. schools) are used to deliver promotional messages to young consumers.”

It also made the point that “[i]ndustry and marketing sources suggest that food and beverage companies and restaurants have been progressively reducing their television advertising budgets, reinvesting in other communication channels, and using integrated marketing strategies to reach consumers more effectively” (Institute of Medicine 2006:166). Thus, there are several questions that we seek to address in our study: what food marketing messages do

parents regard as necessitating mediation; what forms of mediation do they use to counter food marketing messages; and have newer forms of food marketing communications affected parental mediation practices.

## **Methods**

As part of a larger qualitative study on children's and parents' understanding and consumption of food marketing communications, we examined the role that parents take to counter food marketing messages. Our remit included 11 marketing communications (advertising, sponsorship, product placement, newer media, sales promotions, tie-ins, point of sale, in-school, speciality children's food [food specifically designed for children such as DairyLea Lunchables or Bob the Builder spaghetti shapes], branded toys, word of mouth) aimed at children to reflect the current dynamic marketing landscape as outlined above.

Our research with parents was informed by a qualitative, family approach as epitomised by researchers such as Epp and Price (2008, 2011), Uphold and Strickland (1989) and Daly (1992). According to Daly (2007:72) "qualitative methods focus on the process by which families create, sustain and discuss their own family realities" by focusing attention on the processes by which household members negotiate their everyday lives. As groups, family members construct both individual and shared meanings and it is these multiple meanings that allow qualitative research to provide richer accounts and closer approximations of the lived family experience (Daly 2007; Epp & Price 2008). Therefore, data obtained from multiple family members not only describes the family but also provides information on the characteristics, attitudes and events of the family as observed by the family members, thereby allowing the researcher to obtain a broader perspective on the phenomena being studied (Astedt-Kurki *et al.* 2001). Whilst a quantitative survey approach would potentially have enabled a much larger sample of parents, it would have effectively excluded the input of children (Dockrell *et al.* 2000), and we considered

the topic lent itself more to an informal and discursive style in order to elicit the habits, norms and behaviours of everyday family life.

We therefore employed family interviews in this study, recruited at first from contacts known to the authors followed by advertising on family forum websites and snowballing techniques (i.e. initial contacts referred additional families). In total, fourteen families were recruited, detailed in Table 1 (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the families).

Family	Mother/ Father	Child 1	Age	Child 2	Age	Child 3	Age	Children not present	Ages
1	√	Boy	10	Girl	8				
2	√	Boy	11	Boy	8	Boy	5		
3	√	Girl	8					Girl	4
4	√	Boy	11	Girl	7			Boy	14
5	√	Boy	12	Girl	8				
6	√ √	Boy	10	Girl	8				
7	√ √	Boy	8	Boy	6			Girl	4
8	√	Boy	12	Boy	8				
9	√	Girl	7					Boy Girl	5 3
10	√	Boy	9	Boy	7	Boy	5		
11	√	Girl	11	Boy	8			Boy	2
12	√	Girl	11	Boy	9			Girl	2
13	√	Girl	14	Girl	10	Girl	6	2 Girls 1 Boy	under 4
14	√	Girl	9	Girl	5				

**Table 1. Sample of families**

The 14 families encompassed 16 parents and 29 children, which is an acceptable sample size for qualitative research and similar to comparable recent studies (e.g. Kerrane *et al.* 2012). The first author acted as the moderator, often sitting on the floor to be on the same level as the children, and voice recorded each interview. The interviews were facilitated using laminated cards (see Appendix 2 for examples) to illustrate different forms of marketing communications and the most popular food brands communicated to, and consumed by, children (for example cereals, crisps, fast food). Using pictorial cues allowed even the youngest children to indicate



their recognition and understanding where applicable and to respond to questions on different channels of communication (Owen *et al.* 2007). The interviews began with general questions for the parents such as “what are your general feelings towards the marketing of food to your children?” and to the children “who decides what you eat as a family?” followed by specific probes around topics such as “tell me how often you see these types of communications” and “tell me about the last time you saw this type of communication” (using the laminated cards to give examples/prompts). Questions were asked of the children, the parent(s) and generally to the family as a whole, eliciting a rich, descriptive and sometimes argued account of how various marketing communications were recognised, understood, valued, and mediated against. The family focus groups lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were all fully transcribed by the first author, resulting in 261 pages of transcription. This collected data was analysed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) cyclical process of analysis which involves four interactive stages: data collection; data reduction (editing, summarising, coding and memoing the data to surface themes, patterns and clusters); data display (organising and visualising via diagrams); and drawing/verifying conclusions. From this iterative process, themes and propositions were produced and verified (Miles & Huberman 1994).

To ensure the research complied with ethical guidelines, university departmental ethics approval was granted and all participants were provided with an information sheet before the interview commenced. This provided the families with the purpose of the research, their rights in the research process, an explanation of the research procedure, details of what would happen to their contribution and who to contact should they be unhappy with any part of the research process. Once the families were happy to continue (they all were) they were then asked to sign a consent form. The families were given a copy of the information sheet and the signed consent form.

## Findings

In response to our general opening questions around marketing to children, all the parents believed that they were primarily responsible for protecting their children from food companies' marketing. The medium about which they were most concerned was television, and they also expressed irritation with non-mediated promotions. The Internet was not an issue for marketing purposes (many parents were ignorant of the marketing practices evident on the Internet) but related to fears for their children's safety (we return to this point below). Even though they accepted responsibility, parents also thought that the government could do more to regulate advertising - when probed about this they were very hazy about current legislation. This was despite the recent changes to television advertising by Ofcom which had been frequently debated in mainstream media prior to and during our interviews.

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| Family 2  | Mum: I assume there is [regulation] but it's not something I'm aware of.   |
| Family 5  | Mum: I know there are guidelines or there are restrictions but I wouldn't know what they are.  |
| Family 10 | Mum: I know there has been a lot of coverage recently where they were saying we don't want certain things advertised on kids' television, not shown before 9pm or something. |

Once informed about the increased regulation, parents were largely supportive but maintained it was ultimately up to parents to implement their own strategies to counter any unwanted communications.

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| Family 6 | Mum: I would prefer it if those adverts weren't there, but it's our responsibility in what we buy for our children, and I think that we as parents have to take responsibility for that and we need to set up rules. So in the summer holidays you can have Frosties and the rest of the time you can't. And when we are in the supermarket if you want a Star Wars chocolate well the answer might be yes and it might be no. So I don't think we can blame the advertisers, at the end of the day we have to take responsibility for what we are putting into our children's mouths or buying. And I think, you know, I understand that all of this does impact upon families and the way children behave and the way that they will pester their parents but I still think at the end of the day, in one respect it doesn't matter what is going on out there because it is up to you. |
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Parents actively negotiated the marketing environment by imposing their own rules, which were subject to various influences such as holiday allowances, and may have been somewhat unpredictable, but were seen as necessary. Our initial questions therefore revealed that all parents were using some form of mediation, and when asked about the specific food communications they attempted to counter, the immediate response was to equate food marketing with television advertising.

- Family 13 Mum: I'm not very impressed about the sort of television marketing which I see between children's television programmes ... overall there is a lot of, you know, adverts out there.
- Family 4 Mum: When they watch television and all the adverts come on all the time and I know when we go around the supermarket there are things specially targeted at them.

Awareness was predominantly evident for the more familiar forms of marketing communication – television advertising and various promotions in-store. Consequently, these marketing tactics were the ones parents were most concerned about mediating against. Children had a broader recognition of the various communications, showing awareness of websites and advergames but lacking a marketing understanding.

- Family 7 A (boy,8): I have been on a website for food, Cheesestrings website but it's not really tried to sell you anything though, it's like a challenge to do something.

The comment from A illustrates an eight-year-old's lack of marketing awareness of branded games on websites, seeing the content purely as entertainment (An & Stern 2011). Both parents and children showed little awareness of the way that marketers attempt to use new and multiple communications to promote brands, again with parents concerned about traditional methods and with children unable to articulate any sense of integrated marketing. Such a response is understandable both with very young children (limited processors, unable to take another's perspective) and children aged 7-11 who are cued processors (Roedder John 1999), requiring prompts to activate their critical response to marketing tactics, especially for those which are

less familiar persuasion episodes (Friestad & Wright 1994) such as entertainment content on websites.

Discussions around responsibility and awareness led us to elicit information about parents' mediation strategies and three forms of mediation emerged from our data: in home frequency restrictions; out of home frequency restrictions; and impact restrictions across a wide range of food marketing communications. Parental intervention was evident for, but not limited to, television advertising as expressed in previous studies, but extended beyond that to the non-mediated environment.

#### *Frequency restrictions in the home*

Parents attempted to reduce their children's exposure to food marketing communications in the home by placing restrictions on commercial media channels and/or limiting screen time. This mediation was directed at television advertising and implemented informally by encouraging children to play outside/ with alternative toys, and/or formally by setting rules in relation to children's screen activity.

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| Family 14 | Mum: We keep them away from such things as Nickelodeon and Boomerang because the advertising is so in your face. |
| Family 11 | Mum: They are only allowed thirty minutes a day to watch television or play on the Nintendo.                     |

In Family 11, television and game playing were regarded as identical, undifferentiated in terms of the child's access and regardless of the difference in commercial content, simply as a single sedentary activity. The children from Family 11 were allowed the least amount of time for this activity, as the emphasis was very much on creative and physical play. A number of other parents had implemented an informal restriction with the same aim, i.e. to encourage alternative ways of entertainment. Such action encompassed more than a desire to restrict advertising exposure, as it also encouraged less sedentary behaviour. This was a common response in

households where there was an emphasis on healthy living overall. Family 14 was critical of the advertising on certain channels and so restricted access - parents who felt television had little impact on their child's food choice were less likely to implement such restrictions.

Internet use and video game play were mediated for a non-marketing reason - to protect from danger. Parents were concerned about their children coming into contact with unsuitable content of a sexual, alcoholic or gambling related nature, and anxious about their children's safety, placing formal restrictions on which Internet sites their children were allowed to visit or games they were allowed to play. In several cases, children were not allowed to use the Internet without a parent present.

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| Family 4 | K (girl, 7): I've never been to any of those websites [food website shown on the laminated card]. My mum wouldn't let me.  |
| Family 3 | L (girl, 8): I'm only allowed on (the Internet) when mummy or daddy are with me.   |
| Family 5 | Mum: He (son,12) gets in at 3pm or 3.30pm and I get in at 6pm so I don't really want the Internet in the house. They can go on the Internet if I'm around, then it's ok. |

Parents both discussed the Internet, and enforced rules about when it could be used with some limited co-viewing involved, but did not fully comprehend how much marketing content could be incorporated on the sites and/or games. Whilst they monitored video games for age appropriateness, they had not played themselves. Consequently they were unaware of product placement within such games.

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| Family 12 | Mum: I didn't know that McDonald's would be allowed to have a virtual shop in a game. |
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Lack of knowledge around commercial content in video games did not worry parents unduly, and neither did they express concern over advergames or websites in terms of marketing content: as pointed out above, their worries about these media (perhaps understandably) lay elsewhere.

### *Frequency restrictions out of home*

Frequency restrictions took place out of the home in a non-mediated environment. The most common way in which parents attempted to reduce their children's exposure to food marketing communications was not to take their children shopping. There are several communications which can be found in the supermarket such as sales promotions, tie-ins and point of sale promotions. Parents from only two families regularly took either all or some of their children shopping with them. All remaining parents made a considerable effort to avoid this, common tactics including one of the parents to go in the evening once the children were in bed, to go during school hours or, a more recent alternative, to shop on-line.

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| Family 12 | Mum: I must admit that the nagging is ferocious when, during the school holidays, they are coming around with me.  |
| Family 7  | Dad: They very rarely go to the supermarket because S (mum) goes at night.   |
| Family 8  | Interviewer: Do you ever go shopping with your mum to the supermarket?<br>Z (boy, 12): Sometimes.<br>Mum: Not if I can help it.<br>Z (boy, 12): She prefers us not to go. Mum always orders stuff off the Internet from Tesco. |

In-store and sales promotion communications are constantly being refreshed to reflect the latest characters or movies popular with the child audience (Bridges & Briesch 2006). Parents singled out free gifts, especially those in boxes of breakfast cereals, children's speciality foods and tie-ins, as the types of communications which tended to cause the most requests from their children (Wilson & Wood 2004). As a result, these were the ones they avoided the most.

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| Family 13 | Mum: K (daughter, 6) would definitely would go straight for the bright coloured versions which is why I don't take them shopping with me. |
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Parents believed that children were more likely to make requests if they came into contact with these communications when they were younger, and Roedder John's (1999) analysis of under-7s would support this view, given their immediate and unsophisticated response to persuasive messages. However, this is not to say that parents are immune to such requests - as found by

Caruana and Vassallo (2003), some mothers admitted that as a result of taking their children with them to the supermarket the cost of their shopping tended to increase substantially.

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| Family 2  | Mum: I take them to Tesco so rarely for the reason I end up buying things I don't want. |
| Family 12 | Mum: The shopping always comes to about £30 more when they are with me.                 |

Children have an influence on family purchasing, which can be seen as unwelcome by parents. Currently, the in-store environment is largely unregulated in terms of what can be used to attract the child consumer, offering parents little support in their attempts to counter food marketing messages.

#### *Impact restrictions – active mediation*

Parents employed active mediation in an attempt to reduce the impact of food marketing communications on their children. Such mediation could also be seen as a form of enablement i.e. increasing the child's ability to counter marketing messages. Parents aimed to increase their children's media literacy by talking to them about the intent behind the communications, but not limited to television advertising, as traditionally discussed in the literature (Buizjen 2007). Parents actively discussed three different forms of communication with their children: television advertising, free gifts, and children's speciality foods. The Internet was also discussed but again for non-marketing reasons. When discussing both advertising and free gifts parents tried to explain that bias and exaggeration may be present and that the end result, i.e. the product itself or the free gift, would probably not live up to the child's expectations. For younger children especially, parents often had to explain that the free gift was only there to encourage the purchase of the product which they (the child) did not actually like to eat.

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| Family 8 | Mum: I've always ingrained in them the fact that, it's [advertising] a cynical thing. I've always said the reason they are putting that on the box is to try and get you to buy it. |
| Family 4 | K (girl, 7): I just saw it (free gift) and asked, and you (mum) said 'will you like it' in a menacing voice.  |

These two families adopted slightly different approaches – in Family 8 the mother was explicitly decoding marketing practice to educate her children about persuasion tactics, whilst in Family 4 the approach was more subtle, with the objective of getting the child to think about the product beyond the allure of the free gift. However, as we highlighted earlier, active mediation is unlikely to work with younger children, as they do not necessarily have the cognitive development or marketplace experience to be able to understand a marketer’s perspective. Children over seven years may benefit from such mediation but will still require cues or prompts until around the age of 11 (Roedder John 1999).

Parents discussed children’s speciality food out of concern for the quality of the products involved and attempted to educate their children about the products’ content. To help them achieve their objective, the parents sometimes allowed their children to try the products to prove that they did not usually taste as good as the children expected.

Family 12      Mum: If there has been something grotty that they have wanted to try I’ve maybe let them try it, like Cheesestrings, and they have realised actually they don’t taste like very nice cheese.

Parents implemented dietary controls to counter the attractive marketing of such products by teaching their children about healthy eating and introducing rules about which foods their children could and could not eat. Many parents commented that they were supported in this by the school curriculum which covered diet, nutrition and healthy eating. This had resulted in some of the children taking a strong interest in food and actively seeking a healthy diet.

Family 4      Mum: They get an awful lot of education at school. D [son, 11] was asking the other day about proteins. They [the children] are always asking me about what is good for you.  
Family 6      Dad: I [daughter, 8] regularly says ‘I’m dividing my meal into sugars, proteins, starchy vegetables’ and I think that is a good thing.  
Mum: She will come home and say ‘you know what so and so had in their lunch box. There wasn’t any fruit or veg in their lunch box’.



Learning about food in school as part of the science/technology curriculum had an effect on children’s appreciation of ideal food groups in a balanced diet. However, understanding the gap between what marketers promote to children (sugar, fat), and what should make up the majority of a child’s intake (carbohydrates, protein, dairy, fruit, vegetables), was not evident from the children’s conversations. It may be that the children in our families were overall too young (22 out of the 29 were under 11 years) to exhibit such a sophisticated understanding of the market.

**Discussion, limitations and further research**

Our study investigates parental mediation of food marketing messages in a number of ways. Within the context of parental responsibility and their (non)recognition of various marketing techniques, we consider what parents prioritise when mediating across different marketing communications and how they achieve this. Our findings suggest that they mainly attempt to counter food marketing messages transmitted via television advertising, sales promotions, and speciality foods. Mediation is operationalized in three ways as illustrated in Table 2 below:

New Classification		Traditional classification
<b>Frequency restrictions</b>	In home: television advertising	Restrictive mediation: television advertising
	Out of home: speciality food; free gifts; tie-ins	x
<b>Impact restrictions</b>	Active mediation: television advertising; speciality food; free gifts	Active mediation: television advertising

**Table 2: Comparison of parental mediation classifications**

Parents implemented restrictions for two distinct purposes: to reduce the amount of contact their children had with the communication (frequency restrictions), and to reduce the communication’s perceived impact or influence over their children’s wants and desires (impact restrictions). We find little evidence in our data for co-viewing (none for television, limited for the Internet) but support existing mediation methods of restrictive and active mediation, and further

our understanding of how parents counter food marketing messages by proposing out of home controls, such as in a shopping environment, as additional forms of parental mediation. This was not unique to the parents in our study (Ip *et al.* 2007), but it makes sense to see this out of home restriction as an extension of restrictive mediation. Both are aimed at reducing children's encounters with persuasion episodes, whether via traditional advertising or free gifts in cereal boxes. In the UK, food advertising to children on television is heavily legislated, thus helping parents to restrict exposure on this medium but there are few regulations for other food related communications in the in-store environment. If promotions such as tie-ins and free gifts were removed, parents would find it easier to control their children's exposure to such communications.

Our impact restrictions support existing active mediation and extend it to a wider range of communications such as free gifts and children's speciality food. The intention of this type of restriction is to reduce the impact advertising has on children by enhancing their knowledge (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003) and parents discussed children's food products, as well as the marketing of such products, within a discourse of healthy eating, aiming to influence their children's diets (Ip *et al.* 2007; Kelly *et al.* 2006; Marshall *et al.* 2007).

Parents' focus on the more traditional marketing communications was rather unexpected, given the rise of newer forms of communication popular with marketers. We account for this focus by offering two explanations: first, we found that parents were unaware of the marketing content of newer media and therefore did not recognise websites, advergames, or video games as featuring marketing communications; and second, the Internet was regulated by parents for different reasons, primarily to do with unsuitable content, and thus associated with safety rather than marketing. Both lack of awareness and focus on safety indicate that parents are not explicitly countering food marketing messages their children come in to contact with when

playing online, and therefore are not implementing mediation. We echo the suggestion of Shin *et al.* (2012) who call for further parental involvement in monitoring and mediating children's interaction with forms of online advertising, particularly for younger children who are still learning to be critical consumers. The parents in our study described how they liked to be present (although not necessarily involved) with their children whilst the latter were online, but parents may need prompting to ask certain questions of their children as well as those centred on safety e.g. the marketing content of the websites and games they visit, to initiate discussion. Organisations such as Media Smart have gone some way to recognising this gap in parental knowledge and have produced a pack for parents (Media Smart 2012) which covers many forms of digital and social media advertising. Other organisations such as those that exist for parents (e.g. Mumsnet UK) may also be an appropriate place for discussion of marketing techniques. There also appears to be an opportunity to link school lessons around food/health to media literacy classes to illustrate the unbalanced nature of most food marketing aimed at children (Cairns *et al.* 2013). Parents welcomed school input which prompted their children's interest in healthy eating.

Our study had the following limitations. It was based solely in the UK, a geographical context with particular media regulations and school curricula. Our sample was relatively small and parents and children in other families may demonstrate more or different knowledge of food marketing techniques. The micro environment of family culture, norms and interactions can differ substantially. All these factors suggest our study be used to generate new insights rather than generalisations. As such, we have identified several key areas in the mediation of food marketing communications: parental concerns over several food marketing communications which extend to the non-mediated environment; implications for marketers seeking to behave responsibly to the younger child audience by avoiding use of such communications; the potential to integrate teaching of media literacy with food studies to develop children's critical

awareness of food marketing; and lack of parental knowledge over what their children are exposed to during online activities. Each of these points lends itself to further research.

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## Appendix 1 Family details

Family	Description
1	Live in a semi-detached house in a quiet residential area made up of privately owned properties, both parents work full time, the mother (who was not present) is a nurse and has considerable input into the family's nutritional intake and the father is a lecturer at a University, neither parents have any marketing knowledge. The family has access to one television (no digital channels) and one computer which are situated in communal rooms. The family rated their television viewing as below average.
2	Live in a semi-detached house in a quiet residential area made up of privately owned properties, the father works full time and the mother works part time as a lecturer at a University, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family have access to one television (no digital channels) and one computer which are situated in a communal room and office respectively. The children are discouraged from watching television and therefore rate their viewing as below average.
3	Live in a terraced house in a residential area made up of privately owned properties, mum works part time as a teaching assistant at a local primary school and dad is a lecturer at a University, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has access to one television (no digital channels) and one computer which are situated in communal rooms. All Internet access is supervised.
4	Live in a semi-detached house in a quiet residential area made up of privately owned properties, the family is a one parent family with mum working full time as a lecturer at a university with no academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has access to two televisions and one computer, one television and the computer are in communal rooms and the second television is in the eldest son's (who did not take part in the research) bedroom. All children had access to their own mobile (but not smartphones) phones.
5	Live in a terraced house in residential area made up of privately owned properties, the family is a one parent family with mum working full time at a University with no academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has access to one television (no digital channels) and one computer both situated in communal rooms. All Internet access is supervised and the family have a Sony PlayStation.
6	Live in a terraced cottage in the centre of a village in the Peak District, mum is a full time PhD student and dad works full time, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has two televisions (no digital channels) and one computer, one television is in a communal room, the other is in the parents' bedroom and the computer is in an office.
7	Live in a detached house in a quiet residential area of privately owned properties, both parents work full time, mum is a junior school teacher and dad works in IT for the local council, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has one television (with digital channels) and one computer, both are in communal rooms.
8	Live in a semi-detached house in a residential area made up of local authority housing, the family is a one parent family with mum working part time for an insurance company and has no academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has at least one television (with digital channels), one computer and a video game console.
9	Live in a terraced house in a residential area made up of privately owned properties, mum is a housewife and dad works full time, neither appear to have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has one television (no digital channels) and one computer in communal rooms.
10	Live in a large townhouse in a new residential housing estate made up of privately



	owned properties, mum is a housewife and dad is a chef and has nutritional knowledge, neither have any academic or professional marketing knowledge. The family has two televisions (with digital channels), one in the lounge and one in the children's playroom, one computer and a video console game.
11	Live in a large detached house in a residential area made up of privately owned properties, mum is a housewife and dad works full time, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has one television (with digital channels), one computer and a video console game, all situated in communal rooms. The children are limited to 30 minutes of screen time (across all media) per day.
12	Live in a large detached house in a quiet residential area made up of privately owned properties, mum is a housewife and dad works full time, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has at least one television (with digital channels) and one computer in a communal room and the children have an Xbox and a Nintendo DS.
13	Live in a semi-detached house in a new residential housing estate made up of privately owned properties, mum is a housewife and dad works full time, neither have any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has one television (with digital channels), one computer and a video console game all situated in communal rooms. Only the eldest child (14 years old) has a mobile phone.
14	Live in a semi-detached house in a new residential housing estate made up of privately owned properties, both parents work full time, mum is a high school teacher but neither parent has any academic or professional marketing or nutritional knowledge. The family has at least one television (with digital channels), one computer and one video console game, all situated in communal rooms.

Appendix 2 Examples of laminated cards

