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Brazilian parents' perceptions of children's influence on family food purchases

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Abstract

Purpose – Qualitatively ascertain perceptions of parents regarding their children's influence on family food purchases. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Content analysis of the transcripts of 31 semi-structured interviews conducted with parents of students from public and private institutions in Brazil. The public school provided meals supplied by the National School Feeding Program, and discouraged the consumption of foods brought from home. The private school did not receive any governmental subsidies for school feeding, and students were responsible for bringing their own school snacks.

Findings – Parents perceived children's influence especially of energy-dense nutrient-poor food purchases. Parents from the public school students, with lower income and educational levels, showed greater concern with quality and frequency with which requested foods were made available to the child. Only the parents from the private school students mentioned perceiving peer influence over their children's requests.

Research limitations/implications – Results enabled an overview of the main factors that influence children's purchase requests as perceived by parents. School environment seemed to influence requests, reinforcing the need for strategies similar to those present in the public school to be employed in private schools, where government programs that encourage healthy eating are not in place.

Originality/value – Qualitative study conducted with parents of Brazilian school children found that those with lower income and educational level were actually more concerned about their children's eating habits and perceived less peer influence over their children's requests for foods. Initiatives in the public school environment that effectively reduced access to certain kinds of foods in favor of healthier food choices reinforced the school's role as a health promoter for students and also their families.

Keywords Family, Food products, Consumer research, Home shopping, Children

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For decades, the role played by children in the family's consumer behavior was ignored or little mentioned by scientific literature (Lee and Marshall, 1998). Many important modifications happened in the family core and made children recognized as potential consumers. Among them, the increased purchase power of families due to women's income, decrease in fertility rates, delayed family formation and the fact that both parents work (McNeal, 2000). All these factors stimulated parents' indulgence in order to warrant that their children lack nothing (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001). As a consequence, children got involved in many market segments acting as primary consumer, spending their own money according to their wishes, and also as influencers, dictating how parents should spend the family money (McNeal, 2000). Stimulated



by their families, children influence the purchase of innumerable product categories, although requisitions for parents tend to be more frequent for items they want for themselves, such as foods (McNeal, 2000). Their influence over family shopping may be as high as 60 percent of the purchased goods (Turner *et al.*, 2006). Influence over what is spent on foods occurs mainly regarding processed ready-to-eat products, densely energetic, rich in sugar, fat and salt, and with poor fiber content (Wilson and Wood, 2004; O'dougherty *et al.*, 2006; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007; Gram, 2010). The tendency of children to choose and request these products may be explained by physiological sensations (such as satiety) provoked by ingestion of energy-dense foods (Birch, 1998), or the mere availability of such products in the home environment (Patrick and Nicklas, 2005). Besides, food ads exhibited in television are widely recognized as capable of influencing children's preferences and requests for advertised food items (Hastings *et al.*, 2006). Together with the high frequency of food ads directed to children, advertised products are often of low nutritional value (Chapman *et al.*, 2006; Batada *et al.*, 2008; Kelly *et al.*, 2010).

Kids' preferences are also influenced by peer observation – the time spent in educational facilities allow information exchange among colleagues and friends on what to eat and drink (Birch, 1999; McNeal, 2000). Even children with well-established food preferences, when exposed to other children with different preferences may adopt the behavior of the reference group. Therefore, requests for products similar to those ingested by peers are rather common during this phase of life, a situation even parents recognize as true. Products recognized as socially desirable are sweets, chocolate and sweetened beverages, as opposed to fruits and other healthier options (Marquis, 2004; Kelly *et al.*, 2006; Krølner *et al.*, 2011).

In Brazil, the National School Feeding Program provides nutritionally balanced meals to public school students during school hours and stimulates the adoption of healthy eating habits (Ministério da Educação. Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação, Brazil, 2009). Private school canteens are targeted by healthy eating public policies, but students can bring from home whatever they wish to eat during snack breaks. Studies have reported that most consumed snacks brought from home to school are highly processed energy-dense nutrient-poor foods (Sanigorski *et al.*, 2005; Gabriel *et al.*, 2008; Matuk *et al.*, 2011). Also in recent years, it has been observed that Brazilian families of all income levels have been acquiring increasing amounts of ultra-processed foods and insufficient quantities of fruits and vegetables (Levy *et al.*, 2012). Considering that food selection at the time of purchase reflects the beginning of the consumption chain in the family environment, the study's aim was to qualitatively ascertain perceptions of parents of public and private school students regarding their children's influence on family food purchases and factors that influence their purchase requests.

Method

Participants

This was a qualitative survey targeted at all parents of students between six and ten years of age (from the first to the fifth year of elementary school) of both sexes from a public and a private school located in the urban area of a Brazilian state capital. The survey protocol (No. 1140/10) was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Catarina and conformed to the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2000).

This study is part of a more comprehensive study which analyzed students' and their biological parents nutritional status. For this reason, those who reported a guardian status other than mother or father were not included.

Parents of children in this age range were selected because in this period children begin to choose products and more actively participate in the buying process, which increases their influence on family purchases. The period also marks the beginning of attention to product detail and quality, peer influence, brand loyalty and negotiation strategies (McNeal, 2000; Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001).

The public school provided meals supplied by the PNAE, did not have a cafeteria and discouraged the consumption of foods brought from home in the school environment, specifically energy-dense nutrient-poor foods. The private school did not receive any governmental subsidies for school feeding, and students were responsible for bringing their own food or buying it in the school cafeteria.

After contacting the school directors and obtaining formal consent, the survey's objectives were explained to public ($N=100$) and private school students ($N=138$), who brought home Informed Consent Forms. All parents who turned in completed forms were interviewed.

Semi-structured individual interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews included questions about participants' socio-demographic information and questions related to the survey's topic of interest.

In order to define the questions for the interview protocol, relevant themes identified in literature research were taken into consideration – direct and indirect influence of children on family food purchases (“Does your son/daughter usually ask you to buy a specific kind of food? Do you comply with such requests?” “Is there a specific food item which you buy even without being requested?” “Do you usually take your son/daughter with you when grocery shopping? If yes, how does he/she behave during shopping? If not, why?”) as well as influencing factors of children's purchase requests (“In your opinion, why does your son/daughter ask you to buy these kinds of foods?”).

The interview protocol was tested through pilot interviews with individuals having similar characteristics to those included in the survey (data not reported). Interviews were conducted by the first author, in October and November 2011 in places chosen by each respondent and were digitally recorded after receiving verbal consent from the respondents.

Content analysis

Recordings totaled eight hours and 40 minutes and the content was transcribed verbatim. The resulting manuscript was submitted to systematic deductive content analysis (Bardin, 2010). The manuscripts and recordings were read and listened to, respectively, three times to allow for familiarization with the content of the interviews, identification of main ideas and tendencies and highlighting the main themes mentioned. Words and sentences used by the participants were analyzed to determine the degree of similarity between the responses. The raw data were coded through selection, classification and grouping according to common themes, creating categories that represented the main themes to be analyzed by the investigator (Bardin, 2010). The categorization process was performed twice within a 15-day interval to ensure reliability (Kidd and Parshall, 2000).

Results

Participants' characteristics

Participants in the study included 20 parents (18 mothers and two fathers) of public school students and 11 parents (ten mothers and one father) of private school students.

Parent's average age was 38.1 years and children's was 8.4 years. The average monthly income of the public school students' parents was 854€, while the average monthly income of the private school students' parents was 2.545€. Regarding education, 20 percent of the public school students' parents and 91 percent of the private school students' parents reported having completed higher education.

Parents' perception of their children's influence on family food purchases

Children's food purchase requests were similar in the accounts both groups of parents. Most requests were for energy-dense nutrient-poor foods such as filled and unfilled cookies, chocolate, salty snacks, flavored yogurt, sugary cereals, juice boxes, gum, candy and powdered chocolate drinks. Even though parents from both groups reported their children's habit of eating fruits and vegetables, very few mentioned receiving requests for buying such food items. There were also no comments regarding requests for food items other than those mentioned before.

Many parents in both groups confirmed buying foods they knew their children liked even without being asked directly – exactly those most asked for directly by the children. "Sometimes I buy some cookies or something like that [...] a treat for the weekend, you know [...] even if he doesn't ask for it [...]" (Interview 06, public school student's mother); "What she is already used to eating [...] cream-filled cookies, which I know that she likes [...]" (Interview 29, private school student's mother).

Adherence to purchase requests was reported differently between the groups. The public school students' parents reported dodging their children's requests because they were for unhealthy items or because they could not afford them, giving priority to staple foods most needed by their families. Many of the private school students' parents reported often giving in to the requests, not mentioning attempts to control the frequency of acquiring the foods or their nutritional quality. "I almost never buy them [...] to take care of their health. On the weekend or on special occasions, we make a deal. Something healthy, like salad, in exchange for a cup of ice cream afterwards." (Interview 20, public school student's mother); "It's the candy, it's the gum, it's the chocolate, these things that I end up always buying." (Interview 22, private school student's mother).

Some parents mentioned that, in general, all family members ended up eating the foods purchased due to children's requests. Foods that were not part of the family's eating habits became frequent because of such requests.

Parents of both groups reported preferring not to take their children to the supermarket when shopping in order to avoid being harassed by the requests. When it happened, the way children behaved in the shopping environment was perceived differently by the groups. Many parents of public school students referred to their children's assistance in comparing prices and selecting products in general. Among the private school students' parents, the majority emphasized their children's participation only in selecting foods for their own consumption.

Parents' perception of factors that influence their children's food purchase requests

Parents from both groups said that television commercials attracted attention mostly to new products or new versions of a product, but it was the foods' sensory characteristics like flavor and texture that really determined which products were most requested by their children. "[...] she prefers the T. cookies because they taste better. I brought other brands several times and [...]. she ended up not eating [...]" (Interview 17, public school student's father); "[...] a chocolate cream-filled cookie, be its brand A

or B, if she eats it and thinks it is tasty, then there is no problem.” (Interview 27, private school student’s mother).

Only the private school students’ parents considered classmates to be important influences on their children’s requests. In their opinion, the fact that the children brought their own food or bought it at the school cafeteria negatively influenced their children’s food requests since most of those products were rich in fats, salt and/or sugar. They also reported that the children usually tried each other’s food, what ended up stimulating even more the desire to taste these kinds of foods, and purchase requests. Parents also referred that children exchanged information between them about points of purchase of specific products or package size. “The other day a friend was eating those crackers [...] then she said to me, ‘Hey Mom, L. was eating them and I tried them and I liked them. Can you buy me that snack?’” (Interview 27, private school student’s mother).

The parents of the public school students did not report any kind of influence from their children’s school environment on their requests for food purchases, mentioning that all children ate only those foods that were made available by the school feeding program.

Discussion

We verified differences in the way parents perceived direct and indirect influences by their children on family food purchases. The results also provide an overview of the main factors that influence children’s purchase requests as perceived by parents, emphasizing the role of different school feeding environments in shaping children’s consumer behavior.

Children’s purchase requests were most often focussed on energy-dense nutrient-poor foods – a result similar to those obtained in surveys using a qualitative approach conducted in other countries (Wilson and Wood, 2004; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007). The tendency to request highly processed foods of low nutritional value could be a reflection of the children’s own food preferences, as they are predisposed to consume energy-dense and flavorful foods – those with high levels of sugar, fat and salt are usually among their favorites (Birch, 1998; Holsten *et al.*, 2012).

Participants mentioned that, even without their children’s requests, they used to acquire foods of low nutritional value, which coincided with those requested by their children. Those responsible for family purchases should avoid buying high-energy foods with low nutritional value as well as displaying such foods in visible places in the home. On the other hand, the availability of fruits and vegetables is a predictor of consumption and even creates a preference for such foods. Therefore, if they are bought regularly and kept in accessible places, children can be encouraged to eat them (Krølner *et al.*, 2011; Larson and Story, 2009).

If parents influenced children’s food intake, the reverse was also true. Products purchased because of child’s requests ended up being eaten by all family members. Therefore, children could be contributing for the adoption of inadequate food practices by the family, since their preferences and requests were for unhealthy items.

It was interesting to notice that the public school children’s parents (with lower income, but also lower educational level) displayed greater concern about the quality and frequency with which they made such foods available to their children. It has been reported that in low-income families, children have fewer opportunities to have their purchase requests fulfilled (Dobbelsteen and Kooreman, 1997; Holsten *et al.*, 2012), and that in higher income families, the children’s influence level over shopping decisions is

higher, since parents pay less attention to the products' prices (Flurry, 2007). Contrary to the results presented here however, studies report that in families whose parents have lower educational levels, the probability of children having access to low-nutrition foods is greater since low educational levels would limit access to suitable information and the ability to buy foods of better nutritional quality (Patrick and Nicklas, 2005; Molina *et al.*, 2010; Maubach *et al.*, 2009). Kids whose parents are highly educated are expected to make healthier choices, since their parents should be able to choose wisely and make healthy choices widely available (Sausenthaler *et al.*, 2007; Cribb *et al.*, 2011).

As to family shopping routines, it was observed that the presence of children in the supermarket and their participation in grocery shopping were perceived in a negative way by the parents. Similar results are reported in the literature (Pettersson *et al.*, 2004; Wilson and Wood, 2004), but the presence of children and their involvement in grocery shopping can be an important way to socialize them as consumers and both should therefore be encouraged (Fan and Li, 2010). As the first socialization agents for their children, it is up to parents to teach them attitudes and skills so that they can become accomplished consumers (Ward, 1974).

Similarly to what has been reported in other studies (Kelly *et al.*, 2006; Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Fiates *et al.*, 2008), food advertising on television was mentioned by the parents as influencers of children's purchase requests. Such an influence occurs especially when advertised foods include entertainment motifs (Cairns *et al.*, 2009; Pan American Health Organization, 2011). This takes on greater relevance when one considers that Brazil does not yet have governmental measures to regulate food advertising aimed at children. According to parents' views, though, in the long term, the foods' sensory aspects were predominant in determining their children's purchase requests. Besides the value attributed by children to sensory characteristics of foods (Birch, 1999), food ads can exert a negative effect. Ads can create feelings of frustration as well as unreal expectations in children, especially regarding the advertised food's texture and flavor. Because children lack the ability to identify this situation, when tasting the child can become disappointed with the advertised item (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003). Therefore, in the long run, sensory characteristics end up dominating food preferences and choices.

The influence of classmates on children's purchase requests was identified only by the parents of private school students, probably due to the source of the foods consumed during snack break. Similar results are reported in different countries (Cullen *et al.*, 2000; Kelly *et al.*, 2006; Campbell *et al.*, 2007). In the present study, however, the limitation imposed by the public school prohibiting the consumption of foods brought from home, as well as the encouragement of the consumption of meals made available by the National School Feeding Program limited information exchange among the children. Results highlight the importance of the National School Feeding Program, reinforcing the role of school in promoting actions to stimulate learning and health in the school environment and promote the adoption of healthy health habits (Pan American Health Organization, 2003). It has been observed in Brazilian schools that positive outcomes are obtained when interventions associate education to promote healthy eating habits with changes in the school environment, such as the offer of healthy meals and the restriction to processed foods (Jaime *et al.*, 2011).

According to the parents of private school students, besides the great variety of products, the foods consumed by classmates and even by their own children at school were highly processed and of low nutritional value. This is a situation that has been reported in Brazilian studies (Gabriel *et al.*, 2008; Matuk *et al.*, 2011), and appears to be

encouraged by interaction with classmates, which induces children to choose foods considered to be socially acceptable – such as chocolates, sugary drinks and fries instead of fruits (Krølner *et al.*, 2011). It has been reported that children prefer not to take fruits and vegetables to school so they will not be bullied by their colleagues (Cullen *et al.*, 2000).

Contributions from the study regard the behavior of parents from private school students as educators and socializing agents. Even though they had more schooling and therefore should be more aware of healthy eating issues, this was not what happened. Apparently, handling children's requests to purchase highly processed foods is a difficult task when monetary restraints are not present in order to justify refusals.

Second, the effects of strategies which restrain the access of students to certain types of foods appeared to extend beyond the school environment. Since beneficial effects encompass the whole family, strengthening the school's role in health education appears to be especially important in private schools, where government programs are not in place to directly stimulate healthy eating practices.

Finally, the results and conclusions presented by this study can provide support for research on other methodological approaches and representative samples that allow more solid conclusions regarding this issue.

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