



Cognitive interviews to validate the Rudd Center's annual survey of parents' attitudes about food marketing to their children

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Summary

Since 2009, researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity have conducted an annual survey to assess parents' attitudes about food marketing to their children, including its reach and perceived influence. To confirm that respondents interpret the survey questions as intended and that response options provided are accurate and complete, we conducted cognitive interviews with ten participants in May/June 2013. Cognitive interviewing is commonly used by researchers and survey organizations to validate survey questionnaires.¹⁻³

Methods

Participants were recruited through Craigslist. Using the same selection criteria as the annual survey, participants were required to be parents between the ages of 21 and 65, have children (2-17 years old) living at home, and have primary or shared responsibility in making decisions about food and beverage choices for their household. Respondents who met the participation requirements were invited for an in-person interview at the research center. After providing written consent, the participant filled out the survey on a computer with a research associate present. The researcher briefly interviewed the participant after answering each question with probes to: understand the thought process the respondent used to answer the question; confirm the clarity of the question; determine whether any words or terms were confusing; and, if applicable, determine whether the categories provided were comprehensive. Respondents received \$25 for their participation. Participants were between the ages of 30 and 59 and included 9 females and 1 male. The children of the participants ranged from 2 to 17 years old.

Results

Overall, respondents understood the survey questions and researchers correctly interpreted their answers. However, the cognitive interviews did identify opportunities to add categories for some items and add or change some wording for clarification (changes are summarized in **Table 1**). For example, the category of *Coffee drinks/Coolattas* was added as a response choice for the types of food and beverage marketing parents believe their children see. Also, *Sugary drinks* was revised to *Sugary drinks (including soda, juice and sports drinks)* as some respondents interpreted sugary drinks to mean only soda, and *A la carte cafeteria items* was changed to *Individual cafeteria items* to ensure the term would be understood by all respondents.

Conclusions

The cognitive interviews provided two important findings. First, they confirmed that respondents understood the survey questions and answered them as intended. Second, they highlighted minor enhancements and additions to some questions used in the survey. These findings confirmed that the survey is accessible to respondents and helped improve the accuracy of the survey instrument.

A copy of the current questionnaire is available at:

http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/surveyquestionnaire_2014.

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REFERENCES

¹ DeMaio, T., and Rothgeb, J. 1996. Cognitive interviewing techniques: in the lab and in the field. In: Schwarz, N., Sudman, S. (Eds.), *Answering questions: Methodology for determining cognitive and communicative processes in survey research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

² Presser, S., Couper, M.P., Lessler, J.T., Martin, E., Martin, J., Rothgeb, J.M., Singer, E. (2004). Methods for testing and evaluating survey questions. *Public Opin Quart.* 68, 109-130.

³ Miller, K. (2003). Conducting cognitive interviews to understand question-response limitations. *Am J Health Behav*, 27, S264-S272.

Table 1. Changes to food marketing survey items (implemented June 2013)

Original question	Details of change
<i>Added answer category</i>	
<p>2a. How often do you think your children have seen or heard any marketing for the following different kinds of food, beverages and restaurants in the past month?</p>	Coffee drink/Coolattas
<p>2b. And how often do you think <i>your</i> children have seen or heard these types of food, beverage, and restaurant marketing in the past month?</p>	Signs or other types of communication that promote the sale of candy, cookies or other sweets as a school or sports fundraiser
<p>3. Using the scale below, please indicate the level of impact you think these different types of food, beverage, and restaurant marketing have on <i>your</i> children’s eating habits.</p>	Signs or other types of communication that promote the sale of candy, cookies or other sweets as a school or sports fundraiser
<p>4a. Below is a list of actions that are either currently being taken or could be taken to promote healthy eating habits to <i>your</i> children in schools. Using the scale below, please indicate how much you would support each of the following actions.</p>	Do not allow fast food or other restaurant chains to promote special events/dinners to children that provide a donation to schools for purchases of food at the restaurants
<p>5. Using the scale below, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about food, beverage, and restaurant advertising and other marketing to <i>your</i> children.</p>	Makes children want food and beverages they have never tried
<i>Added underlined wording for clarification</i>	
<p>Intro. Today we would like to talk to you about the ways that food and beverages are marketed to children and adolescents. By marketing we mean any activity by a food or beverage company or restaurant that encourages people to purchase their products.</p>	Intro. Today we would like to talk to you about the ways that food and beverages are marketed to children and adolescents. By marketing we mean any activity by a food or beverage company or restaurant, <u>including fast food</u> , that encourages people to purchase their products.
<p>2b. And how often do you think <i>your</i> children have seen or heard these types of food, beverage, and restaurant marketing in the past month? *Premium offers (e.g. toys and other giveaways)</p>	Premium offers (<u>e.g., toys with meals, sweepstakes, contests and other giveaways</u>)
<p>3. Using the scale below, please indicate the level of impact you think these different types of food, beverage, and restaurant marketing have on <i>your</i> children’s eating habits. *Premium offers (e.g. toys and other giveaways)</p>	Premium offers (<u>e.g., toys with meals, sweepstakes, contests and other giveaways</u>)
<p>4b. Below is a list of actions that are either currently being taken or could be taken to promote healthy eating habits to <i>your</i> children in your community. Using the scale below, please indicate how much you would support each of the following actions. *Do not allow the sale of sugary drinks near schools before, during, and immediately after school hours</p>	Do not allow the sale of sugary drinks (<u>including soda, juice and sports drinks</u>) near schools before, during, and immediately after school hours
<p>11b. How much of this is due to an unhealthy food environment, that is, outside influences, such as school food, advertising, number of fast food restaurants, high price of fresh fruits and vegetables, etc.?</p>	How much of this is due to an unhealthy food environment <u>outside of the home</u> , that is, outside influences, such as school food, advertising, number of fast food restaurants, price of fresh fruits and vegetables, etc.?

Changed underlined wording for clarification

4a. Below is a list of actions that are either currently being taken or could be taken to promote healthy eating habits to *your* children in schools. Using the scale below, please indicate how much you would support each of the following actions. *Strengthen the nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold at school (including a la carte cafeteria items and products sold in school stores).

Strengthen the nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold at school (including individual cafeteria items that are not part of the regular meal and products sold in school stores).
