

Child obesity, advertising and promotions aimed at children – people's views deeply divided

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Child obesity is becoming an issue for discussion around the world, and South Africa is no exception. An additional factor that has recently become controversial is the perceived role that advertising and promotions are felt to play in contributing to child obesity and where fast foods fit in.

In two studies carried out over the last year, TNS Research Surveys, South Africa's leading marketing and social insights company, asked people to give their views on issues around child obesity, advertising and promotions aimed at children and how people feel about fast foods in relation to children. These studies were funded by TNS Research Surveys as part of its continuing series of studies on issues of general social and political interest. Both studies were conducted on samples of 2 000 adults in the major metropolitan areas of South Africa and have a margin of error of less than 2.5%.

First, is child obesity perceived to be a problem?

In a study of 2 000 adults (aged 18 years and over) living in all the metropolitan area of South Africa, conducted at the end of 2006, people who still had their children living at home with them (861 of the 2 000 interviewed) were asked to agree or disagree with the following two statements:

- “At least one of your children weighs too much.”
 - Agree – 22% (blacks 26%, whites 15%, coloureds 18% and Indians/Asians 10%)
 - Disagree – 72%
 - Don't know – 6%
- “At least one of your children weighs too little.”
 - Agree – 19% (blacks 22%, whites 12%, coloureds 19% and Indians/Asians 12%)
 - Disagree – 74%
 - Don't know – 6%

Whilst there are fairly strong differences by race, there are few differences by age of child. Zulu speakers are high at 32% on this statement. However, differences by area are much more marked:

- Gauteng – 26% agree that at least one of their children is overweight.
 - Johannesburg and environs – 29%
 - Johannesburg excluding Soweto – 41% (highest)
 - Soweto – 30%
 - East Rand – 24%
 - West Rand – 9% (lowest with East London)
 - Vaal Triangle and South Rand – 21%
 - Pretoria – 15%
- Cape Town – 16%
- Durban – 18%
- Eastern Cape – 18%

- Port Elizabeth – 23%
- East London – 7% (lowest with West Rand)
- Bloemfontein – 24%

In the second study, carried out in September 2007, 53% of adults surveyed felt that South African children in general are more overweight than they were ten years ago:

- “South African children in general are more overweight than they were ten years ago.”
 - Agree – 53% (blacks 50%, whites 60%, coloureds 48% and Indians/Asians 70%)
 - Disagree – 30%
 - Don't know – 18%

Differences by city are marked with Bloemfontein being the lowest at 15%, followed by the West Rand (38%) and Cape Town (47%). The Vaal Triangle (64%) and the East Rand (60%) are the highest followed by Pretoria (59%) and Durban (58%). There is a clear trend for the level of agreement to rise as income rises – from 38% at the lowest income level to 60% at the top end. However, in general, the metro population is divided on this issue.

Why might this be?

The role of exercise is a contributing factor according to the September 2007 study:

- “Children these days don't play outdoors as much as they used to.”
 - Agree – 69% (blacks 62%, whites 82%, coloureds 73% and Indians/Asians 83%)
 - Disagree – 24%
 - Don't know – 7%

Differences by race are strong. Agreement also rises with age and income levels (from 51% to 80%).

- “Your kids often eat whilst watching TV.”
 - Agree – 73% of those with children (blacks 74%, whites 71%, coloureds 72% and Indians/Asians 73%)
 - Disagree – 21%
 - Don't know – 6%

It is clear that people feel that children's habits are more sedentary than in the past.

The role of the media and of advertising

Three statements pertaining to the media and advertising were posed to people in the 2007 study:

- “Child obesity is being exaggerated by the media.”
 - Agree – 35% (blacks 35%, whites 34%, coloureds 35% and Indians/Asians 28% - no significant demographic differences occur)
 - Disagree – 38%
 - Don't know – 28%
- “Advertising aimed at children is damaging their eating habits.”
 - Agree – 47% (blacks 42%, whites 51%, coloureds 58% and Indians/Asians 63%)
 - Disagree – 38%
 - Don't know – 16%

This view was particularly strongly held by people living in East London (71%) but much less so by those in Bloemfontein and the West Rand (28%) and Soweto (40%). Agreement rises with income from 36% to 57%.

- “Advertising and promotions aimed at children should be regulated.”
 - Agree – 61% (blacks 56%, whites 67%, coloureds 75% and Indians/Asians 69%)
 - Disagree – 24%
 - Don't know – 15%

There are some marked differences by city:

- Gauteng – 61% agree with the regulation of advertising and promotion to children.
 - Johannesburg and environs – 59%
 - Johannesburg excluding Soweto – 59%
 - Soweto – 61%
 - East Rand – 60%
 - West Rand – 41% (lowest with East London)
 - Vaal Triangle and South Rand – 64%
 - Pretoria – 71% (highest with Cape Town)
- Cape Town – 70% (highest with Pretoria)
- Durban – 52%
- Eastern Cape – 62%
 - Port Elizabeth – 59%
 - East London – 69%
- Bloemfontein – 63%

Again, whilst there is a considerable level of agreement on both these issues, there are also a substantial proportion of people who do not feel that these are problem areas or that advertising requires regulation. Agreement rises with income (from 50% to 74%).

And finally, how do people feel about fast food outlets and free gifts for children?

Three statements on this arena were posed to people in the 2007 study:

- “Your kids love getting free gifts from fast food outlets and with other food products.”
 - Agree – 71% of those with children (blacks 69%, whites 73%, coloureds 78% and Indians/Asians 75%)
 - Disagree – 20%
 - Don't know – 9%
- “Free gifts and free toys at fast food outlets should be banned.”
 - Agree – 27% (blacks 26%, whites 29%, coloureds 25% and Indians/Asians 26%)
 - Disagree – 62%
 - Don't know – 11%

These results may be a surprise to many given the relatively high proportion of people who feel that child obesity is a problem and that advertising and promotions aimed at children should be promoted. Differences by city (but not by income) are again evident:

- Gauteng – 27% agree that free gifts and free toys at fast food outlets should be banned.
 - Johannesburg and environs – 30%
 - Johannesburg excluding Soweto – 30%
 - Soweto – 15% (low)
 - East Rand – 33% (high)
 - West Rand – 23%
 - Vaal Triangle and South Rand – 36% (highest)
 - Pretoria – 17% (low)
- Cape Town – 23%
- Durban – 32%
- Eastern Cape – 25%
 - Port Elizabeth – 22%
 - East London – 33% (high)
- Bloemfontein – 3% (lowest)

Finally:

- “Fast food outlets should not have promotions or advertising aimed at children.”
 - Agree – 43% (blacks 38%, whites 51%, coloureds 55% and Indians/Asians 48%)
 - Disagree – 42%
 - Don't know – 14%

Taking these last two results together suggests that some people differentiate between advertising and promotions specifically aimed at children and the free gifts that might come with their food. It seems that advertising and promotions are seen by half of metro dwellers as trying to draw children in, and hence need curtailing, whilst the free gift is seen as a value-added bonus by many. However, we see that views are divided on this and it is clear that fast food outlets and their advertisers tread a very fine line.

Our take-out

Whilst there are many who feel that advertising and promotions to children need curtailing or regulation, there are almost as many who disagree or who do not feel strongly about this issue. Free gifts appear to be generally more acceptable than might have been expected. Whilst people tend to feel that children lead more sedentary lives than in the past, overall, people are divided as to whether child obesity is a problem. However, this is much more of an issue for higher income people who are much more likely to want advertising and promotions to be regulated and marketers should bear this in mind when considering their target markets.

Technical note

Both studies were conducted amongst a sample of 2 000 adults (1260 blacks, 385 whites, 240 coloureds and 115 Indians/Asians) in the seven major metropolitan areas: they have a margin of error of under 2.5% for the results found for the total sample. The studies were conducted by TNS Research Surveys (Pty) Ltd as part of their ongoing research into current social and political issues and were funded by TNS Research Surveys. For more details, please contact Neil Higgs on 011-778-7500 or 082-376-6312.

Website: www.tnsresearchsurveys.co.za.

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