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Cereals and Children: a study of their lifetime relation

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Booklet I

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the evolution of the consumption of cereals, regarding brands and child-parental influence, from childhood into adolescence. We conducted in-depth interviews on a sample of 18 parents of children in one of three age groups: 3-6, 7-11 or 12-18 years old. Findings support children's strong influence in the buying decision process. Parents play a key role by defining consumption patterns or selecting brands that the child is exposed at an early age, in order for them to define their preferences. Results suggest a division of opinions between parents categorizing cereals either as an obstacle or a contributing part of a balanced diet. Additional marketing practices can focus on higher parental involvement and a responsible communication towards children.

Key words: children, parents, influence, cereals

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1. Introduction

According to McNeal (2007), children's market of influence has grown from \$5 billion, in the 1960s, to \$700 billion by 2005, in the U.S. alone. One of the factors behind that growth is children's extensive and systematically increasing exposure to media (Moses and Baldwin, 2005). Children between 8 and 11 years old spend a daily average of 8 hours in front of a screen (WNCN, 2013)¹. Also, marketing efforts towards younger audiences have been progressive, massive and increasingly elaborate (McNeal, 1999; Hill and Tilley, 2002; Caruana and Vassallo, 2003; Wang et al., 2007).

Children have significantly gained influence relatively to food choice (Nørgaard et al., 2007), which attracted the attention of marketers. In Portugal, food is the number one industry on total advertising expenditure², while in the US food ads account for over half of all advertising targeting children (Story and French, 2004).

Most of today's public debate relatively to children is focused on obesity. This global epidemic is "the No. 1 health concern among parents in the United States"³. One out of every three Portuguese children is overweight or obese⁴. Strong associations have been found between increases in advertising for non-nutritious products and rates of childhood obesity⁵. Thus, public opinion has turned towards a growing criticism of advertising, with many articles outspoken and vehemently calling for a ban on ads to young children

¹ <http://www.wncn.com/story/23824012/children-are-overexposed-to-media-study-finds> [accessed on 17 December 2013]

² <http://www.marktest.com/wap/a/n/id~735.aspx> [accessed on 16 September 2013]

³ http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/Overweight-in-Children_UCM_304054_Article.jsp [accessed on 18 September 2013]

⁴ <http://www.apcoi.pt/obesidade-infantil/> [accessed on 18 September 2013]

⁵ <http://www.apa.org/topics/kids-media/food.aspx> [accessed on 20 September 2013]

(Spungin, 2004; The Guardian, 2013⁶). Several countries have already placed restrictions on advertising (UK, Greece, Denmark and Belgium) or have even deemed it illegal under the age of 12 (Quebec, Sweden and Norway)⁷. Thus, while markets for children have become more and more attractive for companies to invest in, the growing criticism of the role those very same companies play in society poses a severe threat to their public image. Companies must operate both profitably and in a socially responsible way, in order to balance this difficult trade-off.

Breakfast cereals were chosen for the research since this category is the most frequent in parent-child interactions as consumers and it is one of the most requested by children (Atkin, 1978; Marshall, 2007). It was relevant as well that this category contains both healthy and unhealthy products. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not companies can undertake successful marketing practices that allow for a higher parental involvement and a more conscientious communication with children.

2. Literature Review

Breakfast cereals importance in the food industry and Consumption Patterns

Breakfast cereals are present in almost 60% of Portuguese households⁸ and have a 90% market penetration in the UK (Hill and Tilley, 2002). This product is very popular among children in the USA, Canada, UK, Spain and Croatia (Rampersaud et al., 2005). Consuming breakfast cereals leads to improved overall nutrition and lower risk of

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/11/ban-advertising-young-children-yes> [accessed on 20 September 2013]

⁷ <http://www.indiafoodbrief.com/from-the-editors-desk/126395-inclusion-of-children-in-tv-commercials-is-not-posing-a-good-picture> [accessed on 5 October 2013]

⁸ <http://www.marktest.com/wap/a/n/id~489.aspx> [accessed on 16 September 2013]

overweight, although the relation with body weight has been less well established (Rampersaud et al., 2005). Yet, controversy has been raised over the high levels of sugar contained in a lot of breakfast cereals available in the market (Daily Mail, 2012)⁹. Compared with cereals marketed to adults, cereals targeting children tend to have higher levels of energy and sugar (Schwartz et al., 2008). In the US, pre-sugared breakfast cereals are among the most commonly marketed food products to children (Cairns et al., 2013).

Croker et al. (2009) found that the sampled mothers had little understanding or concern over age-appropriate portions for children. Studies suggest that pre-school children eat breakfast cereals more than once a day (Sepp et al., 2002). Moreover, research supports that past consumption of breakfast cereals strongly reinforces willingness to consume the same product in the future (Thunström, 2009). Taste is the most important product attribute for children in the choice of breakfast cereals (Bergström et al., 2012). Convenience is another important motivation to buy cereals, in the sense that it represents a meal that is easy to prepare (Robinson, 2000).

Cereal Brands – Manufacturer Brands and Private Labels

The majority of novelties in breakfast cereals in the US results in failures and is removed from the market within 5 or less years (Connor, 1999). Private labels, i.e. goods owned and merchandised by retailers, have thrived in markets across the globe. Manufacturers may have reason for concern due to consumer's confusion at the moment of choice (Sloan, 2012). However, studies have failed to provide empirical support to this claim (Burt, 2000). Balabanis and Craven (1997) concluded that no consumer purchased

⁹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2107361/Sugary-breakfast-cereals-1-Britains-leading-consumer-experts-reveals-shocking-truth.html> [accessed on 23 September 2013]

the wrong item due to resemblance between manufacturer brand and private label. Considering changes in preferences, switching costs for cereals are strongly related to the number of decision makers, involving at least children and their parents (Kwon et al., 2008). There is an evident lack of studies on both brand image and brand preference in this category.

Children's Influence and Influences on the Child

In the last 40 years, research has been dedicated to studying **children's influence** in the buying decision process. The majority of the vast research pool has focused on identifying and assessing variables that affect that influence. The older the child the more influence he or she will exert (Atkin, 1978; Mangleburg, 1990; Moschis and Mitchell 1986; Ogden and Ogden, 2011; Ward and Wackman, 1972). While the number of requests decreases with the child's age (Isler et al., 1987; Ebster et al., 2009), parental yielding increases with it (Laczniak and Palan, 2004). Breakfast cereals is one of the categories with the highest levels of parental yielding (Isler et al., 1987).

John (1999), in a retrospective analysis that encompassed several stage theories of social and cognitive development, such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development, supported and further developed the idea of consumer socialization. The conceptual framework entailed the division of childhood in three distinct stages, including children's purchase influence and negotiation strategies, among other topics. In the perceptual stage (3-7 years old), pre-school children exert their influence in a very straightforward way. Already in the analytical stage (ages 7-11), throughout elementary school, children have enhanced abilities of observation from more than their own point of view. Moreover, they start to participate more actively in the purchase decision-making process, using the

knowledge and experience acquired in discussions with their parents about whether or not certain requests could be granted (Palan and Wilkes, 1997). By the time they reach adolescence, children already possess a complex set of influence strategies (Palan and Wilkes, 1997).

Studies of gender as a determining factor of children's influence have not reached an overall consensus and conclude that the child's sex is not a differentiating variable or indicate one of the genders as being the one who influences the most¹⁰ (Moschis and Mitchell, 1986; Shoham and Dalakas, 2006; Wang et al., 2007; Flurry, 2007). With respect to social class, on the basis of parent's educational level, there is no consensus as well (Flurry, 2007; Jenkins, 1979; Shoham and Dalakas, 2006).

Parents play a key role as models and **influencers of children's** consumption behaviour (Isler et al., 1987; McNeal, 1992; Ward and Wackman, 1972; Caruana and Vassallo, 2003). Past studies support the tendency of parents to immediately fulfill their children's needs and wants (Isler et al., 1987; McNeal, 1992; Ward and Wackman, 1972). On the contrary, Spungin (2004) found that parents take into account nutritional value and cost as criteria in evaluating their infant's request. Furthermore, parents have claimed to deny their child's request for unhealthy food (Ogba and Johnson, 2010). Likewise, O'Dougherty et al. (2006) observed that more than half of the parents rejected the child's request for food products, including breakfast cereals. Robinson (2000) concluded that parents of 9-year olds had a high control over quantities in a research that included cereals as one of the categories analyzed. Accordingly, Marshall et al. (2007) concluded that parents imposed more limits on food consumption that took place at home.

¹⁰ There are studies supporting both views of females or males as the more influential

Advertising also affects children's influence, implying a higher number of requests (Arnas, 2006). Nevertheless, research indicates that results pertaining to ad effectiveness that are based solely on self-reports can be misleading (Vavreck, 2007). Roberts (2005) found that premium offers, licensed characters and fun product designs were among the most common techniques used to sell unhealthy food. Atkin (1978) discovered that premium offers influenced the choice of cereals in almost 50% of the children sampled. Other influencing factors rise in terms of importance, particularly in adolescence, when rapid changes in eating habits coincide with a shift of influence from the at-home environment to the peer-related environment (Wouters et al., 2010; Von Post-Skagegard et al., 2002). Children start to recognize that peers are important influencers in public consumption but not for items consumed privately (Bachmann et al., 1993). Schools are a relevant source of influence as well, with the continuously increasing commercial involvement as a consequence of schools' search for partnerships that provide support to their teaching and learning initiatives (Doster and Tyrrell, 2011). As children move into adolescence, the introduction of more unhealthy eating habits is notorious, due to several factors including school and peers (Wouters et al., 2010).

Eating Habits and Health Perceptions

A strong psychological barrier emerges in children around 2 years of age, called neophobia (Cooke, 2007), which is defined as "the rejection of foods that are novel or unknown to the child" (Dovey et al., 2008: 182). Research has found that children with high levels of neophobia have less varied diets (Falciglia et al., 2000). To overcome this rejection, children should experience food as early and broadly as possible (Cooke, 2007).

With respect to parents' perceptions, stronger beliefs about nutritional claims of

breakfast cereals lead to a greater willingness to purchase (Harris et al., 2011). Curiously, parents may place greater weight on healthiness when choosing for themselves than when choosing products for their children, since the parental desire for a healthy lifestyle is overcome by concessions made on unhealthy snacks (Levin and Levin, 2010). Lastly, Cornish (2012) underlined how many consumers use health-value ingredients contained in overall unhealthy foods as a justification to satisfy their hedonic consumption, instead of choosing unhealthy snacks which lack nutrients.

Research Gaps

Despite the vast literature on this field, there are still remaining gaps in research. Few studies of purchase influence have focused on a single product category and the ones that did so have strictly analyzed current consumption, thereby neglecting the evolution of consumption. Additionally, past research has taken a quantitative approach, selecting and testing specific variables without attempting to uncover other relevant factors. Lastly, parent's role has been analyzed mainly through levels of parental yielding only. Thereby, tactics of parental influence have been neglected, especially for categories where children have a very strong influence. Our study aims at diminishing those gaps by analyzing the evolution of cereals consumption throughout childhood and teenage years, accounting for all aspects that influence the child in brand/product choice, with a special attention to the influence of parents. Given the exploratory nature of this research, no hypothesis will be formulated. Instead, this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions¹¹:

RQ1. How does children's consumption of breakfast cereals evolve until adulthood?

RQ2. Which brands are chosen and what are the perceptions on these brands?

¹¹ The answers to these research questions, based on this study's findings, are summarized in Appendix 2

RQ3. What are the motivations behind children/parents choices of breakfast cereals?

RQ4. What is the perceived influence of children on the purchase of breakfast cereals?

RQ5. What is the perceived influence of parents on the purchase of breakfast cereals?

RQ6. What is the perceived healthiness of breakfast cereals, according to parents?

RQ7. Does age, gender or social class affect child-parental influence in purchases of breakfast cereals?

3. Methodology

All ethical issues were taken into account based on UNICEF's guidelines for children participating in research (UNICEF, 2002). The study was conducted in the fall of 2013, considering the following items:

Design

A Qualitative Research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews was the design deemed the most appropriate for data collection in this study. A qualitative approach is best employed when the relevant information is measured with difficulty and the researcher is looking for a rich understanding of the underlying reasons and motivations (Malhotra, 2010). To avoid the possible bias caused by impression management with information collected in groups, research was performed on an individual basis, hence the decision to conduct semi-structured interviews. All these advantages are aligned with the objectives and nature of our research.

Sample

The population under study was composed of Portuguese parents, living in the

Lisbon's metropolitan area with a child in one of three different age groups: children between 3 and 6 years old¹², children between 7 and 11 years old and adolescents (12-18 years old). The age division was based on the aforementioned literature on children's influence in relation to the evolution of consumer socialization. Only parents were chosen for the research due to several reasons. Firstly, parents have been considered to be in a better position to assess children's influence (Moschis and Mitchell, 1986). Although this has been challenged by several studies, multiple reasons may explain why the conclusion on those studies cannot be unequivocally applicable in Portugal, such as the different cultural backgrounds between countries (Wang et al., 2007; Shoham and Dalakas, 2005). Alternatively, children may believe they influenced a purchase for a product that the parent had already decided on beforehand (Ebster et al., 2009). In addition, parents' unwillingness to acknowledge their children's influence might be due to the social desirability effect (Flurry and Burns, 2005). As such, it has not been empirically established who is in a better position to assess children's influence. A second motive to interview only parents in certain research designs is children's cognitive limitations (McNeal, 1999; Caruana and Vassallo, 2003; Ezan and Lagier, 2009). In an interview with a Primary School Teacher, she convincingly stated, with respect to an unstructured interview, "I do not believe children of 7 or 8 could do an interview of that kind." Thirdly, adolescents tend to be difficult subjects for research, not because of cognitive limitations but rather due to difficulties in motivating and engaging them in the research process. Fourthly, a Marketing Research expert, consulted in order to help on this aspect and after proper contextualization of the study's

¹² Cereals are introduced by the age of 3 years old and therefore children younger than 3 were out of the scope of this research

considerations, advised to always use the same measurement unit. She explained that the answers of a child could not be compared with the answers of the parent of another child. Researching parents for each of the three age groups of children allows for an unbiased comparison of results, in the sense that the study is always based on the same unit of measure, i.e. the child's parent. Lastly, given that breakfast cereals consumption takes place at home, parents were deemed to provide adequate testimonials on the subject of research.¹³ A pre-test was performed in order to reduce bias and confirm the alignment between the responses of parents and their children so that we could be sure that assessing only parents would guarantee that truthful information was gathered. Following this step, a random sample of 18 Portuguese parents, 16 mothers and 2 fathers, was interviewed. The sample was equally divided by the three groups based on their child's age (3-6 years old, 7-11 and 12-18).

Pre-test and Exploratory Interviews with Experts

Prior to the interviews, informal interviews with experts were conducted to improve key aspects of the research. A nutrition expert was consulted, in order for the researcher to gain a deeper knowledge of the breakfast cereals' market, which in turn enhances the abilities to analyze qualitative data pertaining to that category. A Marketing Research expert was consulted to inspect the interview guide for problems or ambiguities in its design, subsequently validating it. The researcher gathered as much insight as possible on the best techniques to conduct an in-depth interview and later analyzing the respective results. A pre-test was conducted in a sample of 12 respondents, with 6 interviews of dyads

¹³ Moreover, this paper was written under the guidelines of the Nestlé/NOVA Best Paper Award; given Nestlé's commitment through the EU pledge, children under 6 years of age could not be directly researched

(all mother-son) to verify if parents could present a reliable testimony of their child's influence and also to test the interview guide. That premise was confirmed in the pre-test. A new subject arose and was included in the interview guide, after most parents referred to a description of their child as a consumer, relating personality traits with consumption habits, something that had not been anticipated.

Procedure

The interviewees were approached through their children's schools, since that channel provides a larger audience to target. In addition, it was assumed that parents would more likely reply positively to an interview request involving the school (Turner et al., 2006). A brief pre-recruiting questionnaire was necessary, determining only if breakfast cereals were purchased for the children in the household. In the case of parents with more than one child, parents were asked to focus their responses on a single child during the whole interview (Shim et al., 1995). To assist the parent in that task, the demographic information pertaining to the relevant child was asked in the beginning of the interview. Given the underlying motivation to minimize the social desirability effect and reduce method bias, the incorporation of certain techniques was necessary. Accordingly, assurance of anonymity and emphasis on the subjectivity and acceptability of all answers were critical to ensure a higher degree of respondent's honesty (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the possibility remained of respondents providing answers that conveyed an idealized version of their parental role. The ideal setting for the interviews would have been the respondent's home, in that it assures equivalence of physical context and a strong incentive for informant openness (Polsa, 2007). Thereby, when the parent was in agreement, the interview was conducted in their homes, which was only possible with 3 of the 18

interviews. Otherwise, an appropriate public location was determined to guarantee that the interview took place uninterrupted and in a proper environment. Likewise, we obtained authorization from all the respondents to record the interview in order to facilitate afterwards the researcher's collection of information.

The in-depth interview was composed of four sections. After a short warm-up, parents were asked to describe the last time they went shopping for breakfast cereals for their child. Subsequently, in an unstructured format, the interviewer attempted to probe for elaboration on the respondent's answers. Consumption patterns, Buying drivers and Usage & Attitudes were the three main topics considered and analyzed during the interview. When an interesting subject came up, the respondent was further probed about it. In the end of the interview, the researcher clarified what the interviewee would decide in a hypothetical situation where the usual choice of cereals was unavailable. Afterwards, the origin of consumption was determined, if not previously indicated. Then, the interviewer tapped on the interest of the respondent in a hypothetical event, with the main goal of assessing how informed parents are on this category and how interested they would be in becoming more involved. The event would promote healthier lifestyles for children, based on a partnership between a leader of the cereals market and a popular magazine for parenthood (Pais & filhos¹⁴). Lastly, demographic information would be recorded to define a respondent profile, including age, gender and social class.¹⁵ The data collected was then analyzed through topic and content analysis, the common practice for in-depth interviews.

¹⁴ <http://www.paisefilhos.pt/> - This periodic publication contains articles and illustrations that present parents with a variety of information and tools to help them educate and foster a balanced lifestyle for their children.

¹⁵ The complete structure of the interview guide is in Appendix 1.

4. Findings

Consumption patterns

Respondents displayed some concern over not knowing the adequate portion sizes for their kids' cereal meals. Parents highlighted how convenient cereals are as a fast meal especially in the morning. Most interviewees confirmed not only breakfast as the usual time of consumption but the afternoon as well, albeit with less frequency.

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "We use this kind of cereals because it's fast, very fast for them. They get up really early."

The sample was clearly divided between regular consumption and consumption as a snack or regularly alternated with other foods. The majority of the parents said they also eat cereals, preferring those with lower sugar levels. Children were mentioned as taste oriented, with chocolate and honey standing out as the popular flavors. Home was the most common location of consumption, followed by school, which was a lot more mentioned, in comparison with the pre-test sample. This may be linked with the fact that the pre-test was done concerning adolescent children and the consumption at school happens mostly with younger children.

Buying drivers

Price was a relevant criterion in most interviews, while not frequently identified as crucial. For most parents, private labels are significantly cheaper than brands.

Mother of a 18 year old boy - "I buy those cereals from private labels because those are very cheap."

Promotion was widely more frequent and predominant than Advertisement. A wide array of promotion tactics was mentioned, such as the appeal of the packaging and premium offers.

Father of a 5 year old boy - "Premium offers have a completely ephemeral effect, only at the moment

of purchase because afterwards the object ends up being completely forgotten."

On the aspect of brand image, the focus was divided between corporate brands and commercial brands, depending on the interview. Several parents found no relevant difference in quality between private labels and manufacturer brands.

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "I do not feel a difference that justifies the higher price in most cases."

Estrelitas, Chocapic and Corn Flakes were the preferred brands. Most interviewees used the Chocapic brand name to define the type of cereal even when referring to the private label and not the registered brand.

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "Chocolate, that Chocapic kind, not exactly the brand but the same type."

Half of the interviewees across all age groups stated a strong influence from their children, either by a request or direct choice at the point-of-sale. Even in the cases of limited influence, the child still reminded parent of the need for replenishment or attempted to increase quantities consumed.

Father of a 5 year old boy - "Depends on the budget and the shopping list we have but they usually choose and choose what they like."

Mother of a 4 year old girl - "She is the one that asks. In fact we go to the supermarket and she says 'Oh mother, don't forget my cereals'."

Over half of the sampled parents claimed they often or always yielded to their children's choices of cereals. One of the reasons not to yield was the perception that the child later would not like the choice they were making at the point-of-sale. Half of the respondents stated that the focus of their parental influence was not on the purchase decision but instead on their children's consumption habits. On the one hand, parents attempt to convince children to eat only a certain amount of cereals, inferring that children would consume a lot more if allowed to choose freely. On the other hand, parents try to convince their kids to

mix those cereals with others that they perceive to have low sugar levels. A small part of the sample, mostly parents of younger children, claimed a strong influence over the purchasing decision, through the persuasion towards private labels or simply towards a new brand, as an incentive to create variety.

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "We are very permissive in the choice of that kind of cereals, but then there are rules for the number of times they can eat them."

Father of a 5 year old boy - "It works with us trying new things and asking them if they want to try it too."

Mother of a 16 year old girl - "When she was younger she liked the cereals with more sugar, which I fought, suggesting alternatives, sometimes ones sometimes the others."

Besides parents and children, the three other most mentioned influencing factors were school, peers and relatives outside the household. The opinions of experts, namely nutritionists, were mentioned in only two interviews but in both cases had a critical impact causing a minimization of the consumption of cereals. All but one of the mentions of school as an influencing factor were found in the 3-6 age group. Peers were mentioned mainly in the 7-11 age group, with no such reference among parents of teenagers.

Mother of a 4 year old girl - "I think it was in school, initially, Estrelitas and Chocapic for sure, because even before I gave them they already ate those."

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "They are very much influenced by their peers, more than by television."

Usage & Attitudes

More than half of the respondents highlighted eating cereals by hand, as a snack, in addition to the consumption complemented with milk.

Mother of a 14 year old girl - "Sometimes without milk, they eat directly from the packaging as if cereals were peanuts or put them in a box and eat them like an appetizer."

The results were polarized between parents stating that cereals have too much sugar and parents stating that cereals represent a balanced and complete meal at breakfast or in the afternoon. Most parents that focus their influence in the control over quantities do it because of their concern over the sugar intake, since they are among those that believe cereals have an excessive amount of sugar. In the 12-18 age group, most parents claimed that their children had shifted to healthier cereals around their 12-14 years old and stated that they were still satisfied with that choice. Several parents claimed that the negative effects cereals had in their children's health were significantly mitigated by the fact that such product was replacing even worse foods, namely chocolates, candy or any other choices with higher sugar levels. Also, some parents referred cereals as a way to tackle their child's distaste for milk, since the child is willing to consume it with cereals.

Father of a 5 year old boy - "All that pertains to basic needs in terms of food, that helps their balance and is not harmful to their health I think they are goods of a first necessity and cereals are included there, right? As we all know."

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "It is sort of a special treat, mainly because of the crazy doses of sugar that that has. Those cereals have a lot of sugar."

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "Especially in my oldest daughter, it is a way to work around the fact that she does not like milk and does not want to consume a lot of it."

Bread was the preferred alternative to cereals. In the 12-18 age group there were no mentions of a healthy diet and some parents explicitly pointed out several unhealthy habits of their children. At home, those habits were associated to eating too much and outside the usual meals, while the location of the frequent consumption of junk food was left unspecified.

Mother of a 15 year old boy - "He does not have a fantastic diet because he is at that age when they eat

a lot of junk."

On several interviews, parents first defined a healthy diet for a child, only to contradict that idea later when they were subsequently asked to describe their child's actual eating habits. The only frequent reference parents made to a characteristic of their kids as consumers, including in the category of cereals, was "neophobia".

Father of a 5 year old boy - "My children are very...do not vary a lot the things they like."

What if the usual brand(s) was not available?

Responses were highly diverse. The most named options were not buying at all, letting the child choose directly and looking for the closest private label product.

Where and how did the consumption of the favorite brand(s) begin?

Parents are the primary source in over half the interviews. The strategy for most was to introduce a wide variety of cereals until children had developed their preferences. Other sources included school, peers and relatives, as well as children themselves. In this last case, the parents did not know how children became aware of the respective cereals. Moreover, school took predominance over parents in the 3-6 age group.

Proposal of an event promoted by a brand

This question pertained to a hypothetical event that was described in order to subsequently assess the degree of interest of the respondent. The event was based on a partnership between a well-known brand of breakfast cereals and the magazine Pais & filhos, with the purpose of promoting healthier lifestyles to families in general but especially to children. More than half of the respondents said not to be interested in attending such an event, either claiming to be already well informed or remaining skeptical towards company's intentions. Still, a considerable number of people were very interested

especially in what are the proper quantities for children in different ages, details about the production process and sugar or salt levels in cereals. The most suggested activities were the distribution of samples and a peddy paper. Parents suggested samples so that their child could try out new cereals while avoiding wasting money and cereals since, when their child does not like the product they buy, the entire packaging must be thrown in the garbage. Most of them underlined how important it would be to have activities to occupy and entertain kids so that parents could watch the event without concern for their child.

Father of a 17 year old boy - "What often happens is that companies only intend to promote a brand or product when in fact things then turn out to be something different than what they appeared to be."

Father of a 5 year old boy - "I think that would only help, especially associated with an experienced brand and a very good magazine in terms of information to parents, those would be two very interesting entities so we could go with trust."

Mother of a 9 year old girl - "If the event was something where they [children] had a set of activities, properly supervised, in a restrict space where they were entertained and I could calmly be watching the conferences."

5. Discussion and Implications

Before discussing our findings, some limitations that can be useful to guide future research should be underlined. Our study was based on Portuguese parents which raises the issue of generalizability of results pertaining to the breakfast cereals category in other countries. Secondly, most respondents were female. Future research is necessary containing a more balanced sample in terms of parent's gender composition. Lastly, despite several preventive measures undertaken to tackle the social desirability effect, it may still have been present on some of the results.

Given the predominance of quantitative studies and the lack of research on parental influence for categories targeted to children this study offers valuable insights. The aim of our research was to determine the possibility of marketing practices that would imply a greater involvement from parents and a more conscientious communication with children, without jeopardizing companies' profitability.

The consumption patterns described in our sample support the existing literature and add several tendencies such as the use of breakfast cereals strictly as a snack, not intended for regular consumption.

Among the relevant buying drivers, price was revealed to be a significant factor in the purchase decision, but rarely the most important. That is most likely due to the low-involvement nature of this product category. Promotion was described with a much more determining role than Advertisement. This might be explained by the fact that interviews were made to parents, who tend to focus in more practical, tangible aspects of a product that is not targeted directly to them. Also, they are typically not the focus of ads for breakfast cereals. Similar to Robert's (2005) findings, premium offers, licensed characters and fun product designs were mentioned by parents sampled as the most effective Promotion tactics. The results support the critical influence of Promotion in the willingness to purchase which could be explored by companies through premium offers of an informational nature. Given parents' difficulties to know the appropriate amount of cereals by age and taking into account parental control over children's quantities intake (explained further on), we believe companies should consider a promotion offering a cup. This premium, containing the proper quantities, which vary according to the respective product composition, could not only boost sales but additionally assist parents in overseeing their

children's consumption.

Regarding brand image, our results support the tendency of the rising power of private labels in the market of breakfast cereals. Estrelitas, Chocapic and Corn Flakes were in this sample the most preferred brands. However, Chocapic seems to present some consumer confusion with private labels since parents use the brand name to define the type of cereal whether or not they buy the manufacturer brand.

Children seem to have a substantial influence in the purchase making decision which is consistent with previous literature. Only a small fraction of the sample claimed a strong influence over the purchasing decision, suggesting that most parents are aware of how limited their clout is in the choice of cereals for their children. Parental yielding was high for most of the sampled parents, reinforcing the underlying idea that child influence for cereals is very strong. Parent's positive perceptions towards the product category may have been a major contributing factor and no relevant variations were found between the three age groups. In the cases where parents claimed not to yield, one of the motivations was the belief that the child would later reject that cereal at the moment of trial. In fact, parents referred to be worried about wasting money buying a pack of cereals that could go to the trash bin. Therefore, to introduce new flavors, or new types of cereals, we recommend companies to offer samples at the points-of-sale, or to create bundles of the most sold cereals with a small pack of new cereals, for children to try it.

Based on the interviews, parental influence seems to be stronger on the consumption habits, rather than on the buying decision process. This is due to the child's strong will and also based on parent's perceptions that there are small differences between most cereals. Thus, parental focus has shifted to a higher control over consumption patterns.

Alternatively to minimizing quantities, parents incentive their kids to mix cereals with significantly different sugar levels. Companies could build on that incentive, bundling two packages, one with the typical cereals and the other with much healthier ones. This initiative should be supported by PR activities targeting parents, explaining that this would be a way for their kid to try a healthier cereal with a higher chance of acceptance. Taking into consideration the aforementioned waste avoidance situation for parents, the package of the healthier option could be a smaller sample bundled with the less healthy cereal.

The persuasion towards another choice was the most frequent tactic used by parents with high influence in the purchase decision, especially in the 3-6 age group. This may indicate that parents try to define these habits when children's preferences for cereals have not yet been strongly established.

Results strongly support the idea that school plays a pivotal role in the first years of the consumer life cycle, losing importance as kids grow older. Companies could and should use schools more as a vehicle to introduce their cereals to children, especially in the 3-6 age group. Engaging schools would increase the likelihood of those brands remaining in the consumer life cycle. Indeed, brands accepted by the child at an early age seem to remain in the consumer's set of choices. This is aligned with past studies that have found the same link (Cooke, 2007). Schools choose from the set of leading brands when introducing cereals to children (Estrelitas and Chocapic, which, according to the nutrition expert consulted, have high amounts of sugar) instead of opting for a healthier alternative. Thus, companies could rethink the kind of brands that are introduced in schools. Given parental concerns over unhealthy products, cereals with lower sugar levels could be introduced through schools, as an incentive for children to acquire healthier eating habits at an early age.

Peer influence in this product category seems to be lower in adolescents as it is in other categories such as fashion related products, since cereals are often consumed privately. This finding is in accordance with the conclusions from Bachmann et al. (1993).

According to parents' perceptions, the market seems to be characterized by the opposing ideas of breakfast cereals representing either a danger to consumer's health or a contributing part of a healthy diet. Results suggest a correlation between the perception that cereals are not healthy and the tactics to control quantities. Believing cereals have high sugar levels, parents act as gatekeepers to limit that consumption. As such, parental influence is strongest and at least in some cases only triggered by the perception that the child would be endangering its health if given complete freedom of choice in terms of consumption habits as well as brands.

Based on our sample, most consumers shift to healthier cereals when they reach adolescence and remain satisfied with that choice. In the 12-18 age group, only unhealthy diets were mentioned, contrary to what happened in the other age groups. It is very interesting to contrast these two findings. This might indicate a lower parental control over kids' diets besides cereals, both in-home and out-of home, including the introduction of junk food. Additionally, given that peer pressure begins to increase in out-of-home consumption, adolescents may opt for more unhealthy food with friends and choose healthier alternatives at home, such as cereals, as an attempt to compensate. The description of children's eating behaviors may have been biased due to the effect of social desirability.

Concerning the hypothetical situation of not finding the usual choice of cereals at the point-of-sale, findings suggest parents are aware of their children's brand preferences and also keep in mind that if kids do not like they will not eat and the product will be wasted.

Furthermore, those answers strongly support the previous suggestions of a very high child influence and power of private labels.

Regarding the origin of consumption, parents play a pivotal role in their children's life cycle for breakfast cereals. However, their choice often appeared not to be a well-informed one. The strategy explained in most interviews was to introduce a wide variety of cereals (mostly the leader brands) until children had developed their preferences, rather than select and introduce a specific brand. These considerations strongly support that parents keep a highly significant influence throughout the consumer life cycle, less related with brand choice and more focused on providing assistance in defining brand preferences in the initial period, and practicing control over consumption patterns in the subsequent years. School's predominance over parents in the 3-6 age group suggests the exact same role previously highlighted.

On the hypothetical event, our findings suggest that a partnership with a renowned and credible entity may not be enough to reduce the perception of a pervasive intent in companies' actions. Such an event should focus on advice, information, support and entertainment for families to be able to attend with their respective children. A multitude of merchandising items could also be distributed, such as the informational cereal bowl, previously mentioned. Marketing communications would only be beneficial to the event as long as they were aligned with its purpose.

Concerning the demographic information, no differences were found in terms of the child's gender or the respondent's social class. Our study suggests that companies should improve parental perceptions on this product category. By creating an emotional connection with the consumer and buyer – rarely the same in the context of this study - companies

could communicate an image of corporate social responsibility and provide a reassurance to parents that the product is aligned with the child's best interests. As such, parental influence against any of such cereals would be minimized, which in turn could convince parents to let kids choose freely and even support those brands.

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