Nutritional awareness and food preferences of young consumers

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Introduction

Adolescent health education is an area of great concern, particularly as this development stage represents a “time of experimentation and initiation into adult behaviour patterns” (Perry and Murray, 1982). Startling evidence has indicated that 25 per cent of young consumers in Northern Ireland are deemed likely to experience a heart attack by 15 years of age (Gould, 1997). Their dietary behaviour is one of the major influences in such a potential health problem (Gould, 1997). Unfortunately, much health advice in the past has concentrated upon the adult consumer. Whilst this advice may have been implemented by some adolescents, it is likely to have been in an individualistic and ad hoc fashion. It therefore represents an apparent information gap both in healthy eating policy and in the daily food behaviour of many young consumers.

Adolescent food preference behaviour

Adolescence is a vulnerable period of development and personal adjustment which needs to be recognised and understood when targeting such groups with nutritional education information (Seymour et al., 1997). As young consumers move into adolescence, (11-16 years old) they may have more freedom to select foods, in accordance with their own individual preferences. Such independence is exhibited within the home, school and social environments and may fuel the apparent lack of nutritionally balanced food behaviour exerted by these consumers (Greenwood and Richardson, 1972). Thus adolescents’ independence may affect personal decisions about when, where and what they eat (IFIC, 1998). Many young consumers may seek and develop their own individual food preference behaviour, particularly apparent through the number and styles of meal eaten outside the home, and within the school and social environments. Research has shown that such traits are particularly apparent in the consumption levels of school meals. It was found that 60 per cent of 11 year olds consumed school meals whilst only 20 per cent of 16 year olds opted for this selection. The decrease in consumption by adolescent consumers was cited as being related to the independence
trait, whereby 31 per cent of young consumers bought food from outside school, 20 per cent of subjects brought food from home, 4 per cent ate lunch at home and 4 per cent ate nothing for lunch. Many of the young consumers opted for fast food styled and snacks styled options at lunchtime, purchased within the social environment (Greenwood and Richardson, 1972).

Over previous decades, there appears to have been a sustained increase in the food preferences of young consumers relating to fast food options. It is perceived that:

\[ E \] eating and liking junk food is normal behaviour for teenagers while liking healthy food is an oddity (Chapman and MacClean, 1993).

It may be surmised that young consumers may be more reluctant to eat healthy and nutritional foods, because of the fear of appearing “weird” within a group situation, or being “different” from their friends. These young consumers may be identified as generally eating foods which are familiar, and indeed they may actively avoid new foods. This is defined as:

\[ T \] he fear of new foods (neophobia) which has to be balanced with a desire for variety (neophilia) which is increasingly manifest in a systematic search for new and inexperienced pleasurable tastes (Marshall, 1995).

In essence, the food behaviour of young consumers is portrayed as exerting the characteristics from early childhood years when “notoriously wary of unidentified eating objects, children invariably go for the familiar” (Lydecker, 1988). Also, young consumers appear to have a higher tolerance for repetition than adults and this can mean “an unremitting diet of hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, chilli, barbecued ribs and fried chicken” (Lydecker, 1988). Evidence reflects that “fast food” options appear to have overshadowed the “proper meal” (Marshall, 1995), which encompasses a cooked meal, usually evening dinner and consisting of meat, potatoes and vegetables eaten at a properly set dinner table.

**Young consumers’ nutritional awareness and food behaviour interaction**

Young consumers’ food behaviour may be reflective of the patterns established during early childhood years, fuelled by the parent-child interaction within the home environment. The home environment is identified as one of the most prominent influences on young consumers’ development and food behaviour especially for those of preschool age (Vaines, 1999). If parents hold such negative beliefs in relation to nutritionally balanced changes in their own food behaviour, it is likely that such traits will be passed on to their families. In essence, such negativism within society represents not only the struggle which nutritional education still has to overcome in the future, in convincing these individuals to change, but also the knock-on effects which such beliefs may have upon children’s food behaviour.

Within healthy eating the key influences on food preference and behaviour need to be fully considered. Nutritional and marketing gurus both need to be aware of what makes consumers “tick” with regard to the foods consumed, especially in terms of healthy eating (Alcock, 1995). In particular, consumers will not be forced to eat foods which they do not like and/or want (Brown et al., 2000). It is anticipated that with the supply of information, young consumers may be empowered with nutritional awareness knowledge of both a theoretical and practical nature, with which to make more nutritionally informed decisions based on their own preferences (Brown et al., 2000).

Nutritional education, particularly within the young consumer segments, has to battle against the “desires for autonomy over food choices” (Alcock, 1995) and move towards a preference for healthy eating as opposed to the fast food options. In practical terms, future predictions for nutritional education, have emphasised that the consumption of fruit and vegetables should increase from a daily average of 2.5 to at least 5 servings (Alcock, 1995). Based upon the evidence present, current consumption levels for the majority of consumers and particularly for young consumers, certainly do not meet and/or exceed such levels. This evidence would reinforce the daunting challenge facing nutritional education campaigns, as they will need to persuade consumers to change their food preferences to include fruit and vegetables on a regular daily basis. Evidence has suggested that young consumers appear to be creatures of habit, fuelled from birth by the guidance and influence of their parents, peers and from other societal factors and once formed, such habits are difficult to change.
(Warwick et al., 1997). However, current research questions the uniformity of young consumers’ habits relating to food behaviour. It may be suggested that the food preference habits of young consumers can alter, depending upon the environment within which they are present (home, school and/or social). The power of education can be immensely helpful in the pursuit of better understanding by consumers regarding healthy eating and may occur within the home, school and social environments (Alcock, 1995). Within the home environment, nutritional education and the pursuit of a balanced diet relates primarily to the interaction between parents and young consumers from an early age, thus assisting in the development and progression of food behaviour. Ideally, young consumers should be involved in meal planning, shopping and meal preparation; skills which will assist them in making effective food decisions in later years. Young consumers must be aware that there are no “good and/or bad” foods, but rather it is balance orientated. Young consumers should also be educated in the balance of foods within the food pyramid’s five food groups, in accordance with the recommended amounts for each food in these groups. It must be stressed that the pyramid is not restricted to the home, but needs to be incorporated within the school and social environments (Alcock, 1995). However in practice, this degree of involvement is not always realistic and/or realised.

Similarly, within the school environment, nutritional education provides an important medium through which young consumers’ food behaviour may be motivated and moulded for the future (Dibb, 1994). These educational practices were seen as being influential to young consumers, both within and beyond the classroom. The implications of such approaches may be seen within the family and social environments, particularly in relation to the fast food sector of the Hospitality Spectrum. Although it has been identified that young consumers are aware of healthy food choices in theory, in practice many still do not select them (Warwick et al., 1997).

Within the school environment and much to the dismay of critics, the pursuit of nutritionally balanced meals does not involve the ban of perceived “bad” foods, such as chips but does offer healthier alternatives to such foods (DFEE, 1998). Such empowerment approaches reiterate the independent nature of these individuals, whereby they will not be forced to eat foods which they do not like and/or want (Brown et al., 2000). In essence, therefore the relationship between young consumers’ food preferences and nutritional education appears to represent two extremes of theory and application and will require careful management if they are to effectively merge in the future. The utilisation of such learning approaches from an early age, involving the three environments (home, school and social) may attempt to minimise young consumers’ apparent reliance upon fast food styled options and instead establish more nutritionally balanced food behaviour from an early age.

Methodology

The aim of the research was to analyse young consumers’ food preferences within the home, school and social environments, and in particular the consideration of the theory and application of nutritional education strategies. The social environment relates to selected sectors of the hospitality spectrum, particularly focusing on the “fast food” sector. This sector encompassed a selection of establishments and service styles including take-away, sit-in and multi-cultural cuisine.

Young consumers are defined as being between 11-16 years and were segmented into two age ranges: 11-13 years and 14-16 years of age, within Northern Ireland.

A combination of research methods in both the initial and main studies (Brown et al., 2000) were used as a foundation, to analyse the nutritional awareness and food preferences of young consumers. The methodology of this study has been discussed at length (Brown et al., 2000). The fundamental research techniques which were used to analyse the nutritional awareness and food preferences of young consumers were:

1. Questionnaires. These were distributed to young consumers (n = 900) and their respective parents (n = 800) from selected secondary level schools (n = 5), within Northern Ireland. These included both genders, from urban and rural areas. Questionnaires were distributed for completion by young consumers (11-16...
years) within the classroom environment. Parental questionnaires were also distributed to be taken home for completion by their respective parents. The questionnaires addressed a range of aspects, including nutritional education. These questions encompassed their awareness of healthy eating, the prime medium of conveyance for such information and possible suggestions for improving food served to young consumers, within the school and social environments. The number of questionnaires analysed for both the young consumers and their respective parents included those administered during the initial study and preliminary main study stages of research.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using the SPSS package (Version 8) to ascertain young consumers’ nutritional awareness: the theory and the reality, exerted within their daily food preferences. Such awareness was associated with young consumers’ food preferences (11-16 years) within the home, school and social environments, in relation to the “fast food” sector of the hospitality spectrum.

(2) Focus groups. These were used to further investigate the primary research aim. Pilot focus groups (n = 3) were performed using interview styled questions and discussions. Secondary schools were used, encompassing the young consumers’ age range of 11-16 years. The focus groups enabled pupils’ opinions to be identified in accordance with the research considerations. Each focus group involved males (n = 5) and females (n = 5) from selected school years (11-16 years of age). Focus group responses were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the Nud*ist package.

Results and discussion

Daily food behaviour of young consumers would appear to be motivated by a range of influential factors from the home, school and social environments. Research indicated that most young consumers displayed emerging traits of “independence” in their daily food behaviour and were confident about which foods they preferred and the appropriate price for such preferences. Coupled with these apparent “independence” traits was the potential influence of nutritional education, as expressed within their food behaviour. Evidence suggested that “independence” may be exerted by young consumers within the home, school and social environments, in relation to food preferences, and may indeed fuel their apparent lack of nutritionally balanced food behaviour (Greenwood and Richardson, 1972).

Young consumers within the selected age group (11-16 years) were clearly very aware of healthy eating requirements. Very slight differences occurred between females and males relating to such knowledge, (n = 450/100 per cent and n = 445/99 per cent respectively). Results also indicated that there were no apparent differences between the two age groups (11-13 and 14-16 years), by both genders, regarding their healthy eating awareness.

However, whilst there was a high level of response regarding awareness of healthy eating, young consumer food preferences within the school and social environments do not appear to reflect such knowledge. The school environment was presented as a “seedbed” for nutritional education to be nurtured (Brown et al., 2000) and, interestingly the school was cited as being the prime medium for nutritional education by young consumers from both gender groups. Whilst results were positive for this finding, the chi square results were not found to be significant for either males (\(\chi^2_{12} = 14, p > 0.05\)) or females (\(\chi^2_{12} = 14, p > 0.05\)). Generally, the food preferences of young consumers within the school and social environments would tend to reinforce the perception that junk food was “normal”, whilst healthy food was an “oddity” (Chapman and MacClean, 1993). In addition, such preferences symbolically reflected the more “familiar foods” (Lydecker, 1988) and emphasised the apparent trait of “neophobia” persisting within young consumers’ food behaviour (Marshall, 1995). Within the school environment, those “familiar” (Lydecker, 1988) foods preferred by young consumers, encompassed British styled “fast food” lunches. Both gender groups expressed highly significant preferences for these lunch options (males: \(\chi^2_{24} = 66, p < 0.01\); and females: \(\chi^2_{24} = 58, p < 0.01\)). Such findings were also
reflective of those expressed by 6-12 year old consumers, who identified their top five favourite foods (Lydecker, 1988).

Within the school and social environments, there would appear to be a significant “gap” between nutritional awareness in theory and putting this knowledge into practice, by young consumers in their daily food behaviour. “Fast food” was also popular within the social environment. Typically, the American “fast food” meal was the most popular preference amongst young consumers within this environment. Interestingly, responses indicated a higher level of preference for such foods amongst females, as compared with males, although the levels of significance in the chi squared analysis did not appear to reflect such gender distinctions (females: $\chi^2_{18} = 29, p > 0.05$; and males: $\chi^2_{21} = 38, p > 0.05$).

Young consumers’ food preferences within the home environment were however found to be different to those expressed for the school and social environments. The home environment was presented as one of the most prominent influences upon young consumers’ food behaviour, particularly during preschool years (Vaines, 1999). However, research would suggest that its emphasis would appear to diminish with regard to adolescent independence and their food preference behaviour. In essence, the home environment has to struggle with influences from the school and social environments, relating to the development of young consumers’ food behaviour. Food preferences within the home environment were for “proper” home-made meals (Marshall, 1995), but the responses were more significant amongst the male young consumers ($\chi^2_{12} = 37, p < 0.05$) than their female counterparts ($\chi^2_{14} = 35, p > 0.05$). Clearly, if young consumers are going to implement nutritionally balanced food behaviour anywhere, it is most likely to be within the home environment, and particularly during the evening meal occasion.

However the one or two portions of vegetables consumed during this meal occasion, would appear to be minimal when compared to the recommended daily intake guidelines of five portions daily. Young consumers’ apparent lack of vegetable consumption further signifies the immense gap between theory and practice of nutritional awareness and education.

Young consumers are often believed to be creatures of habit (Warwick et al., 1997); however this study found that uniformity in food preference was not exerted within the home, school and social environments. It must be stressed that young consumers’ food preferences alter depending upon the environment within which they find themselves. Current research would indicate that whilst young consumers express preferences for “proper” homemade meals within the home environment (Marshall, 1995), this habit (Warwick et al., 1997) is clearly not exerted within the school and/or social environments, where they continue to select the “fast food” styled options.

**Conclusion**

Research would indicate that there remains a significant “gap” between young consumers’ nutritional knowledge and their ability to implement such knowledge into the reality of their daily food behaviour. Findings from the study, still re-affirm the “independence” and “creatures of habit” traits of adolescent food behaviour, particularly for “fast food”.

Unfortunately, such food preference behaviour presents challenges for future nutritional awareness campaigns, especially as it is very apparent from the study that young consumers will not be forced to eat foods which they do not like (Brown et al., 2000).

On the basis of the study, it may be expressed that many young consumers whilst being aware of nutritional information and potential implementation, may indeed be very hesitant in actually putting the theory into practice! This must not be underestimated in the continued pursuit of a better diet and/or lifestyle for tomorrow’s adult consumers.

**References**

