

Target Marketing

**African American & Hispanic Youth Vulnerability
to Target Marketing:
Implications for Understanding
the Effects of Digital Marketing**

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Background: Obesity Disparities

There are significant differences in overweight and obesity^a by ethnicity, and rates are significantly higher for African American and Mexican-American children and adolescents than for white children and adolescents (see Tables 1-2, Appendix). Although ethnic disparities in obesity are often assumed to be a product of income differences, the association between socio-economic status and obesity varies by ethnicity and gender. Among white children obesity generally declines with parental increases in education or income, whereas rates may increase with income, or show no consistent pattern among Black and Hispanic children.¹ Although the public discussions of food and beverage marketing in the context of the obesity epidemic often note the higher levels of obesity among ethnic minority youth, target marketing to ethnic minority youth is rarely discussed. Thus, any investigations of digital food marketing premised on concern about obesity prevention among youth should explicitly consider issues of relevance to ethnic minority youth^b who are most affected by the obesity epidemic.

African-American And Hispanic Youth Vulnerability To Targeted Food Marketing

Determining whether or not a particular market segment is more vulnerable to harm from targeted marketing is complex and multiply determined. Vulnerability arises from the interaction of individual states, characteristics and external conditions.² As part of the general youth segment, Black and Hispanic youth share developmental vulnerabilities with other youth including issues of cognitive capacity among children, and self-consciousness and impulsivity among adolescents.^{3,4} Of interest here are factors which may enhance or intensify African-American and Hispanic youth responsiveness to food and beverage marketing. Undoubtedly this involves the interaction of a variety of physiological, cultural, and psychosocial factors, a full review of which is beyond the scope of this report. Additionally, there is significant overlap of income with race and ethnicity. Since substantial numbers of both Blacks and Hispanics are lower income, there may be more pronounced effects among lower income ethnic minority youth. This factor is not considered here though is important since the low income population is also projected to increase more than 15% as wealthy segments decline.⁵ The present report highlights four key factors that may interact with marketing strategies and lead to enhanced receptivity and responsiveness among ethnic minority youth: 1) levels of media exposure, 2) content of targeted marketing, 3) favorable response to marketing, and 4) ethnic identity concerns.

^a The definition of obesity is having a body mass index or BM level (which is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by the square of height, in meters) that is at or above an age and sex specific cutoff point (the 95th percentile) on standard curves published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC uses the term “overweight” rather than “obesity” when referring to children who meeting this criterion. CDC uses the 85th percentile of the BMI standard as the definition for being “at risk of overweight” under the assumption that the “at risk” children are those most likely to become overweight (obese) if they have excessive weight gain. The terms “obesity” and “overweight” are used here for simplicity.

^b The term ethnic minority youth is used here to refer to the focal groups of interest, Black and Hispanic youth. However, this term may also refer to other groups (e.g. Asian-Americans and Native Americans).

Levels of media exposure. African American and Hispanic Youth may have higher exposure to marketing strategies due to heavier media usage than majority youth.⁶ ^{7,8} Among those aged 2 to 7, both Black and Hispanic children spent at least two more hours per week with media than White children.⁹ Among those aged eight to 18, on average, Black youth spent 39.2 hours, and Hispanic youth 31.2 hours per week with on-screen media compared to 25.5 hours among white youth.⁸ Television watching is especially prevalent in African American households, and significantly more Black youth are likely to have TVs in their bedrooms.⁸ This heavy media usage also extends to certain digital media. US Hispanic teens aged 12-17 represent 2.5 million wireless subscribers, and have a subscriber growth rate of two to three times that of the overall US teen market over the next 5 years. And African Americans and Hispanic youth use specific mobile tools, such as text messaging, which have been described as “the core of successful mobile marketing” at a higher rate than the general population.¹⁰

Levels of media exposure are important because repeated exposure can increase learning, increase the weight given to the marketing message, suggest specific behaviors as normative, and affect the social diffusion of the messages.¹¹ These mechanisms may work individually or interactively to support enhanced response to repeated exposures of a message. Accordingly, repeated message exposure influences awareness of specific products, attaches meanings to those products, affects brand attitudes and contributes to food-related norms. Research on the relationship between media usage and obesity show that increased media usage, especially TV, is associated with increased caloric intake and higher weight.^{12,13} Research also suggests that this relationship is driven by increased consumption of frequently advertised high calorie foods.¹⁴ One study among youth 10 to 15 years old found that the odds of being overweight were almost five times greater for those who viewed five hours of TV per day vs. those who viewed two or fewer hours.¹⁵ Thus, any effects of media exposure should be most pronounced among the most frequent viewers, i.e. minority youth.⁶

Content of targeted marketing. The marketing that African American and Hispanic Youth encounter features more food advertising, tends to promote less healthful foods and is less likely to support positive nutrition.^{1,16,19} One study found that ads with Black characters were more likely to promote convenience and fast foods, to depict snacking vs. meals and less likely to include adults, overweight characters or foods in line with dietary recommendations.¹⁷ Minority youth are also exposed to strategies near their schools and within their larger communities, and the marketing is similarly unhealthy. A review of the marketing strategies to which African-Americans were exposed over a 14 year period (1992-2006) identified 20 articles which were consistent in their findings that the most frequently promoted and most accessible products to African-Americans, relative to White Americans, were high-calorie and low-nutrition foods and beverages.²⁰ For example, the TV shows most watched by African Americans tend to have more food commercials that promote candy, soda and snacks than general prime-time shows.^{18,21,22} Analyses of in-store and outdoor advertising have also found significantly greater promotion of less-healthy foods in African American and Hispanic communities relative

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to White communities.^{23,24} Studies which have examined food availability show that Black and Hispanic consumers have access to more fast food outlets and fewer supermarkets.^{20,25} Self-report data shows that both African-Americans and Hispanics perceive greater exposure to fast food promotions, and see fast food outlets as more conveniently located relative to whites.²⁶ Youth exposed to fast food around their schools or who have fewer supermarkets in their neighborhoods are more likely to be overweight and obese, and have higher consumption of unhealthy food.^{27,28} And African-American and Hispanic students in urban schools near fast food restaurants are three times as likely to have higher BMI.²⁹ More generally, the content of the marketing messages to which African-American and Hispanic youth are exposed appears to support overconsumption of high calorie foods.

Response to marketing. Black and Hispanic youth are viewed as heavily consumer oriented and especially receptive to targeted marketing efforts. Surveys have found that minority youth are more interested in, and positive towards, media and marketing than non-Hispanic Whites.^{30,31} African American and Hispanic youth may also be more

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influenced by media and rely more on advertising as a source of information, possibly due to greater independence from parents.^{30,32,35} Further, ethnic minority youth are often viewed as trendsetters who are willing to try new products. African-American and Hispanic consumers have also been characterized as highly brand loyal, although much of the research is older and some contradictory.^{36,42} African Americans readily spread word of mouth about products within their networks while Hispanics are viewed as more receptive to influences from outside their cultural networks.^{30,39} African-American and Hispanics are also more interested in having marketers do good for their communities^{30,43}, which suggests that sponsorships and support of ethnic minority cultural institutions may be quite influential among them.

Ethnic minority youth also respond more favorably to ethnically targeted marketing than majority youth. Advertisers use cues such as ethnically congruent models, ethnic symbols, linguistic styles and music to link cultural values, beliefs, and norms with the consumption of specific food products. Black and Hispanic consumers are more likely to pay more attention to identify with and trust spokespersons of similar ethnicity, and to have more positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards a brand when it features ethnic cues.^{44,51} Consider the McDonalds “365 Black” Campaign

which “demonstrates that African-American culture and achievement should be celebrated 365 days a year – not just during Black History Month.”⁵² The campaign features the African Baobab tree on the website, runs ads that feature African American celebrities such as Venus Williams, sponsors “little known Black history facts” on a daily radio show with more than 122 million listeners, displays posters in the fast food outlets, distributed Black history booklets in schools in collaboration with Coca-Cola, and supports community events including an academic achievement program for middle school students and a Black college tour. The use of ethnic cues in the campaign (e.g. African American celebrities, African cultural symbols, support of cultural institutions) and ethnic media (e.g. Black radio) can increase the salience of the identity and evoke more identity consistent and favorable responses.^{53,56}

The strength of ethnic identity among African-American and Hispanic youth may influence how positively they respond to targeted marketing.^{37,49,57-59} For example, strong Hispanic-identifiers are more likely to use Spanish language media, buy brands advertised to their ethnic group, and buy brands used by family and friends.^{37,58} Similar effects have also been found in response to digital marketing. Black college students identified more strongly with testimonials featuring Black spokespeople, were more likely to believe the website was targeting them, and recalled more product information from a site relative to either a testimonial by a white spokesperson or no testimonial.⁵⁹ Further, Blacks with strong ethnic identities spent more time browsing a site and viewing each story and rated the site and the stories more favorably when the site was targeted to Blacks than Whites.⁴⁸ These effects may be driven by consumer perceptions that the ad is designed for them, self-referencing, or perceptions that the advertiser is sensitive to their group.^{46,50,60,61} A consumer may also have an emotional response to ethnic symbols used in a marketing communication without recognizing the symbols or giving any thought to why the marketer used them⁶², suggesting the importance of understanding implicit persuasion.⁶³ As a member of a numeric and social minority group, Black and Hispanic youth also encounter and may respond positively to marketing targeted to all children, to other minority children (e.g. Asian-Americans), and to minority teenagers and adults.¹⁴⁷ Further, while studies have demonstrated that younger children may have little understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising and that children may resist commercial messages^{4,64}, most consumer research does not break out or include ethnic diversity in their samples. Nonetheless, the research which does exist suggests a strong resonance of identity-linked targeted marketing to minority youth which may support enhanced response to the marketing of calorie-dense less healthful food and beverage products.

Ethnic identity concerns. Minority youth share general youth challenges such as developing a personal identity and fitting in with peers.³ In addition, they are confronted with developing an ethnic identity, which contributes to their self-esteem.⁶⁵ The extent to which ethnic identity and personal identity overlap in ethnic minority youth may vary from person to person. Products, including foods and beverages project images about a person, and can contribute to identity development and self-worth.^{3,66} Youth use of media is also related to their self-esteem and development of personal and ethnic identity.⁶⁷ Given research suggests that adolescent self-consciousness makes them more accepting of image advertising and frequently promoted brands^{3,68}, we might expect ethnically targeted marketing to play an enhancing role in ethnic identity development and minority youth response. Studies which show that stronger ethnic identification leads to enhanced response to ethnically targeted marketing efforts supports this proposition. Researchers also contend that minority youth may use consumption to combat social stigma and economic marginalization.⁶⁹ Research among elementary school students suggests that viewing African-American programs among African-American is associated with higher self-esteem⁷⁰, and suggests how targeted ads may be used in this manner. More generally, ethnic targeted marketing may serve identity development purposes among minority youth and this relationship may support enhanced responsiveness to target marketing.

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Discussion

Four factors—higher levels of media exposure, promotion of less healthful foods, receptivity to media and marketing, and ethnic identity development—may support an enhanced positive response to targeted marketing among African American and Hispanic youth. Most academic research on marketing strategies to children and adolescents does not specifically consider issues that may be of particular relevance to ethnic minority children. Despite the limited academic research, there is a burgeoning commercial market research industry that studies ethnic minority youth to help develop and implement these strategies. However, this research is often proprietary to a particular company, or costly.

We can only expect that targeted food marketing to ethnic minority youth will increase. African-American and Hispanic youth are crucial to the viability of food and beverage marketers as they are the fastest-growing population segments.⁶ Ethnic minorities are predicted to comprise almost half of all American youth by 2050.⁷¹ Ethnic minority families are growing at a faster rate than the total population and are expected to comprise more than half of families with children by 2025.⁵ The majority of spending on ethnic target marketing is geared toward Hispanics and African Americans (2004 totals of \$3.9 billion and \$1.7 billion respectively) whose buying power has steadily increased.⁷² In 2008, the buying power of Hispanics was \$951 billion and \$913 billion for African Americans.⁷³ A study of children 6-14 found that the yearly “income” (consisting of lunch money, allowance, gifts, earned income and other money) for African-American’s was \$1,549 and \$1,192 for Hispanics (vs. \$1,644 for all kids, \$1,811 for whites).⁷⁴ Additionally, ethnic minority youth have notable influence power on other youth, in their families, and in the society at large. Research has found that ethnic minority children have a strong influence on their parents decisions to purchase snacks, breakfast foods, and other packaged food brands.⁷⁴ As a Nielsen VP noted “While some companies have multi-cultural marketing initiatives in place today, by 2020, multi-cultural marketing will be a necessity—rather than an option—for doing business. This shift will impact product selections, product flavors, and the methods marketers use to reach their new target audiences.”⁵

Digital marketers in particular see Hispanics and African American youth as an attractive segment given their growth rates, purchasing power and relevant consumer behavior.

Digital marketers in particular see Hispanics and African American youth as an attractive segment given their growth rates, purchasing power and relevant consumer behavior. Ethnic minority youth are early adopters of new technologies, and influential with regard to the larger society.⁷⁵ Based on their specific attitudes and behaviors, African Americans and Hispanics are viewed as attractive markets for digital marketing campaigns. Consider that teenage consumers are a primary source of subscribers and revenues for mobile companies yet mobile penetration among teens is stagnating.⁷⁶ Given ethnic minority teens represent the highest teen growth segments, companies are developing ethnically targeted mobile campaigns to teens.⁷⁶ For example, Coca-Cola’s Sprite recently unveiled the “Sprite Yard” program for mobile handsets, to interact with its “mostly African American youth target audience”.⁷⁷

The program allows downloading and picture sharing, supports interacting with others via texting, and allows users to receive company information. The program utilizes the slang conception of a “yard” (a place where everyone hangs out) to characterize a virtual space, emphasizing the notion of a community. More generally, marketers will undoubtedly continue to target foods and beverages to ethnic minority youth, especially where they are heavy consumers of specific products such as soft drinks.⁷⁸ Target marketing to African-American and Hispanic youth influences their consumption choices by affecting the awareness and availability of food-related information and options.⁷⁹ Target marketing of food and beverages may also limit the effectiveness of health promotion initiatives targeted towards ethnic minority youth.¹

Whether or not the described factors render African-American and Hispanic youth “vulnerable” to target marketing is certainly open to debate. Nonetheless, given the significant obesity disparities, potential for harm, and market growth and attractiveness, clearly more research is needed. Specifically, it is imperative that investigations of the extent and nature of firms’ market research and digital marketing activities focused on youth explicitly consider ethnically targeted efforts. Digital marketing platforms offer youth engaging opportunities for their approaches to development and growth including self-expression, identity exploration, and social interaction⁸⁰, factors which are especially important to African-American and Hispanic youth. Such information will enable researchers, policymakers, marketers and youth health advocates develop strategies, guidelines and interventions to ensure that digital technology plays a positive role in the health and well-being of all youth.

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APPENDIX^cTABLE 1: Prevalence of Obesity^d (BMI > 95th Percentile of the CDC Growth Charts) Among US Children by Ethnicity and Gender 2003-2006

	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Mexican-American
Boys			
2 to 5	11.1	13.3	18.8
6 to 11	15.5	18.6	27.5
12 to 19	17.3	18.5	22.1
Girls			
2 to 5	10.2	16.6	14.5
6 to 11	14.4	24	19.7
12 to 19	14.5	27.7	19.9

TABLE 2: Prevalence of Overweight (BMI > 85th Percentile of the CDC Growth Charts) Among US Children by Ethnicity and Gender 2003-2006

	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Mexican-American
Boys			
2 to 5	25.4	23.2	32.4
6 to 11	31.7	33.8	47.1
12 to 19	34.5	32.1	40.5
Girls			
2 to 5	20.9	26.4	27.3
6 to 11	31.5	40.1	38.1
12 to 19	31.7	44.5	37.1

^c Both tables from Ogden, C. L., M. D. Carroll, et al. (2008). "High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003-2006." *JAMA* 299(20): 2401-2405.

^d The definition of obesity is having a body mass index or BM level (which is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by the square of height, in meters) that is at or above an age and sex specific cutoff point (the 95th percentile) on standard curves published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC uses the term "overweight" rather than "obesity" when referring to children who meeting this criterion. CDC uses the 85th percentile of the BMI standard as the definition for being "at risk of overweight" under the assumption that the "at risk" children are those most likely to become overweight (obese) if they have excessive weight gain. The terms "obesity" and "overweight" are used here for simplicity, since these are the terms most Americans recognize.