

The Role of Media in Promoting Healthy Nutritional Habits: A Review of *Advances in Communication Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity*, edited by Jerome D. Williams, Keryn E. Pasch, and Chiquita A. Collins

By Astrid Van den Bossche

Heartening news was published in the *New York Times* on August 9, 2013: obesity rates of preschoolers from low-income families have declined in 19 states for the first time in decades,¹ suggesting the global obesity trend is indeed reversible. Yet too much optimism would belie the direness of the epidemic. In the U.S., nearly 32 percent of children and adolescents older than 2 are either overweight or obese, closely followed by England and Australia, where the numbers are, respectively, 30 percent² and 21 to 25 percent.³ Far from a phenomenon affecting only developed nations, sharp increases in Asian obesity rates are a rising concern.⁴ Weight-related health complications, including a slew of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, remain a considerable, and possibly avoidable, economic strain on the world's healthcare systems.

Clearly a global health issue, weight-related health complications are unequivocally blamed on the shift in food preferences, consumption patterns, and exercise habits engendered by a mass-mediated consumer society. Although obesity drivers are composed of complex, dynamic, and sometimes intangible social, economic, and cultural factors, food and beverage corporations are represented by the press and some advocacy groups as the main culprits in promoting unhealthy habits. As the argument goes, focused marketing efforts have introduced calorie-rich, nutrient-poor foods and beverages into the daily fare of many consumers, compounding the already worrying lack of traction of accessible and affordable alternatives.

Advances in Communications Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity comprehensively addresses questions on the role of media in childhood obesity, striving to bring together insights on numerous issues, including legislative mandates, corporate accountability, and environmental influence. Dedicated to

reversing the obesity trend, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation highlights the importance of communication studies in the book's foreword:

From increasing awareness of the threat childhood obesity poses to our nation's health to promulgating promising approaches for change, we recognize that communication is an essential element to inform, appeal, influence, and affect children, families, communities, and policy makers.⁵

As such, the book begins with an overview of obesity-related policy research in part I, with chapter 2 reviewing the conclusions reached in the 2006 Institute of Medicine's report, *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* Chapter 3 brings to light the increased use of Integrated Marketing Communications (the practice of efficiently employing a variety of channels and techniques to communicate a unified brand message), and the consequence for current and future regulation.

As a follow-up, part II delves further into the legal, ethical, and policy implications of advertising. Chapter 4 documents the stance of obesity prevention advocates and marketing practitioners on the ethical issues in children's advertising, including the reach of self-regulation. The issue of the latter reappears in more detail in chapter 6. Chapter 5 lifts the veil on the legal intricacies of regulating communications by discussing the use of the U.S. Constitution's first amendment by both sides of the dispute. Finally, chapter 7 exposes a number of best and worst practices in advertising, highlighting the techniques that skirt current regulatory constraints.

Given that legal action requires reasonable suspicion of causality and/or proof of effectiveness, these chapters are followed by a closer look at the latest findings on the impact of advertising. This consists of studies on children's exposure to food advertising on television (chapter 8), the role of advertising on food consumption attitudes (chapter 9), digital food marketing (chapter 10), and youth food perception and evaluation (chapter 11).

Parts IV and V hone in on more specific research regarding the role of place in food marketing (“place” to be understood as both geographic location and physical surroundings) and racial/ethnic minorities as target groups. Chapters 12 through 15, respectively, discuss the obesity trend in India, the role of schools as marketing places, outdoor advertising, and youth-specific marketing in food stores. Keeping the focus on the U.S., chapters 16 to 18 take a community perspective and unveil the disproportionate prevalence of obesity among Black and Latino youth, including a discussion in chapter 18 of marketing targeted at ethnic minorities.

If Parts I to V focus primarily on the effects and legalities of food marketing by multinational corporations, part VI introduces a welcome respite by turning its attention to physical activity. Chapter 19 documents the advances in communications on physical activity (encouraging adults and children to exercise more in an otherwise sedentary lifestyle), acknowledging the challenges of inducing activity. This is followed by one of the only in-depth campaign discussions—VERB™ *It’s what you do!*—and an account of the development and release of the 2008 *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans: Children and Adolescents*. Part VII closes the book with three solution-oriented chapters that hint at what the future might entail in a discussion of the importance of increased nonprofit involvement (chapter 22), an evaluation of the recently introduced “exergames” in Singapore (chapter 23), and an appraisal of multisector approaches (chapter 24).

Whatever the authors’ backgrounds may be—and this particular collection boasts impressive cross-disciplinary breath—a general agreement comes across in the different chapters: combating obesity is a question of, first and foremost, changing social norms. Yet it is a realization that does not, necessarily, lead to the most effective solution. Indeed, many of the authors seem to focus on the need to limit, if not ban, direct advertising to children, and to decry the increasingly apparent shortcomings of industry self-regulation.

When one is confronted with the data about food advertising to children, it is only natural that one despairs of the status quo: half of all food advertisements viewed by children are broadcast during general audience programs, thereby bypassing restrictions on children's media. Ultimately, children still view an average of 13.4 food ads per day.⁶ At these rates, the industry's self-imposed restrictions against child-directed marketing (which largely consists of abstaining from addressing children under the age of 12 and from promoting in children's media) seem to become little more than appeasement measures to keep policy makers and bad press at bay.

Yet what is an equally repeated point across the chapters is the acknowledgement of the ubiquitous nature of marketing, and the outdated scope of policy and regulation. Coca Cola, for example, is known to "reach large numbers of children 'under the radar' using product placements on prime-time programming, event sponsorships, and digital marketing."⁷ Concerns grow about this tendency, not only because the media ban is rendered much less effective, but also because these alternative approaches to marketing might not be recognized as the persuasive efforts that they are, and are hence better at successfully securing a place in the consumer's mind. What's more, they actively participate in cultural discourse, thereby securing longevity in the hearts and minds of consumers. To pick on Coca Cola once more, their traditional sponsoring of the Olympics ironically binds the calorific soft drink to the biggest celebration of sporting prowess in the world. (Chapter 7 fascinatingly details the exact impact of such sponsorships, which are glaringly overlooked by self-regulatory organizations such as the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI).)

As a consequence, authors' skepticism (if not actual scorn, as in chapter 4) about self-regulation is rampant, while governmental policies lag woefully behind the realities of contemporary marketing techniques. These difficulties raise the question whether gagging food corporation's marketing activities is truly the most important part of the solution to the obesity epidemic. While denouncing these corporations and restricting their maneuvers might have an effect, there is

a long way still to go in effecting behavioral change. Educational efforts to inform consumers about health and nutrition, and subsequently facilitating the “healthy” choice by providing clearly identifiable and economically viable alternatives are equally crucial to effecting change.

It would be an injustice to say *Advances in Communications Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity* does not provide enough food for thought; in fact, it supplies plenty examples of precedents to inspire out-of-the-box thinking. Yet the space dedicated to traditional advertising still indicates a bias towards corporate culpability. This is an approach that glosses over the importance of grass-root actions that strive to affect the mind and attitude of the consumer.

What’s more, the emphasis on traditional media overlooks the opportunity of combating fire with fire: employing marketing know-how and persuasive techniques to instill healthy impulses. In the face of corporations’ cultural and financial power, guerilla-like and community-driven measures might be a way to avoid prolonged and detrimental legislative battles, as witnessed in the demise of tobacco.⁸ Where there is a conscientious and demanding consumer, industries have less incentive to prevaricate in their PR endeavors, instead redirecting their efforts to meeting consumer demand. Furthermore, it might be the only path to changing public opinion because consumers often do not have a favorable disposition towards legislative measures to restrict or direct behavior (the recent repeal of the New York soda ban being a case in point).⁹ In other words: where corporations resist change and consumers don’t rally to enforce it, public policy will only be limited in its effects, if not squashed in its infancy:

[I]t is unlikely that the problem will be adequately addressed without more coercive measures directed either at consumers or suppliers, or both. [But, t]his will only become feasible if observable patterns of over-eating come to be viewed by the public as illegitimate.¹⁰

With this position in mind, my sole concern with this publication is therefore not the quality of the research, nor the relevance of its selected topics, both of which are up to the mark. Its hesitation to focus on potential resolutions of the advertising/obesity dilemma takes away from the boundary-pushing volume it

could have been. More concerted analyses of both successful and less successful prevention projects would have been invaluable additions, providing more guidelines for future researchers, policy makers, and NGOs. Notable absences, for example, are reports on Michele Obama's *Let's Move* campaign, which for its press coverage and nationwide reach has no equal in visibility and impact potential, or further scrutiny of the Los Angeles fast-food moratorium, briefly discussed in chapter 18.

All in all, this book is a solid read to get up to speed with the latest on obesity prevention, and gather useful knowledge on the issues in food marketing. But, although advocates will glean multiple thought-provoking ideas, they might be a little starved on tried and tested marketing options. That said, with an increased body of experts congregating in such cross-disciplinary, multisectoral symposia to inspire fellow advocates, we might yet see a tipping point effect where scientific knowledge filters through to grassroots activation, followed by corporate consciousness and public policy.

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⁴ The Obesity Prevention, "Too Many Kids Are Too Heavy, Too Young," Harvard School of Public Health. <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/obesity-prevention-source/obesity-trends/global-obesity-trends-in-children/>.

⁵ Jerome D. Williams, Keryn E. Pasch, and Chiquita A. Collins, eds., *Advances in Communication Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2013), v.

⁶ Jennifer L. Harris et al., "Monitoring Food Company Marketing to Children to Spotlight Best and Worst Practices," in *Advances in Communication Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity*, edited by Jerome D. Williams, Keryn E. Pasch, and Chiquita A. Collins (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2013), 154.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁸ Courtney Brooke, "Is Obesity Really the Next Tobacco? Lessons Learned from Tobacco for Obesity Litigation," *Annals of Health Law* 15(2006).

⁹ R. West, "What Lessons Can Be Learned from Tobacco Control for Combating the Growing Prevalence of Obesity?," *Obesity Reviews* 8(2007).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*