
Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30046330

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2012, The Author
Integrated Marketing Communication, unhealthy food and power: an under-investigated dynamic

Michaela Jackson, Deakin University, Australia
Paul Harrison, Deakin University, Australia

Introduction

The food and beverage industry is a powerful institution within Western society. It involves thousands of companies and stakeholders and millions of products (Brownell & Warner 2009). Through a range of activities the industry influences how and what food is produced, how food is made available to use, and at what price. There have been significant changes in eating habits and preferences over past decades (Wadden, Foster, & Brownell 2002), and the public health community has consistently and repeatedly highlighted parallels between food marketing and increases in childhood overweight and obesity rates e.g. (J. L. Harris, Pomeranz, Lobstein, & Brownell 2009; Hastings, McDermott, Angus, Stead, & Thomson 2006; Marketing of Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children 2006; McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak 2006; Mehta, Coveney, Ward, & Handsley 2010; The role of media in childhood obesity 2004; Zimmerman 2011).

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) resulted from a shift towards consumer-focused marketing during the 1970s and 1980s (Groom & Biernatzki 2008), and represents a paradigmatic shift in the way marketers view marketing communications (Gould 2004; Kitchen, Brignell, Tao, & Jones 2004). IMC proponents argue that shifting to an IMC approach means individual communications tactics become part of a broader, synergistic communications whole designed around the consumer (Kitchen 2005).

This paper seeks to explore the dynamic between the food and beverage industry’s promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents, IMC, and power. It proposes a conceptual model that identifies three characteristics of IMC that through the enabling processes of legitimacy, hegemony and exploitation help to reinforce and expand the powerful position of this industry. Coupled with these practices is society’s acceptance of such behaviour within the context of our neo-liberal, consumer-culture environment. The proposed conceptual framework builds on existing works within the macromarketing discipline related to the food industry, e.g. Witkoski’s (2007) analysis of food marketing and obesity in developing countries and discussion of ethical and public policy issues, and Redmond’s (2009) analysis of regulatory failure of packaged foods in the United States.

In 1986, Kotler encouraged marketers to use a combination of power and public relations “to accomplish their purposes” (p. 117). The food industry’s position, marketing strategies used and audiences targeted, the broader socio-economic environment in which this industry operates, and the power dynamics inherent in these practices present an archetypal macromarketing issue. This issue enables us to consider the broader contexts and environments in which marketing activities occur (Moyer & Hutt 1978), and focus on the social and economic impacts of marketing at a collective level (Bartels & Jenkins 1977; Shultz 2007).

IMC, power, and the enabling processes of legitimation, hegemony and exploitation
Figure 1, below, proposes a relationship between three characteristics of IMC – subtlety, multiple communication tactics, and co-creation (Harrison & Jackson) - and the power of the food and beverage industry and marketers who promote unhealthy products and brands to children and adolescents. It positions concepts associated with the generation and maintenance of power – exploitation, hegemony and legitimation – as ‘enabling processes’ in this relationship. These processes occur within a broader socio-economic context shaped by consumer culture, neo-liberalism, and protection of freedoms and liberties within the legal system (Parker, Spear, Haolovac, & Olson 2011; Pomeranz, Teret, Sugarman, Rutkow, & Brownell 2009). While legitimisation, hegemony and exploitation are interrelated and symbiotic, the following discussion explores the relationship between these elements by pairing one characteristics of IMC with one of these ‘enabling processes’ of power. Examples taken from industry are used to translate these concepts into practice.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1. The relationship between IMC and power as enabled by legitimacy, hegemony and exploitation**

**Subtlety and legitimation**

Consumer cynicism to traditional forms of advertising and overt marketing has increased (Harris & Whalen 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody 2008). In response, marketers have developed a plethora of marketing tactics and channels that blur the lines between editorial content and advertising, information and entertainment (Zwick, et al. 2008). Consumers of all ages, but especially children who lack cognitive maturity, may be less likely to identify when they are exposed to marketing material (Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009; McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006).

The following discussion builds on earlier work of authors such as Naim and Fine (2008), Martin and Smith (2008), Diksikterhuis, Smith, Baaren and Wibaldus (2005), Bargh (1997) Bargh and Chartrand (1998) and Taylor (2009), by arguing that subtlety is used by food marketers to legitimize their place within popular culture and Western society. From a Weberian perspective legitimation theory helps to explain why people consistently and voluntarily submit to authority (Humphreys 2010a). Mechanisms used by organizations to gain legitimacy within a society can be explicit, such as offering rewards or incentives, or implicit – such as positioning products or brands within everyday cultural contexts (Humphreys 2010b).

Schor and Ford (2007) explain that marketers understand that subtle forms of marketing driven by cultural beliefs, values or symbolism can aid in building a brand’s value. Marketers thus occupy a powerful position as cultural brokers within neo-liberal society, contributing socio-cultural meaning to goods beyond their functional purpose (McCracken 1986; Zakin & Maguire 2004). Food represents
one manifestation of culture. By subtly embedding or positioning brands or products in close proximity to established cultural objects or occurrences, companies are in effect taking a shortcut in establishing credibility and acceptance with their target audience and more broadly, with society. Where once there was a distinction between ‘culture’, and ‘commercial culture’, Taylor draws our attention to the “convergence of content and commerce” (Taylor 2009 p. 406). Marketers, in essence, not only adapt elements of culture from the top-down, but also influence it by creating it from the bottom up.

Taylor provides examples of several collaborations between marketers and popular musicians to produce cultural products that are at once legitimate and commercial (see details in Table 1). For marketers, Taylor claims that the ideal is for brands “to become part of popular culture, not simply to emulate it” (2009 p. 414). These insights become all the more powerful when we consider the myriad of subtle promotional formats that are used as part of an IMC approach: product placements in films, television shows, music videos; adver-games; viral marketing; event sponsorship; and publicity (See table 1 for specific examples). Despite their variety subtle tactics all depend on a sort of ‘cultural camouflage’ for their success. Aside from the possible ethical issues associated with stealth or covert marketing (Martin & Craig 2008), subtle marketing tactics also suggest another manifestation of power imbalance whereby one party knows the motive of the promotional activity while the other may not.

**Multiple channels and hegemony**

Marketers adopting an IMC approach are encouraged to use multiple communication channels or “touch points” to reach their target audiences (Shimp 2010 p. 20). Marketers therefore play another influential role as buyers or users of media space to ensure these messages are communicated. However, media fragmentation and channel proliferation have resulted in media exposure overdrive (Nairn & Fine 2008); promotional messages are so prolific in our society that they have become a form of “social wallpaper” (Preston 2004 p. 365). As we become ever more culturally conditioned to the frequency of such messages there stop being ‘a lot’ of marketing material: it becomes the norm.

Gramsci’s description of hegemony applies to controlling cultural content, such as that communicated through the mass media, to “engineer consensus” that serves the interests of a dominant class (Knuttila, 2005 p. 150). Consensus is engineered by portrayal of world views or ideals as being common sense, normal, realistic or popular (Knuttila 2005).

Producing and delivering messages across multiple communication channels requires significant resources, including purchasing media space, as the marketing budgets of food and beverage corporations will attest. In 2009 the fast food industry spent in excess of US$4.2billion on advertising on television and other media (“Fast Food FACTS in brief”). In an Australian example Cadbury Freddo Frog’s *Adventures of Freddo* campaign used a combination of television, cinema, adver-gaming, dedicated website, online banner advertisements, a stage-show, email, and outdoor posters to reach their target audience (“Cadbury/ The Adventures of Freddo; Mojo Melbourne releases The Adventures of Freddo, Season 2 - The Mystery of Slater Island” 2010).

Through examples such as this (and others outlined in Table 1) it is argued that through their combined marketing might the food and beverage industry is in effect controlling the cultural content of commercial media channels. In this situation we must not forget that the media which sells marketing space also operates as a business and that it is in that a media network’s best interest to ensure a favourable environment for their marketing clients (McManus 1994).

As new additions to a consumer society children and adolescents are exposed to popular neo-liberal ideals. Marketing of brands and products using multiple channels represents part of the collage of neo-liberal culture and society, which through the process of hegemony, no alternative is presented.
While members of the public health community have expressed concerns over the number of marketing channels used to deliver messages to children, and the rate at which children are exposed e.g. (Layton 2011; Mehta, et al. 2010), their message appears less prominent within the current neo-liberal climate than the voice of industry as portrayed through the media.

Co-creation and exploitation

The concept of “value co-creation” refers to a management technique whereby marketers rely on the active participation of allegedly “empowered, entrepreneurial, and liberated” consumers (Zwick, et al. 2008 p. 164). From a critical perspective co-creation can also be seen as encouraging a form of political power through the exploitation of creative labour (Zwick, et al. 2008). We argue that co-creation is inherently exploitative when private companies who adopt this tactic do not adequately compensate co-creators for their work.

Earlier in 2012 an eight-year-old child from the United Kingdom developed a new chocolate ‘Treasure’ bar through the television program Jim’ll Fix it (Colombini 2012). Media reports that followed reported that Nestlé were considering making the product a commercial reality (Colombini 2012). The child received 50 limited-edition ‘Treasure’ bars for his trouble as well as media recognition (Colombini 2012). By comparison, a position as a Customer Product Development Manager with a British snack food company was recently advertised with a salary of £28,000 plus car and benefits ("Marketing Jobs" 2012). The comparison between 50 chocolate bars and marketing salaries is stark. While the employers of the advertised positions would likely expect a degree of professional experience and life-skills perhaps not associated with an eight-year old child, nor do they appear to take full account of the creative processes, customer insights and innovation provided by the child-winner.

The age of the co-creator in this instance also raises concerns. The United Nations explains child labour as referring to “any economic activity performed by a person under the age of 15, defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the United Nations” (“Child Labour” p. 2). The UN also highlights that child labour can range from beneficial activities such assisting with the family business, or farm, or helping with housework, to more destructive forms that may endanger a child’s health or interfere with school attendance (“Child Labour”). At the destructive end during the 1990s high-profile company Nike faced public backlash over employing children in the production of their products (Kenyon 2000). More recently, notebook brand Moleskine faced backlash from its target audience of designers after attempting to engage this audience in a co-creation opportunity to design a new logo for the company ("Moleskine logo contest dubbed ‘Molescheme’ by angry designers" 2011). While the ‘Treasure’ example discussed should not be placed in the same category, it serves as an interesting example whereby more than a decade after the Nike incident, companies are engaging children and adolescents in co-creation, often performing tasks traditionally allocated to paid professionals.

Marketers may argue that such activities are voluntary, nullifying arguments regarding exploitation of labour. This paper argues that the voluntary nature of co-creation becomes problematic in light of the profit seeking motives of companies employing this technique. Co-creation that is employed by non-profit organisations is less problematic because consumers’ work becomes a donation of time or skill that seeks to benefit society, and does not result in profit for shareholders. It is highly unlikely that children and adolescents are shareholders in companies; therefore they will not receive the benefit of their efforts. Zwick and colleagues (2008) also note that in effect, consumers pay a higher price for products to cover the marketing costs, some of which they contributed free of charge. Further, by engaging in co-creation marketers also exert their power by controlling the ways and forms of brand engagement (Zwick, et al. 2008).
Conclusion

The conceptual diagram presented and subsequent discussion of its elements has highlighted the relationships between three aspects of IMC, the powerful position of the food and beverage industry within Western society, and three enabling processes that work to establish and maintain this relationship.

At a micro-marketing level, the power of marketing to influence the behaviour of target consumers is recognized (Royne & Levy 2011). However analysis and understanding of the power dynamics and processes between consumers and industry at a macro level does not yet seem to be fully appreciated by macromarketers or policy makers. With both governments and industry feeling pressure over issues such as food marketing and its association with childhood obesity, macromarketers need to explore these dynamics, their relationship to current marketing communication tactics and their impact on society. This article encourages macromarketers and policy makers to consider marketing’s influence on power dynamics between the food and beverage industry and vulnerable consumer groups – children and adolescents – as brought about by certain characteristics of IMC.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Leverages sublety | Coke Product placement on American Idol  
During 2007 the program featured more than 4,000 occurrences of product placement | Shimp (2010)  
|               | Hershey’s, Cadbury, featured as product placement in Children’s film *Hop*, as did Baby Carrots |  
("brandchannel,") |
|               | Movie *Rango* featured produce placement for Jarritos soft drink and PopTarts |  
("brandchannel,") |
|               | Movie *Dairy of a Wimpy Kid* featured product placement for Twix, Tostitos, Snickers and Doritos |  
("brandchannel,") |
|               | Movie *The Green Hornet* featured produce placement for Coca-Cola, Red Bull, Jamba Juice, Monster Energy Drink, |  
("brandchannel,") |
|               | *The Adventures of Freddo* campaign  
Note: requires parental consent |  
|               | M&M’s Red vs. green games and website  
Note: does require you to enter your age |  
("Red vs. Green,") |
|               | Mya recording music for Coke commercial |  
(Taylor, 2009) |
|               | *Project X* hip-hop show sponsored by Pepsi |  
(Taylor, 2009) |
|               | DreamWorks appear to have stopped using product placement in animated films |  
("brandchannel,") |
|               | McDonalds approaching hip-hop artists to include references to BigMac in their work |  
(Taylor, 2009) |
| Multiple channels | *The Adventures of Freddo* campaign |  
|               | In 2009 the fast food industry spent in excess of US$4.2billion on advertising on television and other media |  
("Fast Food FACTS in brief,") |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-creation</th>
<th>McDonalds’ 13 websites associated with its products and brand</th>
<th>(“Fast Food FACTS in brief,”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moleskine notebooks faced backlash after inviting designers to design and upload a new logo for the company. Angry designers created a ‘Molescheme’ blog in retaliation, claiming the company was seeking 28,000 hours of unpaid design work.</td>
<td>(“Moleskine logo contest dubbed ‘Molescheme’ by angry designers,” 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepsi China invited consumers to create script and TV spot for Pepsi in China featuring Chinese star Jay Chow. Winner received $12,500; 14 finalists received $1,250. More than 27,000 scripts were received.</td>
<td>(Madden, 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Treasure’ chocolate bar developed by eight-year-old in competition could be rolled-out by Nestle Child participated in competition on TV show Jim’ll Fix It and received 50 limited edition Treasure bars</td>
<td>(Colombini, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDonalds competition encouraging consumers to upload their ‘remix’ of the ‘two all-beef patties’ jingle, the winner of which was aired on MTV for a week.</td>
<td>(Taylor, 2009) p. 413</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References**


Harrison, P., & Jackson, M. Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and power imbalance: the strategic nature of marketing to children and adolescents by food and beverage companies. In J. Williams, K. Pasch & C. Collins (Eds.), Advances in communicaton research to reduce childhood obesity: Springer [in press].


