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Food, children and marketing

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Editorial

Children are increasingly recognised as an important market for everything from toys, through video games to breakfast cereals. When it comes to food, we know relatively little about their consumption experiences or indeed how they, as opposed to their parents, respond to the various attempts of food companies to engage with them in the commercial marketplace. ~~As we noted in this call for papers,~~ discussions around food marketing have elicited accusations that include unfairly promoting unhealthy food products to children, using devious marketing tactics to lure the unwary, and innovative techniques to engage children with promotions, cinema and television tie-ins, character licensing and a variety of techniques to encourage children to buy certain types of food or to pester their parents into obliging. Childhood and food are indeed at the core of contemporary societal anxieties that emphasize the complex intertwining of risk, pleasure and control that children, and parents, have to deal with in their food consumption practices.

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* was an attempt to answer some of the questions around children as food consumers and to give an indication of the types of research that were being conducted in this area. Our aim was to represent innovative approaches to children as consumers that affirms or challenges these assumptions we have about young consumers and how they engage with food as part of their own experiences as opposed to those of their parents or adults. What, in other words, do the children actually make of all this food marketing as well as educational and health messages directed towards them as individuals who buy food and consume food bought and prepared by others? As interest in young consumers and the children's market grows, it is imperative that we begin to look at children as active consumers dealing with complex issues and normative systems rather than as simply recipients of food or as vulnerable consumers in need of protection. As we see a shift towards 'feeding the children', this reiterates the need to consider children as part of family food decisions (Cook, 2009).

The call attracted a number of submissions, although surprisingly few on new media, and we would like to thank all those who took the time to submit a manuscript as well as the reviewers who actively engaged in a constructive scientific dialogue with the authors. A number of these were very good papers, but in this Special Issue, we were looking for new and innovative approaches to how children engage with food marketing in their capacity as young consumers. Several papers had good research design and execution but ~~had to be rejected as~~ the focus on the child or food, or marketing was tangential to the research. Others were heavily oriented towards interesting empirical findings but failed to contextualise this empirical work within a more theoretical or critical framework that met the demands of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. Indeed, the call for papers

revealed both the huge variety and scope of work in the field. The varieties of epistemology, method and research techniques betray a very divergent set of approaches to conducting research with children, each with their own particular assumptions, benefits and drawbacks. Furthermore, it revealed the specific challenges of trying to conduct research with young consumers and interpret their answers. This is not an 'easy' field in which to design research projects as it requires the implementation of a set of basic precautions such as, from a cognitive standpoint, ensuring that children actually understand the question they are asked and master the answer format that they are offered (questionnaire, Likert scale, pictures, choice, etc.). Other contextual factors have also to be considered, as an important part of empirical research on children—and consumption is conducted within schools, institutions in which children enact their social role of pupils, leading them to endeavour—as honestly as they can—to provide a 'correct' answer rather than merely accounting for their actual consumption practices or food preferences. Through a mirroring effect, interviewing children within a peer group or within a focus group leads to a similar difficulty as children enact themselves—quite sincerely—as belonging to a cultural system that is socially constructed in opposition to adults' cultural references and normative requirements. Trying to escape the divide between adults' culture and children's peer culture, or the divide between the savvy adult consumer and the inexperienced and vulnerable child, should encourage us to design innovative research methods, allowing a consideration of the set of meaningful relationships through which the child develops its knowledge of commercial environments and learns to behave in an appropriate manner and improve its decisions-making capacity, but from his or her own point of view and not only from the adult one.

We have tried to capture some of that diversity in the papers we selected for this Special Issue. These papers represent a range of different approaches from ~~more~~ traditional experimental design studies that adopt a positivist methodology to more interpretive pieces that engage ~~more~~ directly in the experiences and worlds of the child. Children from different European and North American cultures are represented, which is not to claim any cross-cultural comparison but rather to reflect that research in children as consumers is not confined to any geographical boundaries.

We have several papers in this Special Issue that provide fresh insights into the difference between children's food and adult food, consider the way in which children engage with food labelling and nutritional messages, ~~or around~~ the complex areas of family food negotiation, and examine how children engage with new media, but in a way that might encourage more healthful behaviour. As we stated at the outset, marketing often gets bad press, part perhaps of what

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Kline (2011) calls the new media risks around food, but these papers provide some insights not only in the way in which children interpret and relate to some of these practices but also in the ways in which some of these marketing techniques can be used to encourage more healthy eating. Having said this, it is also something of a concern about the extent to which health has become a key component of this discourse, and this is reflected in the number of papers that chose to feature health as a key part of children's food experience. For some, childhood is a time of carefree abundance and fun. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of fun with health, of adult with child or marketing with parental responsibility raises broader issues around the ways in which social scientists construct and consider children as consumers exposed to the market or, even more broadly, investigate how children develop in a mass consumption society in which they are ineluctably immersed.

We begin with a paper by Elliot that looks at children's understanding and categorisation of food ~~as children's or adult food~~. In this paper, she highlights some of the assumptions around what, from the child's perspective, constitutes 'children's food' and aptly captures the ways in which children construct their own food worlds relative to those of adults. What she illustrates is the need to consider how children understand food and the way in which marketing contributes to the association of food with fun and in the process (re) constructs that discourse. Elliot underlines that fun foods are often associated with 'junk food' and eating practices regarded as spoiled, unhealthy and uncontrolled. She alludes at the end of the paper to the fact that both children and adults have their own ideas about both normative and transgressive eating and drinking. Thus, the ambivalence of what children consider as food aimed at them offers an extremely interesting base from which to examine and question some ambiguities that characterise the contemporary social construction of childhood.

The paper by Miller *et al.* is concerned with the ways in which children engage with and understand food labels, but, unlike the Elliot paper, it adopts a very different approach ~~that chose~~ to use a more traditional laboratory-based study and experimental design. Although there are interesting issues around the extent to which this is representative of ~~the~~ children's experience within the cereal category, they provide a clear indication of the ways in which, *ceteris paribus*, nutritional labelling and claims influence children's liking and preferences for breakfast cereals, one of the most heavily promoted food products. Their findings have interesting implications for the role of nutritional labelling in the promotion of more healthful consumption and in highlighting the different reactions of children and their parents. This raises important questions about the need to understand how meaning is socially (re)constructed when we choose to elicit the views of children themselves. Moreover, it has important policy implications for those engaged in promoting healthy eating who seek to understand information and communication mechanisms that could give parents and children an opportunity to have a clear opinion on healthy eating behaviours.

The third paper, by Pires *et al.*, also positivist in its approach, picks up on this issue of packaging but in an innovative way

that is reflexive of the need to try to utilise methods and stimuli that are representative of the sorts of marketing that children are exposed to. In this research, they design a three-step methodology aimed at testing children's reaction to a packaging design for healthy products using the communication codes that are normally associated with the promotion of 'fun' foods. They discuss the process by which they develop and test this packaging concept, and in doing so, they begin to challenge the depth of conflict that appears to exist in the opposition between fun and health. Like the first two papers, this raises some interesting issues around the categorisation of foods and marketing to children, particularly in regard to the promotion of healthy eating and the possible role for marketing and brand messages to overcome this structural divide between healthy and fun.

Dias ~~offers~~ us an insight into the ways in which a new emerging marketing technique, advergaming, might be used to promote healthy food. But the real contribution of the paper lies in what it shows us about the discourse around food and health and the ways in which marketing is contributing to this debate. In an interesting research design, ~~she~~ uses video games to look at the ways in which children's ideas about food are framed in relation to the fun, experienced by being immersed in a video game with its own rules and challenges. Although normally used to promote less healthful foods, ~~she~~ illustrates how the association of more healthful foods with fun through the use of an advergaming ~~technique~~ has an impact on children's liking and food preferences. Although the paper considers only the short-term impact, it would be interesting to consider how such techniques might be used over the longer term in promoting healthful behaviour and break some of the monopoly that certain foods and brands have built on 'fun' to directly target children.

The final paper by Neill ~~et al.~~ represents a slight deviation for the ~~special issue~~ but addresses an important aspect of children in relation to food. In this paper, the authors examine the ways in which children engage in debates around food within the family. Building on earlier work, they provide an interesting account of contextual influences on children's consumption practice and force us to consider the role of marketing relative to other social and cultural influences on children's eating practices. This paper opens up the broader question about the role of marketing in shaping children's consumption and its contribution to their understanding and construction of associated meaning. Even though it draws on specific investigation techniques inspired from ethnography and requires a special expertise from the researcher, the authors demonstrate that investigating family negotiations about food constitutes a potentially rich perspective for analysing tweens as well as children's agency and reflexivity about their own eating practices.

Although marketing is clearly influencing the way in which children understand food, looking at this interaction outside of the social and cultural context fails to account for the scope and the complexity of children's food consumption practices. As Cook (2009) notes, children are part of and have been part of a commercial environment, they are exposed to food products and brands on a daily basis. Our challenge as researchers requires us to try and understand how children

respond to and also contribute to family food culture. Looking at food consumption allows us to question the actual scope of child ‘agency’ and the institutionalization of contemporary forms of family democracy. These papers hopefully help us to see some of that complexity and the inherent challenges in trying to make sense of children’s food culture especially in relation to the marketing techniques and activities that contribute to the evolving meanings associated with that experience. ~~We hope that this Special Issue will generate further interest and perhaps raise more questions than answers, but this aspect of children’s consumption holds much potential.~~

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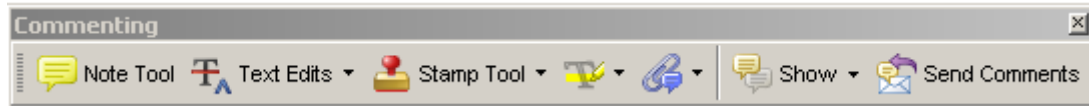
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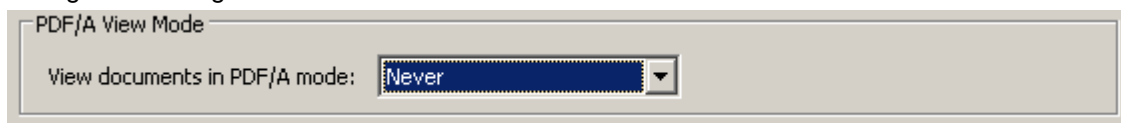
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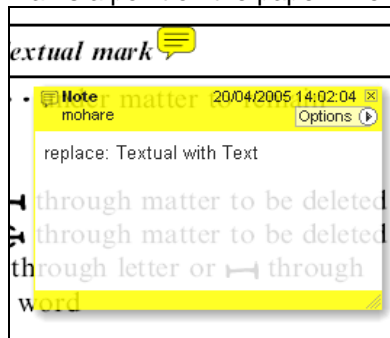
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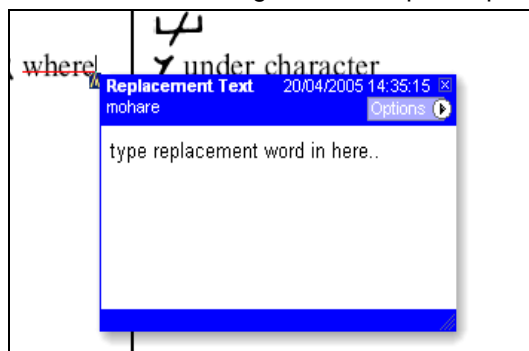


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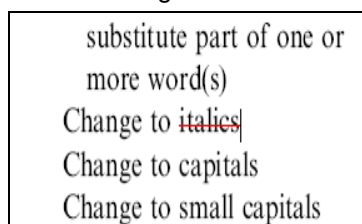


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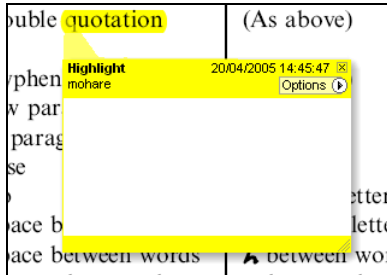


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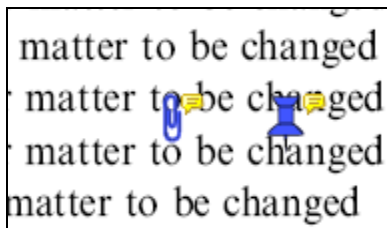


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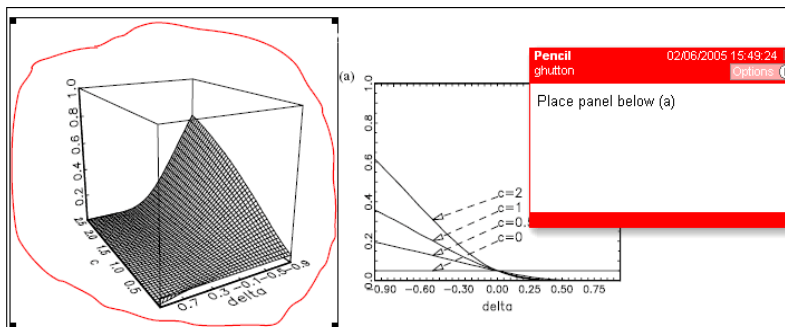


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