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A qualitative assessment of US Black and Latino adolescents' attitudes about targeted marketing of unhealthy food and beverages

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ABSTRACT

Food marketing targeted to Black and Latino adolescents primarily promotes energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and likely contributes to diet-related health disparities. Targeted marketing raises further public health concerns as Black and Latino youth are also exposed to greater amounts of unhealthy food marketing in the media and their communities. However, little is known about Black and Latino adolescents' attitudes toward brands and marketing that target them directly. Focus groups with Black and Latino adolescents ($N=51$) explored their attitudes toward targeted and non-targeted brands of food, beverages, and restaurants. Pile sorting activities using cards printed with targeted and non-targeted brand logos were used as an elicitation technique. Overall, participants indicated more positive attitudes about the targeted brands discussed in the focus groups than the non-targeted brands, and participants often described targeted brands as being for someone most like them. Some participants expressed appreciation for marketing that recognized "someone like them" as potential consumers, while others raised ethical issues regarding targeting of unhealthy foods. Participants' strong affinity for targeted brands, and ambivalent attitudes about targeted marketing of unhealthy products, highlight an opportunity to increase awareness of food marketing targeting communities of color and address targeted marketing through countermarketing and grassroots advocacy campaigns.

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Introduction

Food marketing contributes to poor diet and obesity among adolescents (Barnes, 2010; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2006). Public health experts raise additional concerns about the effects of unhealthy food marketing on Black and Latino adolescents for several reasons (Grier & Kumanyika, 2010; Ramirez, Gallion, & Adeigbe, 2013). First, compared to their White non-Latino counterparts, Black and Latino adolescents face higher risks of obesity and related

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diseases (Kumanyika, 2006; Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012); and they consume more of the unhealthy products most often marketed to adolescents, such as fast food and sugary drinks (Kit, Fakhouri, Park, Nielsen, & Ogden, 2013; Powell, Nguyen, & Han, 2012). Second, Black and Latino adolescents experience more food and beverage marketing in their communities (Herrera & Pasch, 2018; Lucan, Maroko, Sanon, & Schechter, 2017; Powell, Rimkus, Isgor, Barker, & Chaloupka, 2012; Yancey et al., 2009); and there is evidence that proximity of fast-food restaurants to schools may have a greater impact on Black and Latino adolescents in low-income and urban neighborhoods (Grier & Davis, 2013). Finally, Black and Latino adolescents consume more media and thus are also exposed to more general-audience advertising (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2016; Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011).

Evidence that unhealthy food and beverage advertisers often target Black and Latino adolescents directly raises additional concerns (Harris, Schwartz, LoDolce, Munsell, & Fleming-Milici, 2014; Harris, Schwartz, Munsell, Dembek, & Liu, 2013; Harris, Schwartz, Shehan, Hyary, & Appel, 2015). Studies examining food-related advertising in TV programming aimed primarily at Black and Latino audiences document that unhealthy products are disproportionately advertised in targeted media (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2016; Grier & Kumanyika, 2008; Harris, Shehan, Gross, Kumanyika, & Ramirez, 2015; Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Kunkel, Mastro, Ortiz, & McKinley, 2013; Tirodkar & Jain, 2003).

Research has not directly assessed whether Black and Latino adolescents can distinguish brands that target them and what attributes they use to identify targeting. Further, no research has determined Black and Latino adolescents' response to marketing of unhealthy food that targets them directly versus marketing targeted to other consumers. However, studies suggest that they will likely respond more favorably to targeted marketing (Grier, 2009; Williams, Crockett, Harrison, & Thomas, 2012). There are several reasons why targeted marketing may affect these youth more than general audience marketing. Advertising that contains culturally relevant themes and features actors of the same race/ethnicity has been shown to resonate positively with Black and Latino audiences (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000; DiSantis, Kumanyika, Carter-Edwards, & Rohm Young, 2017; Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Sierra, Hyman, & Torres, 2009); and this effect may be enhanced for Black and Latino youth with strong ethnic or racial identities (Appiah, 2001). Also, advertising that focuses on Black and Latino youths' ethnic or racial identity may increase their tendency to adopt the modeled beliefs and behaviors as part of their self-identity (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). In addition, frequent exposure to targeted food advertising may affect adolescents' normative beliefs about consuming the primarily unhealthy products featured (Ajzen, 1985; Grier, Mensinger, Huang, Kumanyika, & Stettler, 2007) and expectancies about positive outcomes from consumption (Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009; Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006).

Thus, high levels of advertising exposure together with extensive targeted marketing may strongly increase Black and Latino adolescents' attitudes toward unhealthy products and ultimately affect the products they choose to consume (Grier, 2009; Grier & Kumanyika, 2008, 2010; Samuels, Craypo, Dorfman, Purciel, & Standish, 2003). Research predicts that these positive attitudes mediate the relationship between advertising exposure and purchase and consumption of the advertised brands (IOM, 2006; Kelly et al., 2015).

It should be noted that targeted marketing recognizes Black and Latino consumers as important customers and is not inherently problematic. Ethnic and minority populations

that have been historically excluded from the mainstream marketplace may view targeted marketing as a positive signal of recognition, citizenship, and marketplace equality (DiSantis et al., 2017; Grier & Lassiter, 2013). However, targeted marketing raises social and ethical issues when it promotes nutrient-poor food and beverages and likely contributes to health disparities affecting Black and Latino communities (Barnes, 2010; Grier & Kumanyika, 2010; Harris et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2012; Yancey et al., 2009).

Research also suggests that exposing racial and ethnic targeted marketing of tobacco and unhealthy food may challenge and undermine positive brand images, thus presenting a potential promising strategy for countermarketing campaigns (Kwate, 2014; Palmedo, Dorfman, Garza, Murphy, & Freudenberg, 2017). One study also found that framing targeted marketing of unhealthy products as a social justice issue increased Black adolescents' negative perceptions about targeted marketing (DiSantis et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to better understand Black and Latino adolescents' attitudes towards food and beverage brands that target them and their identification with targeted brands as a first step toward identifying potential strategies to counter this influence. This information will also help determine whether public health campaigns should begin to directly address the potentially harmful impact of targeted marketing of unhealthy products to youth of color.

The present study explores Black and Latino adolescents': (1) attitudes toward the brands of food and beverages most often marketed to them; (2) perceptions of and attitudes toward marketing that appears to target them directly; and (3) opinions about targeted marketing of unhealthy foods. We also explore if participants' strength of ethnic identification relates to their attitudes toward targeted brands. Findings will inform specific hypotheses for empirical testing in future quantitative research with a larger sample to determine differences in attitudes and perceptions between Black, Hispanic and non-Hispanic White youth. They will also help identify potential opportunities for public health communications and/or countermarketing campaigns to address the impact of targeted marketing on young people's diets and health.

Materials and methods

We conducted focus groups with Black and Latino adolescents participating in afterschool activities in lower-income neighborhoods of a mid-sized New England city. The city has a poverty rate of 31%, which is four times higher than the rate of nearby suburbs and more than double the national rate (Cox, 2012). Laminated index cards printed with logos of targeted and non-targeted food, beverage and restaurant brands were used to facilitate focus group discussions.

Targeted and non-targeted brands

To identify targeted and non-targeted brands, we examined data from a previous report on targeted marketing to Black and Latino consumers (Harris et al., 2015). The report utilized syndicated market research data from Nielsen, and reported TV advertising spending and exposure to TV advertising for highly advertised food, beverage and restaurant brands in 2013. Data included advertising spending by brands on Black-targeted TV networks (i.e., Black viewers represented more than 50% of the network audience) and Spanish-language TV

networks. The report also analyzed the average number of TV ads viewed by adolescents (ages 12–17) and adults (ages 18–49) for these brands. Ratios of TV ads viewed by adolescents versus adults were calculated by dividing the average number of ads viewed by adolescents by ads viewed by adults. As adolescents watched 30% fewer hours of TV than did adults in 2013, they would be expected to also see 30% fewer TV ads. Therefore, a ratio of ads viewed by adolescents versus adults greater than 0.70 indicates that adolescents saw more ads for a brand than would be expected given differences in the amount of time they spent watching TV, and that a brand purchased advertising in media viewed by relatively more teens than adults, which would indicate targeting to adolescents. Detailed methods describing the Nielsen data and calculations used to identify targeted marketing are described elsewhere (Harris et al., 2015).

We used these data to identify a set of targeted and non-targeted brands to discuss in the groups. We first identified youth-targeted brands as brands with a ratio of TV ads viewed by adolescents versus adults of 0.75 or higher. Of those brands, we then identified Black and/or Latino targeted brands with high advertising spending on Black-targeted and/or Spanish-language TV networks (Harris et al., 2015). Brands with below-average ratios of ads viewed by adolescents versus adults (0.71 or lower) and little or no advertising on Black-targeted or Spanish-language TV networks were classified as non-targeted brands. All selected brands spent \$6 million or more in total TV advertising. From this list of potential brands, we identified both targeted and non-targeted brands in the candy, snacks, fast food and beverage categories, as these categories are most often targeted to Black and Latino youth (Harris et al., 2015) and are also highly marketed to teens (Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2012).

The final list included 16 brands that appeared to target Black and/or Latino adolescents (targeted brands); including four brands each in the fast-food restaurant, beverages, snacks (sweet and savory), and candy categories (see Table 1). We also attempted to identify eight non-targeted brands (two per category). However, due to the absence of highly advertised fast-food restaurants that did not advertise on Black-targeted or Spanish-language TV networks, the final list of non-targeted brands included one sit-down restaurant (IHOP) and one fast-food brand (Arby's) that advertised on Black-targeted TV, but had a low ratio of ads viewed by adolescents versus adults. In addition, we initially selected Coca-Cola Zero as a non-targeted brand but removed it due to participant confusion with Coca-Cola Classic during the initial groups. As a result, the final list of brands included 16 targeted and 7 non-targeted brands (23 total). Of note, we specifically excluded highly advertised brands, including McDonald's and Coca-Cola Classic, with extensive advertising to all audiences.

Focus group recruitment

Investigators recruited participants from six after-school and other youth programs. Participating organizations provided written consent and sent recruitment packets to parents/guardians of potential adolescent participants affiliated with their organizations. Parents/guardians who agreed to allow their child to participate provided written consent prior to the start of study, and adolescents signed an assent form at the beginning of each group. Parents/guardians also completed a brief questionnaire with screening questions to allow researchers to assign participants to groups by age, sex and race/ethnicity. Sponsoring organizations received a \$200 gift card for the use of space and/or staff time for distributing and collecting consent forms and coordinating data collection times. Adolescent participants received a \$25

Table 1. TV ad spending and exposure to targeted and non-targeted brands in 2013*.

Brand	Category	All TV		Black youth exposure (all TV)		Black-targeted TV		Spanish-language TV		
		Total ad spending (\$000)	Ads viewed (12-17)	Teen:adult ratio	Ads viewed (12-17)	Black:White ratio (12-17)	Ad spending (\$000)	Ads viewed (Hisp. 12-17)	Ad spending (\$000)	Ads viewed (Hisp. 12-17)
<i>Targeted brands</i>										
Taco Bell	Fast food	\$302,328	155.6	0.88	246.3	1.80	\$8,521	\$22,364	20.9	
Wendy's	Fast food	\$257,215	143.7	0.85	235.8	1.99	\$9,569	\$31,836	31.3	
Pizza Hut	Fast food	\$237,177	124.6	0.80	186.4	1.62	\$5,373	\$11,940	13.0	
Sonic	Fast food	\$209,189	99.5	0.80	141.7	1.69	\$4,759	\$13,050	14.0	
Gatorade	Drinks	\$89,813	33.1	1.02	56.3	1.95	\$2,352	\$0.0	0.0	
Dr. Pepper	Drinks	\$49,704	12.4	0.84	17.5	1.67	\$769	\$9,625	7.4	
Mtn Dew Kickstart	Drinks	\$16,853	11.6	1.00	22.1	2.25	\$516	\$539	1.3	
VitaminWater	Drinks	\$15,196	9.9	1.24	19.6	2.50	\$512	\$240	0.8	
Snickers	Candy	\$41,849	21.2	0.75	34.4	1.80	\$838	\$14,040	19.3	
Twix	Candy	\$37,322	39.6	1.06	71.2	2.02	\$1,648	\$12,784	19.5	
Payday	Candy	\$19,242	25.0	0.81	42.3	1.92	\$1,304	\$0.0	0.0	
Skittles	Candy	\$18,745	22.5	1.32	45.5	2.26	\$1,155	\$5,900	9.9	
Pop Tarts	Snacks (sweet)	\$29,342	42.3	1.23	92.2	2.62	\$4,210	\$7,702	6.4	
Doritos	Snacks (savory)	\$24,281	14.1	0.95	28.6	2.43	\$1,487	\$0.0	0.0	
Oreo	Snacks (sweet)	\$21,370	12.0	0.87	22.0	2.13	\$734	\$0.0	0.0	
Cheetos	Snacks (savory)	\$17,507	19.9	0.90	33.4	1.89	\$1,178	\$1,026	1.6	
<i>Non-targeted brands</i>										
Arby's	Fast food	\$113,984	33.6	0.63	31.5	1.46	\$1,061	\$0.0	0.0	
IHOP	Other restaurant	\$62,822	27.6	0.54	30.1	1.26	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	
Canada Dry Ginger Ale	Drinks	\$9,025	5.5	0.66	7.7	1.43	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	
Dove Chocolate	Candy	\$14,897	14.3	0.67	21.4	1.62	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	
Ferrero Rocher	Candy	\$14,853	5.1	0.65	8.1	1.75	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	
Chex Mix	Snacks (savory)	\$9,826	11.5	0.71	15.4	1.36	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	
Pepperidge Farm Milanos	Snacks (sweet)	\$6,326	2.5	0.61	3.3	1.48	\$0	\$0.0	0.0	

*Source: Data from Harris et al. (2015)

gift card for their time. All participants were Black or Latino youth, ages 12 to 17 years. The University's Human Subjects Review Committee approved all procedures.

Study procedures

Researchers conducted 21 focus groups from February to April 2016 at 6 different after-school programs. All sessions were held at the recruitment site, with the exception of two groups held at the research facility. To foster an environment where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves freely, we segmented each group by race/ethnicity and, when possible, by gender and age [ages 12–14 (middle-school age) and 15–17 (high-school age)]. Group sizes ranged from two to four participants due to relatively small numbers of participants at each site. Although the groups were small, we determined that separating participants by race/ethnicity, as well as age and gender, would allow participants to speak more openly about their own experiences and outweigh any disadvantages of the small groups. Sessions lasted 60 to 75 minutes, and were facilitated by a trained moderator with one research assistant. A Black moderator facilitated the groups with Black participants, and a Latina moderator facilitated the Latino groups.

The discussion guide was based on prior research that used brand-as-personality metaphors to elicit implicit attitudes about food brands (Kelly et al., 2016). Youth have been shown to incorporate brands into their self-image and used brands to portray themselves to others (Aaker, 1997; Roper & La Niece, 2009). Questions such as “Which brands are most like you” or “least like you” or “What kind of person would brand X be at a party” assess individuals' affinity for and identity with the brands and brand personalities. A moderator's guide was developed to facilitate the discussion (see Appendix). Questions also assessed participants' exposure to and attitudes toward marketing for the brands, and their awareness and attitudes about marketing targeted toward someone like them. All sessions were audio recorded.

Moderators began the session with an ice breaker to encourage participants to begin thinking about their thoughts and feelings associated with brands (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). Next, participants each received a set of 23 laminated cards with the logos of all targeted and non-targeted brands (selection described earlier) for pile sort activities. Pile sorting is an elicitation technique used to explore attributes individuals use to categorize similar objects (Borgatti, 1999; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After discussing each pile sort, a research assistant took photographs of participants' sorts, which were tagged with a unique participant ID number for tracking.

For the first pile sort, the researcher placed two category cards in front of each participant that read “Brands for someone who is most like me” and “Brands for someone who is least like me.” Then, the researcher asked each participant to select five brands to be placed below each of the category cards. By limiting their selection to five brands each, participants were not forced to categorize unfamiliar brands. A group discussion about their choices followed and brand cards were recombined.

For the second pile sort, the researcher placed two different category cards in front of each participant, “Brands with marketing I like the most” and “Brands with marketing I like the least,” and asked participants to place five brands below each category card, followed by another open-ended discussion about their choices. We reserved questions regarding the targeted marketing for unhealthy food and beverages to Black and Latino youth for the end

of each session so as not to bias participants' attitudes toward brands during the pile sorting activities and earlier discussions.

After the pile sorts, participants individually completed two psychographic questionnaires. The affirmation, belonging, and commitment items from the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) provided a measure of participants' sense of affiliation and happiness with his/her respective ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). This scale has been used to assess the ethnic identification of adolescents in other research that examined the effects of cultural cues in TV advertisements (Appiah, 2001). This seven-item questionnaire measured participants' agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale. The mean of all items provided an overall MEIM score, ranging from one to five, with a higher number indicating a stronger ethnic identity. The Dietary Habits questionnaire from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS) assessed our sample's consumption habits relative to other US youth. The items measure consumption of healthy and unhealthy food/drinks with 12 questions about the frequency of consumption of specific food/drinks during the past seven days (Kann, McManus, Harris, Shanklin, & Flint, 2016). After completing the questionnaires, researchers debriefed the participants as to the purpose of the study and provided a debriefing sheet for their parent/guardian.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo version 11 by three researchers. Researchers used thematic analysis to collectively identify, analyze, and define key themes present in the data. Each theme was defined in a coding manual and also assigned to nodes in NVivo for coding. Supporting themes were organized into sub-nodes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coders conducted three rounds of reliability testing with a sample transcript, and determined inter-coder reliability using NVivo's percentage agreement score. Following recommendations for focus group thematic analysis (Creswell, 2014), inter-coder reliability was determined based on percent agreement of at least 80% for all codes/nodes coded per transcript. Coding discrepancies, when agreement was less than 80%, were discussed and resolved using consensus among coders and by refining and merging codes. Researchers also tallied the five brand choices from each pile sort to determine the most and least liked brands and marketing. Chi-square tests assessed differences by ethnicity. Participant responses to the YRBSS dietary questionnaire were collapsed into healthy and unhealthy behaviors to match the Trend Fact Sheets (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2015) reported in the 2015 National YRBSS survey. Chi-square tests for equality of proportions were used to compare Black and Latino participants' responses to YRBSS 2015 panel (Kann et al., 2016). Statistical tests were performed at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Fifty-one adolescents (ages 12 to 17) participated in the groups (see Table 2); 61% identified as Black and 56% as female. MEIM scores averaged 4.65 and 4.13 out of 5 for Black and Latino youth, respectively. These results demonstrated strong racial/ethnic identity for all participants, so differences in attitudes toward targeted marketing based on ethnic identity score could not be assessed. There were no significant differences between Black and Latino participants on the YRBSS measures. However, compared to responses from the 2015

Table 2. Participant demographics and dietary behaviors.

	Black participants n=31	Latino participants n= 20*
Female	18 (58%)	10 (53%)
Age	15.2 +/- 1.6	14.1+/-1.6
MEIM Score	4.65 +/- 0.6	4.13 +/- 0.8

*One participant did not report gender

Responses to YRBSS dietary questions (% of participants reporting behavior in the past 7 days)

		Unhealthy behaviors		Healthy behaviors		
		Black	Latino	Black	Latino	
Fruit/100% fruit juice	None ^j	15*	8	3X+ per day	18	10
Vegetables	None ^j	48***	38***	2X+ per day [†]	11*	10
Milk	None	32	10	2X+ per day	16	40
Soda	2X+ per day	23	20	None [†]	29	15
Sports drinks	2X+ per day ^j	32***	20	None [†]	26***	40
Water	None ^j	3	5*	2X+ per day	61	40
Breakfast	No breakfast [†]	15*	10*	Daily	18	10

Significant differences compared to respondents to the YRBSS 2015 survey, using chi-square test for equality of proportions: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

^jParticipants were more likely to report the behavior.

[†]Participants were less likely to report the behavior.

YRBSS panel data for U.S. adolescents in total (Kann et al., 2016), Black participants reported a significantly higher incidence of some unhealthy behaviors, including not eating fruit or vegetables in the past seven days, and drinking two or more sports drinks per day. They also reported a lower incidence of not eating breakfast in the past week. Latino participants were significantly more likely to report not eating vegetables or drinking water compared with YRBSS panel participants, but less likely to report not eating breakfast. There were no other significant differences between participants and the YRBSS panel.

Preferences for targeted and non-targeted brands

Table 3 presents the percent of participants who included each brand as a top-five choice for their pile sorts. Five targeted brands were selected by more than one-third of participants as brands for “someone most like me:” Doritos, Pizza Hut, Gatorade, Taco Bell, and Snickers. More than 40% of participants also selected Doritos, Gatorade, and Snickers, as well as Skittles, as brands with “marketing I like.” More than one-third of participants selected four non-targeted brands as top-five brands for “someone least like me:” Chex Mix, Ferrero Rocher, Pepperidge Farm Milanos and Dove Chocolate. However, more than one-third also chose three targeted brands (PayDay candy bar, Dr. Pepper, and Pop Tarts) for this list. There was greater variance in participants’ choices of brands with “marketing I like the least.” Only Chex Mix and Dove Chocolate (two non-targeted brands) were selected by more than one-third of participants.

Qualitative results

Overall, participants expressed high awareness and engagement with most targeted brands and their marketing campaigns. A few participants reported no awareness of one brand: Ferrero Rocher (non-targeted). Key themes that emerged in participants’ characterization of

Table 3. Relative frequency of targeted and non-targeted brands selected during pile sorting activities*.

Brand	Positive attitudes		Neutral/negative attitudes	
	Brands for someone most like me	Brands with marketing I like the most	Brands for someone least like me	Brands with marketing I like the least
<i>Targeted brands</i>				
Doritos	48%	52%	7%	11%
Pizza Hut	41%	26%	17%	28%
Gatorade	39%	65%	4%	7%
Taco Bell	39%	17%	20%	11%
Snickers	37%	43%	4%	9%
Wendy's	30%	33%	17%	13%
Cheetos	26%	20%	7%	17%
Oreos	26%	17%	4%	26%
Dr. Pepper	26%	2%	37%	24%
Skittles	22%	61%	11%	2%
Twix Candy Bar	20%	30%	7%	17%
Sonic	17%	30%	26%	26%
Mtn Dew	17%	11%	17%	22%
Vitaminwater	13%	0%	30%	22%
Pop Tarts	9%	28%	37%	30%
Payday	2%	7%	46%	30%
<i>Non-targeted brands</i>				
IHOP	33%	28%	9%	17%
Canada Dry Ginger Ale	15%	4%	11%	30%
Ferrero Rocher	15%	4%	39%	24%
Chex Mix	9%	0%	48%	41%
Dove Chocolate	9%	4%	37%	35%
Pepperidge Farm Milano	7%	4%	41%	26%
Arby's	2%	13%	26%	30%

*Reported percentages indicate participants who selected the brand for their top-five list divided by total participants who properly completed the pile sorting activities (n= 46). Pile sorts from five participants who included more than five brands were excluded from this analysis.

Table 4. Key themes that emerged within discussions.

Discussion topics	Key themes that emerged
Characteristics of brands for “someone most like me”	Good tasting, low price and convenience, appealing brand images
Characteristics of “marketing I like”	Use of humor, memorable catchphrases, motivational messages
Characteristics of brands for “someone least like me” and “marketing I don’t like”	Unappealing brand images, unfamiliarity with brand, infrequent brand advertising exposure, unexciting advertising
Indicators of targeted marketing	Black/Latino characters/athletes in advertising, Spanish language spoken in advertising, utilization of Black/Latino cultural indicators, perceived typical consumers of targeted brands as Black/Latino
Attitudes about targeted marketing	Inclusive (recognizes Black/Latino youth as potential consumers), unfair/manipulative, smart business

brands for “someone most like me,” “marketing I like,” brands for “someone least like me” and “marketing I don’t like,” and awareness and attitudes about targeted marketing are highlighted in the following sections and summarized in [Table 4](#).

Characteristics of brands for “someone most like me”

In all groups, participants indicated that they selected brands for “someone most like me” largely based on liking the *taste*. They also frequently discussed low *price* and *convenience* as indicators that brands were for them, and *brand images* that they found appealing.

In describing *taste* attributes, participants often commented on preferences for products available in multiple varieties/flavors and “extreme” tastes (e.g., hot, sour, extremely sweet).

- “I like how there’s a variety of flavors of Skittles, so like there’s not just one bag specifically. There’s like many, many types.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “I like Pop Tarts because they come in all different flavors.” – Latino male (15-17y)
- “I like the Jacked one (Doritos). It’s spicy. Dipped in a spicy sauce.” – Latino male (12-14y)

Some participants described products’ unhealthy or other negative attributes but still chose to consume them because they liked the *taste*.

- “I like Skittles even if candy is bad for you. It tastes sweet so I like it.” – Black female (12-14y)
- “I like hot Cheetos. They taste so good. They give you heartburn, but they taste good.” – Black female (15-17y)

Price and *convenience* were especially important factors in brand liking and consumption for fast-food restaurants. Participants often commented on the importance of meal deal items, and restaurants located close to their work or home. These discussions included mostly targeted brands.

- “[Wendy’s] 4 for \$4, you get like four items for \$4. And it makes more people want to buy it, because they can get their whole meal for that money, instead of spending like \$12.” – Black female (15-17y)
- “I like Taco Bell, because you can go there when you are on a break from work, and get something fast. The same with Wendy’s.” – Latino female (12-14y)
- “Oh, Wendy’s is super close to my house. I have a [local supermarket] and a corner store near my house. So I can get Gatorade, Skittles, and Cheetos very easily.” – Latino female (15-17y)

Participants’ attitudes toward liked brands often reflected the *brand images* presented in advertising, which many participants appeared to internalize.

- “I choose Gatorade because I play sports and that helps me when I’m like taking a break or on the sideline. I can fuel up and get ready for my name to get called back in the game.” – Latino male (12-14y)
- “Cool and spontaneous people eat Doritos. Because of the way it looks and different spices. It got the fire in it you know? It’s daring.” – Black female (15-17y)

- “[Snickers would be a positive person] ‘cause in commercials, [you’re] usually like mean and grouchy before you eat a Snickers, but when you eat a Snickers you feel better.” – Black male (15-17y)

Characteristics of “marketing I like”

When asked about marketing they liked, participants mainly discussed ads on TV, but some participants also mentioned seeing ads on YouTube and Facebook. A few discussed product placements in TV shows and video games. In describing these ads, key themes included *humor*, *memorable catchphrases*, and *motivational messages*. When discussing this marketing, participants often recited slogans verbatim.

- “I like the Pop Tarts, Sonic, Twix and Skittles [ads because they are] funny. I’ll be in a really bad mood and they come on and I start laughing.” – Latino female (12-14y)
- “I think Snickers, just because I remember the commercials the most out of any of the other brands. The slogan Snickers satisfies just sticks with me.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “Skittles is good because they have that catchy phrase ‘taste the rainbow’, so that gets stuck in your head because they say it a lot.” – Black male (15-17y)

Gatorade marketing was unique in its *motivational messages* that resonated with many participants. Gatorade endorsements by celebrity athletes of color had special appeal to Black male participants.

- “I saw Kyrie Irving’s Gatorade commercial. When he was tired. When he was about to stop. He grabbed his Gatorade bottle and drank it. And then he went back to go play. [The message is to] never give up.” – Black male (12-14y)
- “It’s usually, like in Gatorade commercials, it’s always like a Black guy, like a football player, it’s a Black guy, it’s encouraging.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “It creates a sense of wanting to be like the people who are drinking it. So if I see someone. Say someone came in drinking it, a Gatorade, and I’m a football player, I will have the mindset of, if I drink Gatorade, I might be as good as him.” – Black male (15-17y)

One participant also commented on a Gatorade product placement in a Play Station 4 video game.

- “Gatorade is highly advertised. Since I play basketball, I want to be like people who drink Gatorade and when I play [NBA 2K16] my player drinks Gatorade.” – Black male (15-17y)

Characteristics of brands for “someone least like me” and “marketing I don’t like”

Brand image also emerged as a key theme when participants discussed brands for someone who is not like them in this section. They also discussed *unfamiliar* brands and brands that they had not seen advertised. In discussing marketing they did not like, participants often noted brands with *unexciting* advertising.

- “[Chex Mix are for people who] like to eat healthy. Like you know the commercials with Cheerios and how it helps your heart and stuff? Older people would eat Chex Mix because it is healthier for them.” – Black female (12-14y)
- “[Ferrero Rocher is for] fancy people. The name of it. It looks fancy. It sounds foreign too.” – Black male (15-17y)

When discussing marketing they didn’t like, participants often contrasted these ads to ones that they liked. In this section, participants discussed advertising for both targeted and non-targeted brands.

- “[Chex Mix ads are] just boring. You see how they make Doritos look like [they] taste good [in the ads]? [Chex Mix ads do not] make [the product look like it] tastes good.” – Black male (12-14y)
- “I’ve had Pizza Hut pizza before and to be honest they hype it up too much. I’m like ‘eww’. It doesn’t even taste that good. So whenever I watch commercials for Pizza Hut, I’m like they’re over doing it. I see Pizza Hut commercials on TV and Facebook.” – Latino female (15-17y)
- “I personally don’t like Dr. Pepper [ads]. They need better graphics. They’re not selling it for me. They’re just pouring Black soda in a cup.” – Black female (15-17y)

Unfavorable comments about brands with *infrequent ad exposure* tended to focus on non-targeted brands.

- “I don’t see [Dove chocolate commercials] often enough for me to want to buy it every time I go into the store. Like for Snickers. I see the commercials. I go to the store and I immediately think about [Snickers].” – Black male (15-17y)
- “You don’t hear too much about Canada Dry. When I drink it, I get a weird feeling – not the same [refreshing feeling they show in the commercial].” – Latino male (15-17y)

Awareness about targeted marketing

When asked to explain why they thought that marketing was targeted to someone like them, key themes included the *race/ethnicity* of character(s) featured in an ad or endorsing the brand, the *language* spoken in the ad, other *cultural indicators*, and their perceptions of a *typical consumer*.

- “Gatorade. Even though you see a lot of athletes in the commercials. You see a lot of African American athletes promoting the product.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “There was a [Skittles] ad and the Skittles were chicken pox, and [the ad] was in Spanish. [I saw a Sonic ad] in Spanish too. Once they order, their food came and the inside of their car turned into a background, like their home. And they were playing dominos. Latino people play dominos.” – Latino female (12-14y)
- “Tacos come from Mexico and when you put it together it’s (Taco Bell) like for Latinos.” – Latino female (12-14y)
- “[Popeye’s marketing is targeted to African Americans] because you know, society thinks that only Black people eat chicken.” – Black female (15-17y)

- “This is going to be a stretch, but Wendy’s. Just because the majority of the people I see going there after school are African American. They go there for the 4 for 4. So, I don’t know if that’s just my school. But I see the majority of them are Black. That’s where my African American brothers go.” – Black male (15-17y)

Attitudes about targeted marketing

Participants discussed both positive and negative attitudes about targeted marketing around key themes of *inclusiveness*, *fairness*, and *smart business*. When first asked how they felt about companies targeting marketing to someone like them, most participants viewed it positively. However, when the moderator probed for how they felt about unhealthy products targeting them, some participants responded negatively. By the end of the discussion, participants in most groups expressed ambivalent attitudes about targeted marketing for unhealthy products.

On the positive side, participants described targeted marketing as *inclusive* and even considerate.

- “It makes me feel good, because they want everyone to try their products, people from higher or lower social class and from different countries.” – Latino female (12-14y)
- “Seeing a Black lady on [the Popeye’s commercial] makes me feel like ‘Oh, she knows what cookin’ I like!’, so I’ll be more apt to go there than some other place that’s not like that.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “It makes us feel special, I guess, since they are going after us.” – Latino male (12-14y)
- “It makes me more attached to it [the advertised brand].” – Black male (12-14y)

Negative reactions tended to focus on targeted marketing of unhealthy food as *unfair* or manipulative.

- “They are exploiting the fact that we don’t have the resources to go and buy things that taste good and are also healthy. So we have to limit ourselves to their food.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “I feel kind of taken advantage of.” – Latino male (12-14y)
- “They’re trying to make us fat.” – Latino female (15-17y)

Issues of *fairness* were also raised when in discussions of the availability of restaurants in wealthier suburban communities compared to the restaurants in their own community.

- “It is a little stereotypical, but most African Americans live in urban neighborhoods and make less money, so [restaurants in their communities] are usually cheaper and have less quality in terms of nutrition.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “You mostly find like Wendy’s, McDonalds, and Burger King in cities. And who mostly lives in cities? You have like Latinos, umm, African Americans, and stuff like that. So of course I’m going to see it and be like ‘Oh, there’s a Wendy’s across the street!’ because it’s so easy to go there. And you have like someone living in the suburbs and it’s not as easy to get to a Wendy’s.” – Latino female (15-17y)

However, despite ethical and health concerns regarding targeted marketing of unhealthy food, participants acknowledged that targeted marketing was *smart business*, so they did not blame the companies.

- “I wouldn’t take like, personal offense on it (targeted marketing), because this is them trying to make money, [and] it is smart to target urban Blacks. But it still is unethical.” – Black male (15-17y)
- “Well I can’t really blame them. They really want to make a profit, so of course they’re going to go towards the people who could give them money. So I’m not like offended like ‘Ohh Wendy’s you’re so bad for giving me delicious food for a cheap price!’ of course I’m not going to say that. But at the same time, now that I know that [brands target me with unhealthy products], I’m not going to go Wendy’s as much as I usually do because I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of causing me to give them my money and stuff like that.” – Latino female (15-17y)
- “I think [Wendy’s is unhealthy and trying to make us fat]. But then again, maybe they’re (Wendy’s) trying to help us. If we want to eat it, we’re going to eat it, so they (Wendy’s) know you only got \$10.” – Black female (15-17y)

Discussion

These findings demonstrate extremely positive attitudes about some targeted unhealthy food, drink and restaurant brands that likely affects Black and Latino youth’s purchase and consumption of these brands. Not all targeted brands or marketing campaigns were well liked by study participants, but a few stood out for their strong appeal to many of these youth, including Gatorade, Doritos, Wendy’s and Snickers. This appeal appeared to be driven by several factors, including highly engaging advertising and taste preferences, as well as ease of availability and price. In addition, the consistency between participants in their liking for some brands (e.g., Doritos and Gatorade) indicate that popularity with their peers may also contribute to the appeal of these brands.

Although this research did not examine whether Black or Latino adolescents were more influenced by targeted marketing compared to White youth, it does support public health experts’ concerns about targeted marketing of unhealthy food to youth of color. Research has already shown that Black and Latino youth are exposed to higher levels of marketing for unhealthy products in the media and their communities (Harris et al., 2014; Lucan et al., 2017), that they tend to consume more of some unhealthy products that are highly advertised (Kit et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2012a), and that this consumption contributes to health disparities affecting communities of color (Grier & Kumanyika, 2010). This research demonstrates that marketing for some targeted brands likely makes these products even more appealing.

We also found evidence that participants strongly identified with some targeted brands. Gatorade ads were especially appealing, particularly to Black male adolescents who aspired to be like the athletes in the ads. Their strong affinity to Gatorade ads highlights the salience of the advertising to this group and suggests that they not only identify with the highly revered Black athletes in the ads but also internalize the main message in these ads delivered by these experts (i.e., drinking Gatorade will enhance their

sports performance). On the other hand, participants tended to be less familiar with non-targeted brands and their advertising, and expressed negative attitudes toward some non-targeted brands (e.g., Chex Mix, Ferrero Rocher).

Generally, positive attitudes about marketing for unhealthy brands that appear to target them raises additional concerns. The adolescents in our groups typically identified targeted marketing through advertising that portrayed people like them (through race/ethnicity, language, other cultural cues, and similar interests), as well as low price and product availability in their community. They generally responded positively to targeted marketing and appreciated that companies valued them as customers. Few blamed the companies, and some expressed admiration for targeted marketing as smart business and beneficial because it provides them with products they like and can afford. Previous focus groups with Black adolescents similarly reported that participants viewed targeted marketing as understandable and a profitable marketing strategy (DiSantis et al., 2017). However, as in the previous study, sensitization about targeted marketing of unhealthy food and drinks that occurred during the focus groups led some to reconsider their opinion. When asked how targeted marketing for unhealthy products made them feel, some participants expressed ethical concerns. This ambivalence suggests that increased awareness of how unhealthy products are targeted to youth of color could begin to counteract harmful effects of this marketing.

We did not identify any systematic differences between Black and Latino youth responses to brands targeting their own racial or ethnic group, and it appears that targeted brands were appreciated by participants in all groups. One potential explanation is that participants often identified targeted marketing as marketing that occurred in their community. Since these youth lived near each other, they likely encountered the same community-level marketing (e.g., fast-food restaurants, marketing in corner stores). They also recognized that marketing in their high-poverty community was different from marketing in wealthier nearby suburbs, which suggests that countermarketing campaigns to address unhealthy food marketing targeting youth in impoverished communities could resonate with youth.

Another potential explanation for similarities in responses by Black and Latino youth may be that advertising for the targeted brands we chose was aimed at adolescent audiences more generally. Although these products portrayed Black or Latino celebrities or actors and culturally relevant cues in ads and they appeared on Black-targeted and Spanish-language TV programming, these ads could also have been aimed at White non-Latino adolescents, who also saw ads for these brands in other media. Some brands have indicated that marketing to “multicultural” youth has “crossover appeal” for adolescents of all races and ethnicities (Harris et al., 2015). One marketing expert describes the “cool factor” of brands popular with Black consumers and the “halo effect” that appeals to White consumers (Nielsen, 2018).

This study does have limitations. Due to its qualitative nature results are not generalizable. Further, we conducted the research in one city with a small number of participants; findings may not be representative of all U.S. Black and Hispanic youth. In addition, the discussions of race/ethnicity may have heightened participants’ racial identity and contributed to uniformly high MEIM scores following the discussion. Finally, we cannot make conclusions about the effectiveness of targeted marketing on Black or Latino youth versus White non-Latino adolescents or adolescents generally.

However, this study was intended to be a preliminary examination of Black and Latino adolescents' attitudes toward targeted marketing, and findings will be used to derive questions for future quantitative studies.

Future quantitative research with a larger more diverse sample is needed to determine whether targeted marketing also appeals to adolescents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, including White non-Latino youth, and to quantify differences by SES and other individual characteristics (e.g., age, media usage, gender). Participants also identified the strong appeal of non-traditional forms of marketing, such as product placements in video games and viral YouTube videos, that should be examined in future research. Although positive attitudes have been shown to mediate the effects of advertising on product purchase and consumption (IOM, 2006; Kelly et al., 2015), further studies are also needed to quantify effects of targeted marketing on purchases and consumption of unhealthy products and to further explore differences in how Black and Latino youth process targeted marketing. Research on potential disproportionate influence of unhealthy brand marketing on Black and Latino adolescents living in low-income communities would provide guidance on interventions to help reduce the impact targeted marketing in their communities (Powell et al., 2012; Powell, Wada, & Kumanyika, 2014; Yancey et al., 2009). This research would also increase our understanding of how media advertising and community-level marketing interact to affect attitudes toward and purchases of unhealthy products.

Quantitative studies to confirm these qualitative findings would also help identify opportunities for countermarketing and grassroots advocacy campaigns to address targeted marketing of unhealthy products aimed at Black and Latino communities. Countermarketing health communications campaigns and media literacy programs that expose marketers' motives and portray their activity as "outside the boundaries of civilized corporate behavior," such as the "truth" campaign, have been effective at reducing the impact of tobacco marketing on youth (Palmedo et al., 2017). Grassroots advocacy focusing on questionable corporate practices has also been used to limit tobacco and malt liquor marketing targeted to Black communities (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). Future studies could also guide policy and other public health initiatives to address the potential impact of targeted marketing on health disparities.

However, participants' strong emotional affinity for some targeted brands suggests that countermarketing campaigns to address unhealthy food marketing may face additional barriers than previously successful tobacco and alcohol campaigns (Palmedo et al., 2017). Youth-focused media literacy campaigns are more effective when adolescents are exposed to the campaigns before beginning the behavior (i.e., smoking, drinking alcohol) (Harris & Bargh, 2009). However, youth are already actively engaged consumers of the unhealthy food brands. Therefore, policies to address the unhealthy food marketing environment that surrounds low-income youth of color (e.g., sugary drink taxes, limits on unhealthy marketing in local communities) are also required.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides additional evidence to support concerns about potentially harmful effects of targeted marketing for unhealthy food, drink and restaurant brands on youth of color. It demonstrates that Black and Latino adolescents hold primarily positive attitudes targeted marketing and the brands that target them. However, ambivalent

attitudes about targeted marketing of unhealthy foods also suggest the potential for countermarketing campaigns and media literacy to raise awareness of targeted food marketing as a social justice issue. Together, these findings suggest that culturally sensitive strategies to inform youth and their parents about targeted marketing and its potential impact would support advocacy efforts to reduce unhealthy food marketing targeted to communities of color (Color of Change, 2017; Palmedo et al., 2017).

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Appendix. Focus group activities and questions

Activity 1: Warm-up

First, think about your favorite foods and drinks. I am going to ask you to tell me some of them and then I'll write them down on this list. We're focusing on brands not just categories so when I ask about favorites I'd like to hear a brand name.

Let's start with drinks. What are your favorite drink brands? We don't have to go person by person so you can just call out one when it comes to mind.

Now we are going to think about snacks. What are your favorite snack brands? Again, brands please.

Now we are going to think about candy. What are your favorite candy brands?

Now we are going to think about fast-food restaurants. What are your favorite fast-food restaurants?

Out of all the brand we listed I would like each of you to write the name of your favorite brand on the top line of the sheet you just received (see below). Then, without thinking too long please write down any words, pictures, or feelings that come to mind when you think about or see this brand. Write or draw them in the boxes on the sheet in front of you – one per box.

My favorite brand is

1.	2.
3.	4.

Activity 2: Pile sorts for “Brands for someone who is most like me” and “Brands for someone who is least like me”

[Moderator asks participants to choose five brands to include under each heading.]

What is it about these brands that makes you think they're least like you?

What is it about these brands that makes you think they're most like you?

[Moderator chooses one or more brands that many participants chose for “Brands for someone like me.”]

I see that all/most of you put brand x the pile “Brands for someone most like me.” Can we talk about why you all think it belongs there?

If participants focus on taste:

“Is there more to brand than taste? What other things about a brand could make it for ‘someone like you’?”

Sometimes people pick a brand of sneakers or another type of clothing because it shows people who they are or who they want to be. It is interesting to think about brands of food and drinks and if they also say something about a person who eats or drinks them. Does one of these brands do that?

[Moderator asks a participant to pick a brand from the “Brands for someone who is most like me” pile or picks a brand if no one volunteers.]

What does this brand say about a person who eats or drinks it?

[Brands at a party exercise: Moderator picks a brand from a “most like me” pile then from a “least like me” pile.]

It is interesting to think of brands as people. What if [brand X] was a person at a party. What kind of person would [brand X (targeted brand)] be?

How about this other brand [point to non-targeted brand]? What kind of person would [brand X (non-targeted brand)] be?

Activity 3: Pile sorts for “Brands with marketing I like the most” and “Brands with marketing I like the least”

Now, I would like you to think about the advertisements you see

- on billboards,
- outside of stores in your neighborhood
- by bus stops
- on TV
- or online like on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram

Companies use advertisements to get as many people as possible to buy their products. For this next sort, we're going to talk about how companies market or advertise the brands that are on your cards. By marketing or advertising, we mean all of ways that companies tell you about the brand such as TV ads, signs in stores, radio ads, billboards, and ads on the Internet or your phone.

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers; we really want to know what you think.

This time, please pick 5 brands that use **marketing that you like the most**, and 5 brands that **have marketing that you like the least**. The rest you can leave in a separate pile.

[Moderator points to cards above "Brands with marketing I like the most."]

Where have you seen marketing for this brand? What do you like about it?

(Probes: TV, billboards, storefronts, magazines, on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or on the internet in games or websites?)

[Moderator picks one brand that everyone has and then move on to one or two others.]

Let's start with this brand because everyone has it in their "Brands with marketing I like the most" pile.

If you had to describe the type of person who you think the marketing for brand X is trying to reach, what would you say?

[Moderator probes for perceived targeted marketing]

Are there any brands here that you think are trying to get [Pick the category within the interview group: either Black or Latino] girls or boys to like their products? What is it about the marketing that makes you think that? How does this make you feel about this brand?

Can you think of any celebrities that promote any of these brands here?

Are there any other food brands that you don't see here that you think might have marketing that is trying to reach people like you?

[If time allows, moderator discusses the "Brands with marketing I like the least" piles.]