Children’s Food Consumer Socialisation: The Impact of Food Advertising, Parents, Peers, and Social Norms on Children’s Food Preferences, Food Consumption, and Obesity

by

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Major Thesis submitted to the Business School,
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as part of the requirement for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Declaration</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Background to the Research                                          | 17   |
1.2. Causes of Childhood Obesity                                         | 18   |
1.3. Defining the Influence of Food Marketing and Children’s Importance to Food Industry | 19   |
1.4. Research Questions and Contributions                                | 21   |
1.5. Demarcation of Relevant Literatures                                 | 25   |
1.6. Research Stages of the Current Study                                | 26   |
1.7. Organisation of the Thesis                                          | 28   |

## Chapter Two: Review of Public Health Literature: Theoretical Foundations of and Empirical Findings about Factors Associated with Children’s Food Preferences/Consumption and Childhood Obesity

2.1. Introduction                                                        | 30   |
2.2. Theoretical Foundations                                             | 30   |
2.3. Empirical Findings                                                 | 34   |
2.3.1. External Factors:                                                 | 34   |
   Parents                                                               | 34   |
   Household Food Availability                                           | 34   |
   Food Consumption Modelling                                            | 35   |
   Parental Control and Teaching                                         | 35   |
   Socio-Demographic Characteristics                                     | 36   |
   Parents’ Weigh                                                        | 37   |
   Food Marketing                                                        | 38   |
   Peers                                                                 | 43   |
2.3.2. Internal Child-Related Factors                                    | 44   |
2.4. Summary                                                            | 45   |


3.1. Introduction                                                        | 47   |
3.2. Theoretical Foundations: Consumer Socialisation and Attitudes       | 47   |
3.3. Empirical Findings                                                 | 54   |
3.3.1. Socialisation Agents                                             | 54   |
   Parents                                                               | 54   |
   Mass Media                                                            | 54   |
   Peers                                                                 | 55   |
   Magnitude of Influence of Several Socialisation Agents                 | 55   |
### Chapter Four: Development of Conceptual Framework and Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Introduction</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Gaps in Extant Knowledge</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3. Conceptual Framework Development and Relevant Theories</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4. Research Design</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1. Target Audience</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2. Mixed Methods Approach</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4. Summary</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter Five: Preliminary Test of Conceptual Framework – An Exploratory Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Introduction</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Focus of Exploratory Study</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. Data Collection Method</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4. Sampling and Administration of Focus Groups</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5. Focus Groups’ Protocol</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6. Data Analysis</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7. Results</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.1. How Does Children’s Nutritional Knowledge Influence Their Food Preferences?</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite Foods</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Are my Favourite Foods Good for me?”</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What Makes Food Good for me?”</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.2. Does Advertising Literacy Reduce the Effects of Exposure to Food Marketing?</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.3. How Should the Impact of Peers be Conceptualised?</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and Observational Learning</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foods Popular amongst Children</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.4. How can the impact of parents be conceptualised?</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8. Summary of Qualitative Data and Modification of Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter Six: Development of Instruments and Pilot Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1. Introduction</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Data Collection Instrument Development</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3. Overview of Instrument Validation Process</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4. Children’s Questionnaire</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Food Preferences</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ Food Preferences</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutritional Knowledge</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes: Brand Evaluation and Evaluation of Non-Branded Foods</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Acceptability of Foods’ Consumption by Others People</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising Literacy</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Data</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5. Pre-Testing the Children’s Questionnaire</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Test One: Face Validity</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Wordings of Items</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Seven: Research Protocol for the Full-Scale Fieldwork and Preliminary Data Analysis

7.1. Introduction 141
7.2. Experimental Protocol and Data Collection 141
7.3. Determination of Sample Size 146
7.4. Preliminary Data Analysis 147
  7.4.1. Sample Characteristics 147
  7.4.2. Missing Value Analysis 148
  7.4.3. Validity and Reliability 150
    Reliability of Likert Items 150
    Reliability of Test Items 150
    Convergent Validity 150
    Convergent and Discriminant Validity 157
  7.4.4. Construction of Scores and Recoding 159
  7.4.5. Assessment of Data Normality 160
  7.4.6. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables 162
7.5. Summary 164

Chapter Eight: Quantitative Results

8.1. Introduction 165
8.2. Statistical Techniques Chosen for Data Analysis 165
8.3. Models’ Specification and Fit Assessment 166
8.4. Results of ANOVA 172
8.5. Assessing Measurement Model Validity 174
8.6. Models’ Testing with Structural Equation Modelling 178
  Model One 178
Chapter Nine: Discussion and Conclusions

9.1. Introduction

9.2. Contributions

9.2.1. Theoretical Contributions

9.2.2. Methodological Contribution

9.2.3. Empirical Contributions

Brand Evaluation and Evaluation of Non-Branded Foods

Magnitude of Influence of Different Socialisation Agents

Parents

Peers

Influence of “Other” People

Gender Differences

Advertising Literacy

Nutritional Knowledge

Food Consumption and Weight

9.3. Limitations of the Study

9.3.1. Research Design and Reverse Causality

9.3.2. Internal Validity

9.3.3. External Validity

9.3.4. Measures

9.4. Directions for Future Research

9.5. Conclusions

Appendices

Appendix 1: Human Ethics Research Committee Approval for Exploratory Study

Appendix 2: Human Ethics Research Committee Approval for Quantitative Pilot Tests and Full-scale Fieldwork

Appendix 3: Human Ethics Research Committee: Approval of Changes made to Children’s and Parents’ Questionnaires after Pilot Tests

Appendix 4: Cross-Sectional Research: Factors Influencing Children’s Food Preferences, Consumption, and Weight (Overview, 1970-2010):

Table 1: Parent-Related Factors

Table 2: Food Marketing

Table 3: Peer-Related Factors

Table 4: Child-Related Factors

Appendix 5: Experimental Research about the Influence of Food Marketing on Children (Overview, 1970-2010)

Appendix 6: Information Sheet for Parents (Focus Groups with Children)

Appendix 7: Information Sheet for Children (Focus Groups)

Appendix 8: Parental/Guardian Consent Form for Focus Groups with children

Appendix 9: Children’s Consent Form for Focus Groups

Appendix 10: Focus Groups Interview Guide: Younger Children (10 to 11 years)

Appendix 11: Focus Groups Interview Guide: Older Children (12 to 13 years)
Appendix 35: Finalised Online CQ 383
Appendix 36: Summary of Changes in the PQ 406
Appendix 37: Finalised Paper-Based PQ 413
Appendix 38: Location of Research Site for Field Study 437
Appendix 39: Research Site for Field Study 438
Appendix 40: Instructions for Research Assistants 439
Appendix 41: Flyers Distributed to Recruit Participants for Fieldwork 441
Appendix 42: Information Sheet for Participants at the Point of Recruitment 442
Appendix 43: Consent Forms for Full-Scale Fieldwork 443
Appendix 44: Determination of Sample Size for Full-Scale Fieldwork 445
Appendix 45: Missing Value Analysis for Fieldwork Data: 446
   A) Children’s Questionnaire 446
   B) Parents’ Questionnaire 450
Appendix 46: Reliability of Likert-Type Items (Full-Scale Fieldwork) 545
   A) Children’s Sample 454
      1. Oreo-Related Items 454
      2. Apple-Related Items 455
      3. Less Healthy Foods 456
   B) Parents Sample 457
      1. Experimental Group 457
      2. Control Group 457
      3. Less Healthy Foods 457
Appendix 47: Reliability of Test Items (Full-Scale Fieldwork) 459
   A) Children’s Sample 459
      1. CTT Item Analysis of NKT 459
         1.1. Experimental Group 459
         1.2. Control Group 459
      2. IRT Item Analysis of NKT 460
         2.1. Experimental Group (8 Items) 460
         2.2. Experimental Group (5 Items) 462
         2.3. Control Group (8 Items) 464
         2.4. Control Group (5 Items) 466
   B) Parents’ Sample 468
      1. CTT Item Analysis of GNKQ 468
         1.1. Experimental Group 468
         1.2. Control Group 471
      2. IRT Item Analysis of GNKQ 474
         2.1. Experimental Group (80 Items) 474
         2.2. Control Group (80 Items) 477
         2.3. Experimental Group (43 Items) 480
         2.4. Control Group (43 Items) 482
Appendix 48: Respondents’ BMI 484
   A) ABS BMI Cut-Off Points 484
   B) Weight by Gender: 484
      1. Children’s Data 484
      2. Parents’ Data 485
   C) Body Mass Index in General Australian Population 2007-2008 485
Appendix 49: Preliminary Analysis of Parent-Child Communication about Food and 486
Food Advertising Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Preliminary Analysis of Advertising Literacy Items</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Assessment of Data Normality:</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A) Children’s Data</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Parents’ Data</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C) Frequencies for Recoded Variables</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Detailed Descriptive Statistics</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A) Variables for Oreo (Branded Food) and Apple (Non-Branded Food) SEMs</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Variables for Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods SEM</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Children’s Preferences for Oreo Biscuits (Model 1)</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Internal Validity Assessment of the Data</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A) Children’s Food Preferences by Weight</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Children’s Self-Reported Consumption of Less Healthy Foods by Weight Status</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C) Correlations between Children’s Self-Reported Consumption of Less Healthy Foods and Parents’ Estimate of Their Children’s Consumption of Fast Foods/Consumption of Fast Foods as a Family</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References 508
List of Tables

Table 1: Gender Distribution in Focus Groups 86
Table 2: Children’s Favourite Foods 90
Table 3: Characteristics that Make Food “Good” for Children 92
Table 4: Reasons for Liking Food Advertisements and Recalled Food Advertisements 94
Table 5: Characteristics Which Make Food “Good:” Parents’ Perceptions 100
Table 6: Nutritional Knowledge Test 114
Table 7: Advertising Literacy Items 117
Table 8: EFA for Food-Related Items (CQ) 123
Table 9: EFA for Advertising Literacy Items 123
Table 10: Cronbach Alpha for CQ Items 123
Table 11: Correlation: Children’s Nutritional Knowledge, Age, and Sources of Knowledge about Food 125
Table 12: Correlation: Food-Related Items 127
Table 13: Correlation: Age and Advertising Literacy 128
Table 14: Multiple Regressions for Food Preferences 131
Table 15: EFA for Likert Items (PQ) 136
Table 16: Cronbach Alpha for Likert Items (PQ) 136
Table 17: Correlation: Parents’ Nutritional Knowledge, Social Norms, and Frequency of Fast Food Consumption 137
Table 18: Determination of Sample Size for Experiment 147
Table 19: Final Sample Size for the Fieldwork 148
Table 20: Sample Characteristics 149
Table 21: EFA for Items Designated for Oreo SEM (Branded Food) (CQ) 152
Table 22: EFA for Items Designated for Apple SEM (Non-Branded Food) (CQ) 153
Table 23: EFA for Items Designated for Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods SEM (CQ) 154
Table 24: Cronbach Alpha for Likert Items (CQ) 155
Table 25: EFA for Parents’ Variables 155
Table 26: Cronbach Alpha for Likert Items (PQ) 155
Table 27: Children’s Nutritional Knowledge, Age, and Sources of Knowledge about Foods (CQ) 157
Table 28: Correlation: Age and Advertising Literacy (CQ) 157
Table 29: Correlation: Advertising Literacy Items (CQ) 158
Table 30: Correlation: Parents’ Nutritional Knowledge, Social Norms, and Frequency of Fast Food Consumption (PQ) 158
Table 31: Weight in the Current Sample and General Australian Population 160
Table 32: Descriptive Statistics for Variables for Oreo (Branded Food) and Apple (Non-Branded Food) SEMs (CQ) 162
Table 33: Descriptive Statistics for Variables for Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods SEM (CQ) 163
Table 34: Descriptive Statistics for Parents’ Data 164
Table 35: Results of Three-Way ANOVAs 172
Table 36: Results of Three-Way ANCOVAs 174
Table 37: Standardised Factor Loadings: Children’s Data (Models One and Two) 177
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Path Analysis for Apple Evaluation and Food Preference</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Standardised Factor Loadings Children’s Data (Model Four)</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Standardised Factor Loadings: Parents’ Data (Models One, Two, and Four)</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Discriminant Validity Assessment</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Model One, Children’s Preference for Oreo Biscuits (Structural Model)</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Model One, Children’s Preference for Oreo Biscuits (Measurement Model)</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Model Two, Children’s Preference for An Apple (Structural Model)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Model Two, Children’s Preferences for An Apple (Measurement Model)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Model Three, Children’s Preference for Oreo Biscuits (Control Group, Structural Model)</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Model Three, Children’s Preference for Oreo Biscuits (Control Group, Measurement Model)</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Model Four, Children’s Consumption of Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods (Structural Model)</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Model Four, Children’s Consumption of Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods (Measurement Model)</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: Food Marketing and Its Effects on Children 19
Figure 2: Research Focus of This Study 23
Figure 3: Research Stages of This Study 27
Figure 4: Ecological Framework of Factors Influencing Childhood Overweigh 32
Figure 5: Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing Children’s Food Choices, Habits, and Health 33
Figure 6: Summary of Previous Research 39
Figure 7: Conceptual Framework of Children’s Consumer Socialisation 48
Figure 8: Conceptual Framework of Consumer Socialisation 49
Figure 9: Conceptual Framework of Magnitude of Influence of Different Socialisation Agents 49
Figure 10: Persuasion Knowledge Model 52
Figure 11: Research about Children: Public Health and Marketing Disciplines Compared 61
Figure 12: Summary of Extant Gaps 65
Figure 13: Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing Children’s Food Consumption/Preferences Leading to Development of Obesity 73
Figure 14: Research Design of this Study 81
Figure 15: Focus Groups Interview Guide 87
Figure 16: Nutritional Knowledge: Comparison between Younger and Older Children 93
Figure 17: Child-Peer Communication about Food: Comparison between Younger and Older Children 97
Figure 18: Modified Conceptual Framework 104
Figure 19: Instrument Development Process 107
Figure 20: Expected and Final Sample Sizes for Pilot Tests 109
Figure 21: Modified Answer Grid for NKT 119
Figure 22: Modified Images (CQ) 120
Figure 23: Causal Relationships Estimated Using Pilot Test Two Data 130
Figure 24: Finalised Version of CQ for Full-Scale Fieldwork 139
Figure 25: Research Site for Full-Scale Fieldwork 142
Figure 26: Experimental Design 142
Figure 27: Pop-up Advertisements Used in Experimental and Control Groups 144
Figure 28: SEM Models Estimated Using the Fieldwork Data 170
Figure 29: Causal Relationships Assessed Using the Fieldwork Data 171
Figure 30: Results of Three-way ANOVA 173
Figure 31: Factors Influencing Children’s Preference for Oreo Biscuits (Model One) 180
Figure 32: Factors Influencing Children’s Preferences for An Apple (Model Two) 183
Figure 33: Multigroup Comparison for Children’s Preferences for Oreo Biscuits (Model Three) 187
Figure 34: Factors Influencing Children’s Consumption of Less Healthy Non-Branded Foods (Model Four) 189
Abstract

This study addresses an ongoing debate about the influence of food advertising on children through the development of a comprehensive, yet parsimonious conceptual framework which pulled together extant gaps from the public health and marketing literatures and integrated the influence of external agents and child-related factors on children’s dietary behaviour and weight. The framework has undergone an extensive validation process, including qualitative refinement and quantitative assessment, relying on a randomised controlled experiment with children, a survey of children, and a survey of their parents. The analysis of variance shows that when children were exposed to a food advertisement, their preference for an advertised snack was influenced by their brand evaluation and friends’ preferences for a similar snack. Understanding of the advertisement’s selling and persuasive intents and nutritional knowledge did not reduce preference for, and evaluation of, the advertised product. This most likely occurred because most respondents grasped advertisement intent, resulting in insufficient variance for empirical analysis. In contrast, preference for a healthier snack (apple) amongst children exposed to the experimental advertisement was influenced by an evaluation of healthier snack’s taste, higher preferences for a similar snack amongst their friends, and more frequent parent-child communication about foods and food advertising. Overall, no statically significant differences were detected between experimental and control groups, suggesting that research which solely relies on experimental exposure while investigating the effect of food advertising on children does not account for a bigger picture of factors influencing children.

Structural Equation Modelling showed that while parents’ social norms about fast foods, friends’ preferences for burgers, and social acceptability of burgers were related to children’s consumption of less healthy foods, more frequent parent-child communication about foods and food advertising and parents’ higher nutritional knowledge reduced unhealthy dietary behaviour. Exposure to fast food advertisements resulted in more positive evaluation of burgers, French fries, and soft drinks, which, in turn, were related to less healthy dietary behaviour. Nutritional knowledge and understanding of selling and persuasive intents in food advertisements (advertising literacy) exerted small, mediating effects on children’s dietary behaviour through attitudes, confirming the importance of these cognitive defences. A positive relationship was also detected between children’s dietary behaviour and weight. Across all models, brand evaluation/evaluations of food exhibited the strongest influence on
children, followed by peers (experimental data) or parents’ social norms about fast foods (cross-sectional data), pinpointing parents’ crucial role in fight against childhood obesity provided that parents hold less positive social norms, possess higher nutritional knowledge, and communicate with their children about food and food advertising. The current study shows that parents who are frequently exposed to fast food advertising, or have lower education, or reside in an area where residents hold lower education and occupations, tend to exhibit more positive social norms about fast foods, which, in turn, are related to children’s more frequent consumption of a number of less healthy foods. This study has identified important indirect pathways to childhood obesity through parents, peers, social norms, food advertising, and children’s attitudes that have important implications for public policy and social marketing.
Statement of Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Liudmila Tarabashkina
August 27, 2013
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Abbreviations

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics
BMI – Body Mass Index
CQ – Children’s Questionnaire
CFA – Confirmatory Factor Analysis
EFA – Exploratory Factor Analysis
ERST – Event Rates Estimation Tool
EST – Ecological Systems Theory
IPT – Information Processing Theory
IRT – Item Response Theory
HREC – Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide
GNKQ – General Nutrition Knowledge Questionnaire
NKT – Nutritional Knowledge Test
PQ – Parents’ Questionnaire
SEM – Structural Equation Modelling
SES – Socio-economic status
WFA – World Federation of Advertisers
WHO – World Health Organization