

## Deleterious Consumer Socialization: The Negative Impacts of School Environment on Children's Food Well-Being

Roberto Flores Falcão, UNIALFA<sup>1</sup>  
Rodolfo Rodrigues Rocha, University of São Paulo<sup>2</sup>  
Andres Rodriguez Veloso, University of São Paulo<sup>3</sup>  
Daniel Faria Chaim, FATEC Guaratinguetá<sup>4</sup>

### Introduction

John is an 11-year-old boy from a family that regards food habits as an essential part of children's socialization skills. John's parents talk to him about food and the importance of healthy habits. John's afternoon snacks made at home often consist of fruits and natural juices, foods that the boy also usually takes to school to eat during the breaks. But, when at school, John's behavior goes rogue. He buys unhealthy snacks, candies, and treats from the canteen while also sharing and trading these foods with his peers. The story depicts the reality of a boy who is a victim of deleterious consumer socialization (DCS), that is, situations or environments in which the consumer socialization process negatively influences well-being. Our study focuses on understanding how deleterious food socialization (DFS) practices impact children's well-being within the school environment.

Researchers have studied the negative influence of the environment on children and adolescents in extreme scenarios, such as abusive families (Majonis, 1991) or school violence (Hilarski, 2004). Our research contemplates food, a context, at first, less shocking, but which influences the formation of children's eating habits and preferences (Prescott, 2020), impacting their well-being for life (Scott & Vallen, 2019).

Children and adolescents experience a series of cognitive and social development stages as they mature (John, 1999), developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to their role as consumers (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). A critical aspect of this process refers to food socialization (Block et al., 2011) and influencing factors (Bublitz et al., 2011), such as interactions with family (Moore et al., 2002) or with peers mainly at school (Hemar-Nicolas et al., 2013; Rocha et al., 2017). The school's importance as an agent of food socialization is further reinforced by teachers and the canteen, which defines the purchase availability of food (Block et al., 2011).

By focusing on the negative impacts that the school environment can place on children's food well-being, we try to shed light on real-life phenomena and provide recommendations that enhance well-being, following MacInnis et al.'s (2019) recommendations. Also, we seek to broaden the perspective of food well-being, contributing to the TCR movement (Scott & Vallen, 2019).

### Literature Review

Consumer socialization is a fundamental part of a child's life (Veloso et al., 2012). During this process, they learn about social roles and how behaviors vary according to roles when relating with socialization agents, particularly family, school, media, and peers (Moschis & Churchill Jr., 1978). Peers and school are essential agents (John, 1999) since school and peer experiences go together. Children begin to give importance to the symbolic meaning of products and brands from the age of seven, understanding their role in group acceptance and self-image (Hemar-Nicolas et al., 2013).

Food has been a topic traditionally studied within the domains of Nutrition and Public Health. The Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement embraced the subject due to its impact on well-being (Block et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2013) and the call for consumer studies that maximize their well-being (Mick, 2006). Within TCR, Block et al.'s (2011) pivotal study on food well-being - positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food, both at the individual and collective levels – changed the landscape of the topic, moving it from the

---

<sup>1</sup> Roberto Flores Falcão ([roberto.falcao@unialfa.com.br](mailto:roberto.falcao@unialfa.com.br)), Professor of Marketing, UNIALFA Business School

<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo Rodrigues Rocha ([rodolfo.rocha@usp.br](mailto:rodolfo.rocha@usp.br)), PhD Candidate, School of Economics, Business and Accounting

<sup>3</sup> Andres Rodriguez Veloso ([veloso@usp.br](mailto:veloso@usp.br)), Full Professor of Marketing, School of Economics, Business and Accounting

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Faria Chaim ([chaim@fatecguaratingueta.edu.br](mailto:chaim@fatecguaratingueta.edu.br)), Professor of Management, School of Business

perspective of health to a broader definition that relates food to well-being. The old paternalistic and normative paradigm (food = health) imposes limitations and restrictions on consumers that do not result in their well-being. The new holistic and integrative paradigm (food = well-being) has a more positive and consumer-oriented approach.

Social actors, such as family and peer relationships, influence the process of food socialization (Bublitz et al., 2011), which can impact the well-being of an individual. (Block et al., 2011). Additionally, Block et al. (2011) draw attention to media and marketing's importance in this process. For instance, food marketing practices (e.g., messages emphasizing foods low in nutrients and high in calories) can generate harmful effects that are difficult to regulate, such as increasing childhood obesity. Nevertheless, TCR suggests that food marketing can have positive influences on consumers when fostering better consumption decisions (Block et al., 2011), such as contributing towards reduced obesity rates among young people (Goldberg & Gunasti, 2007) or helping children and adolescents acquiring healthy eating habits (Pettersson & Fjellstrom, 2006).

Children's obesity is a public health problem (Ebbeling et al., 2002) that the World Health Organization (2016) classified as an epidemic. This situation is especially worrisome for emerging countries with limited resources, such as Brazil, where one third of children and half of the adult population is overweight (Brasil, 2014). School-age children and adolescents spend part of their day at school, where they eat some of their meals (Hemar-Nicolas et al., 2013) and receive strong influence from teachers, colleagues, and from the canteen (Block et al., 2011; Rocha et al., 2017).

### Method

To identify DFS practices that occur within the school environment, we developed a mixed methodology. We focused on a data collection method that could inform us what children and adolescents eat at school and how they can access these foods (whether they bring them from home, buy it in the canteen, or trade with colleagues). Additionally, we checked what they usually eat at home (meals similar to the snack they make at school). We developed structured questionnaires with open and closed questions. We also included a blank frame that children could freely express themselves by writing or drawing (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). This questionnaire was pre-tested, and we made some necessary adjustments. The data collection took place in two private schools of the upper-middle class. Both schools authorized us to collect data based on contracts signed between parents and the school. This contract allows research with children, pending school board approval based on ethical guidelines. We obtained support from teachers and collected 388 useful questionnaires from students between 10 and 14 years old (average of 12.4).

To code the innumerable food types that were collected, we used the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population published by the Ministry of Health (Brazil, 2014). The Guide divides food into four categories – 1. Natural (whole) foods or minimally processed; 2. Oils, fats, salt, and sugar; 3. Processed; 4. Ultra-processed – and suggests that meals should be based on group 1, while the consumption of processed foods should be limited to small amounts. Group 4 should be avoided, as they are nutritionally unbalanced and favor excessive calorie consumption, in addition to negatively affect culture, social life, and the environment. The classification was made by two of the researchers in successive stages until they reached an agreement.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

Regarding what they eat at school, respondents pointed out 883 food and drinks that they usually consume, with an average of 2.6 foods per individual. The majority of the respondents brought food from home (331), followed by those that purchased food in the canteen (280) and those who traded food with peers (272). Our data shows that while foods from home are mainly classified as healthier, foods from the school environment (bought at the canteen or traded with peers) are mostly unhealthy (e.g., ultra-processed). Although the levels of ultra-processed items brought from home is far from what the Guide recommends, our data indicates that the school environment is more harmful to children's eating habits and behaviors. When comparing food originated from home versus originated from the school (bought and traded), we encountered statistically significant differences ( $\chi^2(3, N = 883) = 38.9, p < .001$ ). The explanations for these results are twofold. First, healthy foods originated from home are not subject to or attractive for trade. Second, most products that originated from the school environment are unhealthy. For instance, 87% of products purchased in the canteen and 86% of those traded with peers are unhealthy.

These results highlight the influence of two aspects of food well-being – food availability and food marketing – on children's behavior (Block et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2011), commanding a

substantial influence on the construction of eating habits and behaviors. While households are sending healthier snacks and beverages with children to school, they are influenced by DCS during recess. Considering that parents are generally responsible for purchasing food at home, we can observe their influence on children and adolescents' habits and behaviors as agents of food socialization. These results exemplify some of the strength of social factors and food literacy, discussed in the context of food well-being (Block et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2011). Interestingly, only one food item traded with peers could be classified as a natural or minimally processed food: water.

We also evaluated foods and drinks our respondents consume at home in their afternoon snacks. It represents a similar meal to snack time at school, allowing us to compare school (food bought and traded during recess) and home environments (food brought from home and food consumed at home during an afternoon snack). The opposite movements observed in the "natural or minimally processed" and "ultra-processed" categories point to our proposal for DCS. Among food and beverages with a domestic origin, "natural or minimally processed" represent 25%, while those with school origin in the same category are only 4%. Regarding "ultra-processed" foods and drinks, those with domestic sources are 56%, and those with school origin are 86%.

The independence test statistically supported the difference between the "home" and "school" food groups ( $\chi^2(3, N = 2015) = 172.7, p < .001$ ). This analysis reinforces the existence of deleterious consumer socialization in the infant food context. Thus, even if they do not entirely follow the Food Guide's recommendations for the Brazilian Population (Brazil, 2014), infant feeding is affected by the school environment compared to the domestic context.

### Conclusions

Based on our results, we cannot be surprised that one-third of Brazilian children are overweight (Brasil, 2014). Children's food habits are primarily unhealthy, either at school or at home. We observed low levels of healthy behaviors: consumption of meals rich in natural or minimally processed foods and few ultra-processed foods. In reality, what we observed is the opposite: the prevalence of ultra-processed foods and drinks. More importantly, even for parents who send their children to school with healthy snacks, there is still the possibility of deleterious socialization practices. In this case, these kids would throw out whatever they brought from home and consume what the school environment provides, either buying at the canteen or trading with peers.

Healthy oriented parents and the school need to work together to influence food availability at the canteen, while at the same time working to educate other parents on the importance of sending their kids to school with a package of healthier foods. Policymakers could act on the food availability factor, putting limits on the type of food sold within schoolgrounds. In comparison, there is a regulation on what kind of store and product types they can sell in schools' proximity; there are no regulations on what can be sold within the school. Thus, parents and schools must work together to improve infant feeding. Following Davis et al.'s (2016) call, we hope that the results presented here will make parents and managers of early childhood schools reflect on the subject.

When comparing data on what children and adolescents eat at school and what they usually eat at home in similar meals, we found out that the school environment tends to be more harmful to infant feeding than the domestic one. From the point of view of consumer socialization, we call this phenomenon "deleterious consumer socialization" or DCS. At home, there seems to be a concern of parents (in the role of agents of the socialization of infant food) about their children's feeding. The amount of ultra-processed food and drinks consumed at home and taken by children from home to school is smaller than what they buy at the school canteen or get from their colleagues. This behavior characterizes DCS.

Putting these findings in the context of food well-being (Block et al., 2011), we could observe the potential negative impacts of social factors on children and adolescents' diet. Children's eating behavior at school, where children and adolescents spend a good part of the day, seems to impair the behavior and habits acquired at home. Thus, children and adolescents (vulnerable consumers) have their food well-being negatively impacted. There must be an effort by schools so that the environment favors healthy eating habits and behaviors, positively impacting children's food well-being.

With these conclusions, we contribute to the discussion on food well-being, particularly regarding social factors, in specific and vital contexts for infant feeding: home and school. We also contribute to the consumer socialization literature by proposing the idea of deleterious consumer socialization (DCS). A few studies in contexts that harm children and adolescents can be found in the literature. However, when the negative influence of a given environment on children's socialization is less evident, the literature has not yet highlighted this impact.

The specificity of the context and the characteristics of the environment where we collected data are study limitations. While these characteristics allow a better understanding of the context, they may not reflect a broader reality. Similar research in other regions of Brazil and other countries and schools with different characteristics could add relevant information to the discussion. Another possible limitation of this research is the relatively short collection period, which can influence the results due to specific factors. Studies with longer timespans can bring different insights into consumer behavior literature (Chintagunta & Labroo, 2020). In the case of the analysis of infant feeding at home and at school, longitudinal surveys may show the effects of deleterious consumer socialization on children and adolescents' nutritional well-being.

### References

- Block, L. G., Grier, S. A., Childers, T. L., Davis, B., Ebert, J. E. J., Kumanyika, S., ... & Bieshaar, M. N. G. G. (2011). From nutrients to nurturance: a conceptual introduction to food well-being. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 30(1), 5-13.
- Brasil. (2014). *Guia alimentar para a população brasileira* (2nd ed.), Ministério da Saúde. Brasília, DF. (in Portuguese)
- Bublitz, M. G., Peracchio, L. A., Andreasen, A. R., Kees, J., Kidwell, B., Miller, E.G., ... & Vallen, B. (2011). The quest for eating right: advancing food well-being. *Journal of Research for Consumers*, 19, 1-12.
- Bublitz, M. G., Peracchio, L. A., Andreasen, A. R., Kees, J., Kidwell, B., Miller, E. G., ... & Vallen, B. (2013). Promoting positive change: advancing the food well-being paradigm. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(8), 1211-1218.
- Chintagunta, P., & Labroo, A.A. (2020). It's about time: a call for more longitudinal consumer research insights. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 5(3), 240-247.
- Davis, B., Ozanne, J. L., & Hill, R. P. (2016). The transformative consumer research movement. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 35(2), 159-169.
- Ebbeling, C. B., Pawlak, D. B., & Ludwig, D. S. (2002). Childhood obesity: public-health crisis, common sense cure. *Lancet*, 360, 473-82.
- Fargas-Malet, M., McSherry, D., Larkin, E., & Robinson, C. (2010). Research with children: Methodological issues and innovative techniques. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 8(2), 175-192.
- Goldberg, M. E., & Gunasti, K. (2007). Creating an environment in which youths are encouraged to eat a healthier diet *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 26(2), 162-181.
- Hemar-Nicolas, V., Ezan, P., Gollety, M., Guichard, N., & Leroy, J. (2013). How do children learn eating practices? Beyond the nutritional information, the importance of social eating. *Young Consumers*, 14(1), 5-18.
- Hilarski, C. (2004). Corporal punishment: another form of school violence. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 1(2-3), 59-75.
- John, D. R. (1999). Consumer socialization of children: A retrospective look at twenty-five years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(3), 183-213.
- MacInnis, D. J., Morwitz, V. G., Botti, S., Hoffman, D. L., Kozinets, R. V., Lehmann, D. R., ... & Pechmann, C. (2020). Creating boundary-breaking, marketing-relevant consumer research. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(2), 1-23.
- Majonis, J. (1991). Discipline and socialization of children in abusive and non-abusive families. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 8(3), 203-224.
- Mick, D.G. (2006). Meaning and mattering through transformative consumer research. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 33, 1-4.
- Moore, E. S., Wilkie, W. L., & Lutz, R. J. (2002). Passing the torch: Intergenerational influences as a source of brand equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 66(2), 17-37.
- Moschis, G.P., & Churchill Jr., G.A. (1978). Consumer socialization: A theoretical and empirical analysis. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 15(4), 599-609.
- Pettersson, A., & Fjellstrom, C. (2006). Responsible marketing to children and their families. *Young Consumers*, 7(4), 13-18.
- Prescott J. (2020). Development of food preferences. In Meiselman, H. L. (Ed.), *Handbook of eating and drinking*, Springer, Cham, ZG, pp.199-217.
- Rocha, R. R., Chaim, D. F., & Veloso, A. R. (2017). Hora do recreio: A relação de crianças e adolescentes com os alimentos na perspectiva do bem-estar alimentar. *Revista Brasileira de Marketing*, 16(3), 396-409. (In Portuguese)

- Scott, M. L., & Vallen, B. (2019). Expanding the lens of food well-being: An examination of contemporary marketing, policy, and practice with an eye on the future. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 38(2), 127-135.
- Veloso, A. R., Hildebrand, D., & Campomar, M.C. (2012). *Marketing e o mercado infantil*, Cengage Learning, São Paulo, SP. (in Portuguese).
- World Health Organization – WHO (2016). *Report of the commission on ending childhood obesity*. (Last accessed: October 10, 2020).