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COMM 3201 Reading Summary
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A Crisis in the Marketplace: How Food Marketing Contributes to Childhood Obesity and What Can Be Done

The Problem:
- The prevalence of childhood obesity is increasing worldwide (even in developing countries), with particularly high rates in the United States.
    - Childhood obesity leads to a number of health complications later in life, including Type II Diabetes, cardiovascular health problems, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and others.
- Food marketing to children is increasing in prevalence and had bled from television advertising into other forums, such as the internet, pro-sports sponsorship, celebrity endorsement, music, and, in some cases, schools.
    - Advertising aimed at children is lucrative because they spend money on food and drinks, affect what adults buy, and develop brand-loyalty at a young age.
    - Advertisements directed towards children are almost exclusively those promoting calorie-dense, high-sugar, high-sodium, and/or fatty foods; these advertisements present their products as having no negative outcomes, although we know clearly that eating these types of foods, in combination with a sedentary lifestyle, is linked to obesity.
- Although there is a strong correlation between watching more television and an unhealthier diet, it is difficult to study the effects of food advertising on childhood obesity directly, because there are a number of factors that may be confounding:
    - The sedentary lifestyle associated with more hours of television may be contributing to weight-gain.
    - Parents who allow their children to watch more television may also be more permissive with their diets.
    - Children who watch television are those who have low self-restraint, and thus may be more likely to eat unhealthy foods.
    - Children eat while they watch television; the more hours they spend in front of the television, the more calories they are consuming.
- One recent study did find a significant reduction in Body Mass Index (BMI) of young children who decreased their television-watching, and this was directly linked to a reduction in calorie-intake rather than any changes in physical activity.
- Children younger than 7 or 8 are unable to understand that advertisements may present a biased point of view--can we ethically expose them to advertising if they don't have the cognitive abilities to combat it?
    - Food advertising uses bottom-up attention to pull children in; food marketing is taking advantage of the fact that children haven't yet developed the critical-thinking and top-down attentional skills of their adult counterparts

- Food advertising can induce "hedonic hunger," or the desire to eat without the energy deficits that normally indicate a need to eat.

The Solution?:
- Childhood obesity is a controversial issue, largely because there are widely differing opinions on where the blame should be placed. Are parents the primary party responsible for managing their children's weight? Is private industry? The government?
  - It is unfair to place all of the responsibility on parents while their children's environments do not change; in the digital age, parents cannot be fully responsible for all the advertising to which their children are exposed.
- Private industry can been increasingly supportive of self-regulation of food marketing to children, but this may not be altruistic; more likely, it a means by which to avoid more serious regulations.
  - The International Chamber of Commerce published the *Framework for Responsible Food and Beverage Marketing Communication* in 2004, but the guidelines presented were vague and have been widely criticized.
  - Some companies have made promises in regards to child-directed food marketing, but these too may be lots of talk with little substance. There is also the concern that as these companies back out advertising to children, other, larger companies will merely swoop in to fill the void, negating any potential benefit.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) stated in a panel in 2006 that self-regulation within private industry is a good supplementary strategy, but not sufficient in improving outcomes for kids.
  - The panel also recommended developing an international code to regulate food advertising to children
- On both population and government levels, attempts to regulate the industry of food marketing to children have been met with outrage; many claim that doing so infringes on the First Amendment (free-speech) rights of corporations, and this has largely been backed by the U.S. court system:
  - The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) proposed banning television advertising to kids under 8, and advertising of sugary foods to kids aged 8-11 in 1978. Congress quickly declared that this would violate the First Amendment and removed the FTC's authority to make any rules aimed at protecting children.
- There is clearly a strong link between food advertising directly towards children, and the rise in the childhood obesity crisis. As a protective measure, and as a matter of public health, we should begin exploring ways to regulate food marketing that is directed towards children.

Obesity Metaphors: How Beliefs about the Causes of Obesity Affect Support for Public Policy

Background:
- The use of metaphorical language and thinking is widespread and gives people a method by which to frame governmental policies and decide whether or not to support them. A metaphor, in this case, is defined as "...understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

- - Metaphors are partial comparisons of one thing to another; certain features can be compared while others are ignored.
  - People use metaphors when thinking about obesity, and these metaphors are strong predictors of their support (or lack thereof) for governmental policies aimed at reducing obesity.
- Metaphors, as used to shape public opinion and policy, are particularly salient under four conditions, all of which are (or were at some point) relevant to the obesity issue:
  - The issue in question is relatively new; before people fully understand an issue, it is helpful to think of it in the familiar terms provided by metaphor (this was applicable when the issue of obesity first came to the forefront of public attention in the early 2000's).
  - The people in question are fairly politically illiterate; that is, they are not usually interested in public policy and lack the political knowledge with which to frame the issue. Instead, they draw on personal experience that incorporates metaphor. Party affiliation has been found to have little relation to support for government policies concerning obesity.
  - The issue at hand is fairly complicated and can be more easily understood by relating it to that which we already know. Although many people blame obesity on issues of personal willpower, there is evidence supporting the claim that a large portion of the general public recognizes that a number of factors play into the increasing prevalence of obesity. There is a level of confusion about where to assign the blame and how to go about correcting the issue.
  - Media outlets use ample metaphors in their framing of the issue: we often hear about the "obesity epidemic" in political discourse.
- This study used a national survey (The Yale Rudd Center Public Opinion on Obesity Survey) in 2006 and 2007 to examine how seven commonly-used metaphors regarding obesity influenced Americans' support for sixteen obesity-related policies.
  - The policies in question were chosen from a longer list because they were considered to have the largest potential impact and be the most politically feasible. The policies chosen incorporated a number of different strategies including taxing, subsidies, mandates, incentives, and nontax-financing; and aimed at different institutions, such as schools, food manufacturers, and restaurants.
  - The policies were split up into three categories:
    - 7 redistributive policies required a tax increase
    - 6 compensatory policies aimed to protect and/or help citizens, and
    - 3 price-raising policies imposed financial consequences for those people and corporations who engaged in behavior likely to lead to obesity.
- The seven obesity metaphors examined can be thought of as occurring along a continuum (from individual responsibility to the influence of external factors). They were presented to participants in paragraph form and were as follows:
  - Obesity as sinful behavior
  - Obesity as a disability
  - Obesity as a type of eating disorder

- ○ Obesity as an addiction to food
- ○ Obesity as a reflection of a lack of time for exercise and healthy eating (people are working more hours at the expense of their own health)
- ○ Obesity as a consequence of advertising
- ○ Obesity as a result of a toxic food environment (we are constantly surrounded by high-fat, high-sugar foods with few low-cost alternatives)
- ● Participants were asked to rate how many people's obesity stemmed from each of the former problems (with the ability to choose more than one). Out of a total score of 100, those metaphors that scored 10 or more were coded as "important" and those of 25 or more were coded as "very important."

Results:
- ● All seven obesity metaphors were rated as "important" explanations for the obesity problem
  - ○ The "toxic food environment" was cited as "important" by 78% of respondents, indicating that most people believe this plays a significant role in obesity
  - ○ Only 11% of respondents chose two or fewer metaphors as "important;" this indicates that the majority of people understand the multi-causal nature of obesity.
- ● Political ideology was found to have a low correlation to participants' assessment of each of the metaphors; this indicates that metaphor-based views can be considered apart from people's political leanings.
- ● There was a wide range of support for redistributive policies (37-68%) and compensatory policies (33-66%) and generally low support for non-tax price raising policies.
  - ○ Support for all three policies varied widely based on race, gender, age, political identification, geographical location, and education (independent of metaphors).
- ● There was significant variation in the relative importance of each metaphor and how this correlated with support for each of the sixteen policies; see Table 5 on page 35 of the study.
  - ○ Certain correlations were predictable: for example, those people who placed significant importance on the "obesity as a disability" metaphor were likely to support the compensatory policy providing overweight people with the same legal protections and benefits as other disabled people.
- ● The lowest individual blame metaphors were the most positively associated with policy support, while the highest individual blame metaphors were the most negatively associated with policy support.
- ● Individual personal health status has little effect on support for obesity policy
- ● Metaphors were more significant predictors of policy support than political leaning.
- ● Framing obesity with low-blame metaphors is likely the best way for advocates to elicit support for obesity-prevention policies.

Americans Are Finally Eating Less
· Americans' eating habits are getting better after decades of poor dieting and high rates of obesity
· Calories consumed by American adults have declined for the first time in 40 years
     Decline is even more substantial among children
· The amount of soda drunk by Americans has also dropped 25% since the late 1990's

· This new trend possibly a result of people's growing realization that eating and drinking unhealthily is harmful for their health

    o This renewed health awareness sprung in the late 90's, thanks to increased scientific research about costs of obesity and public health campaigns in recent years

· There still remains a lot of work to be done however; More than a third of American adults are still considered obese

    o This puts them at increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer

    o Americans still eat too much junk food and too few fruits and vegetables; but the number is declining, slowly but surely

    o These new health developments described by Barry Popkin, UNC professor, as a "turning point"

· No perfect way to measure American calorie consumption, but three large sources of data about diet point in the same direction

    o The three sources: detailed daily food diaries tracked by government researchers, food bar code data, and estimates of food production

    o All sources show calorie reduction, which has convinced many public health researchers that these changes are meaningful

· Healthy eating changes have been the most substantial in households with children

    o Public health emphasis on childhood obesity is driving changes

    o Parents are trying to become more mindful of their own diets when around their children

· A 1999 study is cited a breakthrough when American attitudes towards eating changed

    o Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a paper in The Journal of the American Medical Association

    o Paper illustrated worsening obesity rates in the 80's and 90's in all 50 states, as well as an increase in diabetes diagnoses

    o The research was presented via bright blue maps, making for a more visual presentation, which garnered significant buzz

· This message has appeared to resonate with the public

    o 60% of Americans said they wanted to lose weight in 2003, up from 50% in 1990 and 34% in the 1950s

    o Obama Administration has increased pressure on this issue

        § The 2010 Affordable Care Act requires restaurants to publish calorie content of their meals

        § Federal gov't has also changed requirements, making school lunches healthier

    o Philadelphia has begun to subsidize produce purchases for the poor

    o NYC limits the kind of food available in daycare settings

    o Berkeley, CA became the first city in the US to tax sugar-sweetened beverages

        § These implements reflect public health officials' emphasis on diet and obesity

· Anti-obesity public health campaigns have focused primarily on beverages

    o Many anti-soda messages in recent years

    o Americans purchased about 40 gallons of full-calorie soda a year in 1998, which fell to 30 gallons in 2014

- o Beverage companies reacted my marketing diet drinks and invested heavily in new products (like iced teas and flavored water)
· While consumption of fruits + vegetables remain low and consumption of desserts is high, people still seem to be eating less of everything
  - o Popkin still believes that "the food part of our diet is horrendous and remains horrendous"
· White families have reduced their calorie consumption more than black and Hispanic families
· The caveat to this recent trend: people who are overweight are eating more than ever before
  - o Weight and waist circumference have all continued rising in recent years
· An estimation by Kevin Hall (researcher at National Institutes of Health) says that in order for Americans to return to the body weights of 1978 by 2020, the average adult would still need to reduce calorie consumption by 220 calories a day
  - o Recent reductions represent only a fraction of that change

How Changing Attitudes Went Along With a Drop in Calories
· In the early 2000's, people started to see obesity as a health crisis instead of a personal problem
  - o This explains the surprising reduction in calorie consumption since 2003
  - o Obesity became a national, culture, and economic issue
  - o Around this time (2003), Americans' daily calorie consumption had started to come down
  - o Sustained calorie declines combined with a flattening of the obesity rate has persuaded public health researchers that something is changing in Americans' attitudes
· Changes begun with a growing scientific recognition that obesity was a worsening nationwide problem
  - o Excess weight is tied to health problems like diabetes, heart disease and cancer
  - o About 95% of people now believe it is important to prevent obesity, with only 35% of adult Americans considered obese
  - o Many researchers believe that increased knowledge of obesity's risks has helped shape public consciousness of the issue
· The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the federal gov't's principal public health agency, called it an obesity epidemic, or a health emergency
  - o The public agreed with this take
· In NY Times articles, the word 'obesity' was mentioned triple as much in 2003 than in 1998
  - o Phrase 'obesity epidemic' first mentioned in NY Times in 2002 and stayed relevant since
· A growing rate of people began declaring their intentions to lose weight as well
  - o In 2003, 60% wished to lose weight, which was significantly higher than previous decades
· Researchers say the fact that obesity was rapidly spreading among children, along with obesity-related illnesses, helped shift public attitude the most
  - o Since children are not responsible for their own diets, evidence suggests that it is easier to prevent obesity in children
  - o Many magazine covers (i.e. Time, Newsweek, The Atlantic) depicted overweight children, and these images seemed to get people's attention
· Two years ago, the American Medical Association classified obesity as a disease
  - o The change was a result of more people understanding that obesity is a complex condition with health consequences, not just an aesthetic problem or a sign of weakness

HBO Films' The Weight of the Nation Chapters 1-5

Chapter 1
- "The reason we have government in the first place is to solve problems collectively that we can't solve individually."
- The CDC dates the beginning of the obesity epidemic to the early 1980s
- Obesity-related healthcare costs are projected to exceed $300 billion by 2030
- "Excess is really new in human history; we're simply not genetically programmed to turn down extra calories when they're in front of us."
  - Our bodies are programmed to want to consume as many calories in as short a time as possible for the sake of survival
  - We're programmed to seek foods that are high in sugar and fat, as these are the foods that, from an evolutionary standpoint, would give us the energy required to live as long as possible
- At the turn of the 19th century and into the 20th, we as a society realized that in order to become a strong military and industrial power, we would need to have cheap and readily available food; thus began the industrialization of the food supply
- Our communities have become car-dependent--we walk, bike, etc. much less
  - "We've engineered physical activity out of our everyday lives"
- Portion sizes have increased dramatically--today's American is eating about 600 calories more per day than they were in 1970
- In many low-income places in America, there is a lack of safe and adequate outdoor spaces in which people (and especially children) can exercise
- The increase in obesity is particularly dramatic in low-income populations (which are disproportionately people of color), because the food they can afford, and that they have access to, is largely calorie-dense, large-portion meals.

Fed Up
· Focuses on causes of obesity in the United States
· Presents evidence which shows that large quantities of sugar in processed foods are main culprits of rising obesity rates
    o Points out the power of "Big Sugar" corporations who are blocking attempts to change policies
        § Policies would help trim obesity levels, but the "Big Sugar" refuses to budge, all in the name of money and corporation
· The movie shows how the first dietary guidelines put out by the US gov't 30 years ago failed to address the role of dietary sugar in the high risks of obesity and diabetes, especially in children
    o The initial guidelines did not properly address this issue, so as a result, sugar consumption has risen dramatically
        § This has led to obesity increasing, and a new generation of children who have become much fatter than their parents
        § These such children had dire health impacts as a result, including shorter lifespans

o The sugar industry has fought to keep its products alive and well, and since they have basically unlimited financial lobbying resources, they have been able to fight off parents, schools, etc. who are trying to make the world a healthier place for their children to live in