

Move It and Consume It: Media Constructions of Childhood Obesity

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Abstract. Between 1980 and 2004, the number of overweight children in the U.S., ages 6 to 19, nearly tripled from 5% to 18.8% [1]. Currently there are approximately 25 million U.S. children “at risk of becoming overweight” or “overweight” [2,3]. Contributing factors in this epidemic are the lack of physical activity in children, and the lack of proper diet. During the fall 2007 semester, a content analysis of articles from Kansas newspapers and for comparison, newspaper articles from throughout the United States was conducted using the constant comparative method [4]. Themes concerning causes of childhood obesity, blame for the obesity epidemic, and suggestions on how to encourage children to be healthier were identified. Based on an analysis of both literature and the findings of this study, childhood obesity seems to be misunderstood by much of the public. While studies indicate that both a lack of physical activity and an improper diet has been the cause of the epidemic, many parents, teachers, doctors and nutritionists alike, blame the marketing of food to children. The implications of childhood obesity make it imperative that a solution is found.

Introduction

In 2004, the United States Surgeon General warned that childhood obesity is a “potentially catastrophic problem in the United States.” Currently, the percentage of young people who are overweight has more than tripled since 1980. Among children and adolescents aged 6-19 years, 16%—over 9 million young people—are considered overweight [5]. The American Academy of Pediatrics lists the following health risks related to childhood obesity: high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, asthma, sleep apnea, liver disease, gallstones, inflammation of the pancreas, joint pain, and severe headaches and menstrual irregularities in girls [6]. An overweight child has a 70% chance of being an overweight adult. The odds go up to 80% if a parent is overweight [7]. The financial costs of this epidemic are significant. The U.S. Government Accountability Office in their October 2005 report [8] concluded that between 1979 and 1999 obesity-associated costs for children between the ages of 6 and 17 more than tripled, from \$35 million to \$127 million. Increased numbers of obese children who become obese adults may impact future health expenditures, including Medicaid and potentially Medicare. Obesity-related health expenditures are estimated to have accounted for more than 25 percent of the growth in health care spending between 1987 and 2001. In 2000, an estimated \$117 billion was spent for health-related expenditures due to obesity with \$61 billion in direct costs. These figures, along with the health risks associated with childhood obesity, reiterate the importance of implementing programs that will reduce this nationwide epidemic. Many Americans rely on the media as their source of information for topics such as childhood obesity therefore it is essential to understand what is being said by the media. By doing a content analysis of newspapers across the United States and locally, it can be determined how childhood obesity is being conveyed and how society understands it. Once it is determined how a topic is being communicated to the masses, messages can then be framed to

Experiment, Results, Discussion and Significance

This study reports the results of a content analysis of articles from Kansas newspapers and for comparison, a sampling of articles from throughout the United States on the topic of childhood obesity. Articles for analysis were located utilizing the Lexis Nexis database through the following search terms; child, overweight, obesity, and their variants. The search period covered a 5 year period from 2002 – 2007. Articles were identified using a reverse chronological approach. The initial search of non-Kansas newspapers yielded 995 articles. Every tenth article was selected for content analysis. The publication range for articles selected was from July 14, 2004 through April 6, 2007. Articles that were either opinion pieces or letters to the editor were omitted from analysis. This process resulted in a total of 87 articles, which were analyzed and coded. Articles in Kansas newspapers were searched using the methodology discussed above. However, too few articles were identified, so the search was broadened to include Kansas wire service stories. The Lexis-Nexis Wire stories option was

selected to broaden the search. This expanded search yielded 126 articles. Every second article was selected for content analysis. Kansas articles selected for analysis covered the timeframe of June 26, 2002 until October 28, 2007. As with articles from the nationwide sample, any article considered an opinion piece or letter to the editor was not omitted from analysis. A total of 54 articles were coded and analyzed.

Using the constant comparative method three categories emerged from analysis, causes of childhood obesity, blame for the obesity epidemic, and recommendations on how to encourage children to be healthier. The major causes of childhood obesity that emerged included lack of physical activity and poor nutrition. In Kansas, content analysis revealed that lack of physical activity was presented as a more prevalent cause to childhood obesity than was an improper diet. Out of 54 articles 25 (47%) cited lack of physical activity compared to 38 (20 %) that blamed improper diet. Nationally, 84 (96 %) articles advanced that lack of a proper diet, was more likely to cause childhood obesity while 66 (76%) sources blamed lack of physical activity. Although the numbers are fairly close, it is interesting to note that the articles in Kansas focused more often on the lack of physical activity than the lack of a proper diet as a cause of childhood obesity. Related causes included increased screen time (television and video games) and social economic status (a contributor to improper diet due to the high cost of nutritious food and lack of a place for children to exercise). For example, the lack of a safe place to play or exercise was related to lower social economic status.

The major targets of blame for childhood obesity in articles analyzed at both the national and Kansas levels were marketing to children and government run programs such as No Child Left Behind. The predominant theme in nationwide articles was blame focused at the marketing industry for targeting unhealthy products to children. Out of the 87 articles analyzed from U.S. newspapers, 24 or 27% of the articles blamed marketing to children as a reason for the increase of childhood obesity. Those sources that blamed marketing the most were organizations whose work included obese children. For example, an article published in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution entitled “Nickelodeon gets moving to counter obesity rap” an author of Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood says, “If they really want to address childhood obesity, they would stop marketing junk food to kids” [5].

Kansas articles were more likely to focus on news events, like the statewide bill concerning vending machines in schools. For example, an article that appeared in the Topeka Capitol on January 19, 2005 revealed that Senate Republicans asked Kansas governor Kathleen Sebelius to support legislation that would phase out junk food in public schools sold from vending machines. That article led to 16 additional stories (nearly 1/3 of those analyzed) updating readers about proposals to ban vending machines from schools or have them turned off during normal school hours.

Only one Kansas’ newspaper article (2%) offered recommendations on how to prevent childhood obesity was smaller than the nationwide sample where recommendations were made in 21 articles (25%). Recommendations included: parents becoming more physically active (as models for children), encouraging children to become more physically active, not eating in front of the television, eating dinner as a family, and encouraging children to adopt good eating habits.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn. Childhood obesity is portrayed in national and Kansas newspaper articles as due primarily to a lack of physical activity and improper diet. Analysis of the articles also indicates a trend toward blaming the childhood obesity epidemic on advertisers who market unhealthy food to children rather than offering solutions. Solutions that were offered emphasized encouraging parents and children to become more physically active and developing more mindful eating habits.

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[2] Mayo Clinic Staff. (March 31, 2006). Childhood Obesity. Retrieved September 3, 2007, from <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/childhood-obesity/DS00698>

[3] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, children and teens with BMI levels above a normal weight are labeled as at risk of overweight or overweight.

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