

# DELETERIOUS CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION: THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON CHILDREN'S FOOD WELL-BEING

**Andres Veloso**

University of Sao Paulo

**Rodolfo Rocha**

University of Sao Paulo

**Roberto Falcao**

UNIALFA

**Daniel Chaim**

University of Sao Paulo

Acknowledgements:

We thank CNPq for funding this research.

Cite as:

Veloso Andres, Rocha Rodolfo, Falcao Roberto, Chaim Daniel (2021), DELETERIOUS CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION: THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON CHILDREN'S FOOD WELL-BEING. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 50th, (94595)

Paper from the 50th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, May 25-28, 2021



# **DELETERIOUS CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION: THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON CHILDREN'S FOOD WELL-BEING**

## **Abstract**

The negative influence of the environment on children has been studied in some extreme contexts. Our research contemplates food, a less shocking context, but which influences the formation of children's eating habits and preferences, affecting their well-being for life. We focused on understanding how deleterious food socialization influences children's well-being within the school environment. We define deleterious food socialization as situations or environments in which the consumer socialization process negatively impacts one's well-being. The data collection (structured questionnaires with open and closed questions) took place in two private schools, and we collected 388 questionnaires from students between 10 and 14 years old. When comparing data on what children eat at school and what they usually eat at home, we found that the school environment tends to be more harmful to infant feeding than the domestic one. We call this phenomenon "deleterious consumer socialization."

**Keywords:** *Well-Being. Socialization. Children.*

**Track:** *Transformative Consumer Research.*

## 1. 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 above depicts the reality of an 11-year-old boy who is a victim of deleterious consumer socialization, that is, situations or environments in which the consumer socialization process negatively influences well-being. Our study focuses on understanding how deleterious food socialization 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). Thus, we will conduct this discussion from the perspective of children's food well-being.

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 environment also has teachers and other authority figures influencing the socialization process (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Finally, the school's importance as an agent of food socialization is further reinforced by 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' recommendations *al.* (2019) on relevance. Also, we seek to broaden the perspective of food well-being, as suggested by Scott and Vallen (2019), contributing to the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Consumer socialization

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 those roles when relating with socialization agents, such as family, school, media, peers, and even marketing professionals (Moschis & Churchill Jr., 1978; McNeal, 1987). 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).

### 2.2 Food well-being

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 perspective of health to a more broad 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.

### 2.3 Food socialization

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 (Harris *et al.*, 2009). 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).

#### *2.4 Children's eating behavior*

Children's obesity is an individual problem and 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). They receive strong influence from teachers, colleagues, and, specifically regarding food consumption, from the canteen (Block *et al.*, 2011; Rocha *et al.*, 2017).

### **3. Method**

To identify deleterious food socialization 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 as afternoon snacks (meals similar to the snack they make at school). We developed structured questionnaires with open and closed questions. We asked children and adolescents to report their eating habits, both at school and at home. Our questionnaire also included a blank frame that children could use to freely express themselves by writing or drawings (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. The schools involved 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 of each school that were responsible for collecting 388 useful questionnaires from students between 10 and 14 years old (average of 12.4)

To code the innumerable food types listed by children and adolescents, we used the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population published by the Ministry of Health (Brazil, 2014). The Guide divides food into four categories according to their processing: 1. Natural (whole)

foods or minimally processed; 2. Oils, fats, salt, and sugar; 3. Processed; 4. Ultra-processed. The Guide suggests that meals should be based on natural (whole) or minimally processed foods, while the consumption of processed foods should be limited to small amounts in culinary preparations based on fresh or minimally processed foods, the consumption of ultra-processed foods 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 agreement. Some responses (e.g., bread, cake, and juice) hindered our coding capacity since they were generic and did not allow us to categorize clearly.

## **4. Data Analysis and Discussion**

### *4.1 School environment*

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 originated from home are mostly classified as more healthy, foods from the school environment (bought at the canteen or traded with peers) are mostly unhealthy (e.g., ultra-processed). Although the proportion of ultra-processed items brought from home is still far from that recommended by the Guide, the numbers indicate that the school environment is more harmful to children's eating habits and behaviors.

When comparing the type of food that originated within the school environment (bought versus traded), we encountered no statistically significant differences ( $X^2(3, N = 552) = 5.8, p = .1224$ ). Interestingly, when comparing food originated from home versus originated from the school (bought and traded), we encountered statistically significant differences ( $X^2(3, N = 883) = 38.9, p < .001$ ). We argue that 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 and oppose the Food Guide's recommendations for the Brazilian Population (Brazil, 2014).

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 strong influence on the construction of eating habits and behaviors. While households are sending more healthy snacks and beverages with children to school, they are faced with a deleterious consumer socialization influence 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. This is a classic example of the social factors discussed in the context of food well-being (Bublitz *et al.*, 2011).

#### *4.2 Home context*

To assess children and adolescents' food context at home, we classified the foods and drinks they indicated to consume at home in their afternoon snacks. As it represents a similar meal to the snack time at school, this allowed us to compare school and home environments. For the "school" group, we combined food purchased in the canteen and those traded with colleagues during recess, for the "home" group combined 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 deleterious consumer socialization. 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 origin are 56%, and those with school origin are 86%.

The independence test statistically supported the difference between the *"home" and "school" food groups* ( $X^2(3, N = 2015) = 172.7, p < .001$ ). This analysis reinforces the existence of deleterious consumer socialization in the infant food context. Thus, even if they do not completely 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.

## **5. Conclusions**

Based on our results, we cannot be surprised that one-third of Brazilian children are overweight (Brasil, 2014). Children's food habits are mostly 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 that send their children to school with healthy snacks, there is still the possibility of deleterious socialization practices happening. 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 more healthy foods. Policymakers could act on the food availability factor, putting limits on the type of food sold within school grounds. 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 in the school. Thus, parents and schools must work together to improve infant feeding to reduce all problems resulting from inadequate feeding. Following Davis *et al.* (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 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." 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 in the school canteen or get from their colleagues. This behavior characterizes deleterious consumer socialization, that is, the school environment negatively interferes in the action of another environment where consumer socialization develops.

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. In this complex context, 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, specifically 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. 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.

### *5.1 Limitations and Future Research*

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.
- Harris, J.L., Pomeranz, J.L., Lobstein, T., & Brownell, K.D. (2009). A crisis in the marketplace: how food marketing contributes to childhood obesity and what can be done. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 30, 211-225.
- 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.
- McNeal, J.U. (1987). *Children as consumers: insights and implications*. Lexington Books, Lanham, MD.
- 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. Meiselman, H.L. (Ed.), *Handbook of eating and drinking*, Springer, Cham, ZG, 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).