

“Where the lies are”

Equipping young people to understand food advertising



Project Evaluation

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Project implemented by Cordwainers Grow and funded by Hackney Council



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Executive summary

“The project is really good...it actually helps change your mind-set on food”
(girl, 13 years).

‘Where The Lies Are’ is a short documentary film produced by a group of eight young people, 9-14 years old, living in the borough of Hackney. The film explores the impact of food advertising on children’s eating habits. It was produced during a pilot school holiday project (the Frampton Film Project). The purpose of the project was to test **whether increasing young people’s awareness about food advertising could change their attitudes towards the food industry and the unhealthy foods it promotes, and eventually alter their food choices, thereby contributing, in the long-term, to a reduction in childhood obesity.** This was done by exploring information and ideas about food advertising and healthy eating with them by way of a small research project and production of a documentary film. The project was implemented by Cordwainers Grow.

Findings

The evaluation, conducted by an independent evaluator, found that by the end of the project the participants exhibited much more sophisticated awareness of the ways in which advertising strategies are designed to influence what they buy, and an increased ability to understand and evaluate nutritional and other information on product labels. They expressed strong sentiments of anger, distrust, betrayal, and confusion at the misleading claims made by advertisers, and the damage that processed foods high in fat, sugar and salt can cause to their health. And they showed a keen interest in what is in the food they eat and a readiness to change some of their food choices some of the time. Four months after the end of the project, at a Q&A session at the first public showing of the film, they gave examples of some of the changes they had made. Their mothers also reported encouraging signs of change among their children, and a willingness to make some changes to the family diet based on what they had learned from their children.

We cannot know to what degree the young people will successfully make and maintain changes over time. Many factors drive young people’s choices, including health, peer pressure, taste, cost, and convenience. Further interventions of this kind may provide a promising way forward in a context of rising childhood obesity, and with little, as yet, in the way of evidence of what works to shift eating patterns. Certainly, the rationale for investing in interventions to influence the attitudes and behaviour of young people around healthy eating is strong, particularly as habits and preferences established during childhood tend to be maintained into adulthood.

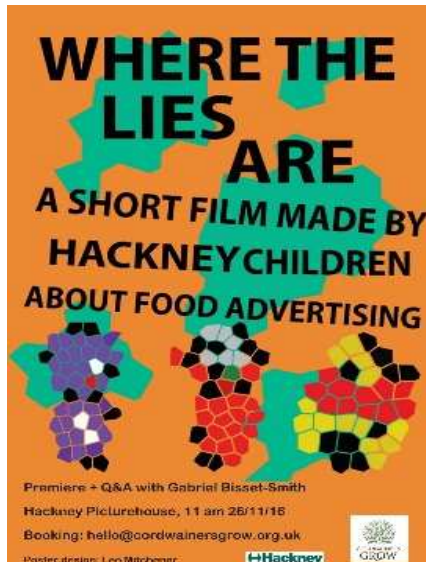
The recommendations made on the basis of the evaluation include: ensure the film is circulated widely, especially to schools and youth clubs; conduct a further evaluation with the project participants in one or two years’ time to ascertain if and how they have sustained changes to their food choices; fund a follow-up intervention with a larger and more diverse group of young people, including young people of lower income groups; and use the evaluation of a further project to explore ripple effects among participants’ families and friends, and differential changes among the participants by age group and gender.

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1. Introduction

'Where The Lies Are' is a short documentary film produced by a group of young people living in the borough of Hackney (see film poster in Figure 1). The film explores the impact of food advertising on children's eating habits. It was produced during a pilot school holiday project called the Frampton Film Project, designed to address some of the underlying causes of childhood obesity.



The project was implemented by Cordwainers Grow, a community interest company providing educational projects focused on the promotion of health, well-being and community cohesion among vulnerable and minority children and adults in the borough of Hackney (<http://www.cordwainersgrow.org.uk/>). It was funded through a grant of just under £12k from Hackney Council's Healthier Hackney Fund community grants programme. The evaluation was conducted by an independent evaluator, Dr. Frances Hansford, in collaboration with Cordwainers Grow.

Figure 1: Frampton Film Project poster

Cordwainers Grow would like to thank the following professionals for their contributions to the project: Fiona Whitty, artist filmmaker; Paul Ellerker, Director, Parallel; Paul Fox, Creative Director, Parallel; Keith Adams, senior broadcast journalist, BBC; Natalie Burrell, behavioural scientist; Emma Boyland, lecturer, University of Liverpool; Bobby Kasanga, Founder and Football Director, Hackney Wick FC; Kenan Yildirim, Manager, Erciyes Kasabi Food Centre; and Michelle Dornelly, Youth Worker, Children With Voices.

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2. Background

Childhood obesity is rising rapidly in England and elsewhere. Nearly a third of children aged 2 to 15 in England are overweight or obese.² In Hackney, 41% of children aged 10 and 11 are overweight or obese.³ Obesity rates are higher among children from low-income backgrounds: at age 11, children from the poorest income groups are three times as likely to be obese as their counterparts from the

² Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015. Health Survey for England 2014.

³ UK National Child Measurement Programme in Hackney Today, Issue 393, 12th December 2016.

highest income groups.⁴ Obesity brings with it serious health problems: obesity doubles the risk of dying prematurely⁵, and obese adults are seven times more likely to become a Type 2 diabetic than adults of healthy weight⁶ and are more likely to suffer heart disease.⁷

The influence of food advertising on children's diets – what and how much they eat – is widely recognised⁸. Children are exposed to food adverts on broadcast TV, online and through social media, on the street and in shops, and even in schools and leisure centres. Most food advertising is for unhealthy foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) and low in nutrients: £200 million was spent on the promotion of confectionary and snacks and £87 million on soft drinks in the UK in 2015, compared with £15 million on fruit and vegetables.⁹ Expert opinion recently identified the control of advertising of unhealthy foods to children as the top priority policy action required to tackle the obesity crisis in England¹⁰. The government's Childhood Obesity Plan, published in August 2016, failed to bring in tighter controls on food advertising to children, despite recommendations to do so from Public Health England.¹¹ The Committee on Advertising Practice has announced new rules on advertising 'less healthy foods' on all forms of children's online media, to be brought in on 1st July 2017, but critics say the rules will not cover many popular social media sites and proposed enforcement is weak.¹²

Most public health interventions to tackle obesity focus on individual behaviour change.¹³ They concentrate on providing the knowledge and skills to grow, cook and eat a healthy diet, and largely ignore the far-reaching influence of the food environment in which we live, including the power of large local, national and multinational food companies to set the agenda on concepts of health, quality and value, shape our eating preferences and habits, and build 'customers for life'.¹⁴

⁴ Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015. Health Survey for England 2014; Kelly, Y., Goisis, A., and Sacker, A., (2015). Why are poorer children at higher risk of obesity and overweight? A UK cohort study. The European Journal of Public Health.

⁵ Pischon, T., et al. (2008). General and Abdominal Adiposity and Risk of Death in Europe. The New England Journal of Medicine. 359:2105-2120.

⁶ Abdullah, A., Peeters, A., de Courten, M., Stoelwinder, J., (2010). The magnitude of association between overweight and obesity and the risk of diabetes: A meta-analysis of prospective cohort studies. Diabetes Research and Clinical Practice.

⁷ Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015. Health Survey for England 2014.

⁸ Boyland, E. J., Nolan, S., Kelly, B., Tudur-Smith, C., Jones, A., Halford, J. C. G., & Robinson, E. (2016). Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 103(2), 519-533; Boyland, E. J., & Whalen, R. (2015). Food advertising to children and its effects on diet: review of recent prevalence and impact data. Pediatric Diabetes, 16(5), 331-337.

⁹ Nielsen 2016. Expenditure on Food Advertising 01 January 2015-31 December 2015.

¹⁰ Food Environment Policy Index (Food-Epi) for England. Food Foundation, November 2016.

¹¹ HM Government 2016. Childhood Obesity: A Plan for Action. August 2016.

¹² Our response to new rules restricting junk food marketing on children's media. Sustain's Children's Food Campaign, 8th August 2016: https://www.sustainweb.org/news/dec16_cap_marketing_rules/

¹³ Bowyer, S., Caraher, M., Eilbert, K. and Car-Hill, R. (2009). Shopping for food: lessons from a London borough, British Food Journal, 111:5, pp.452-474.

¹⁴ Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood, (2015). Marketing to Children: An Overview. <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/resource/marketing-children-overview>.

3. The project

The Frampton Film Project sought to explore the influence of food advertising on young people's food choices. The central purpose of the project was to test whether increasing young people's awareness about food marketing and advertising could change their attitudes towards the food industry and different foods and drinks, and eventually alter their food choices, thereby contributing in the long-term to a reduction in childhood obesity. The project also aimed to help the young people develop new skills, increase their self-confidence, and enhance their sense of community, both as ends in themselves, and as the means to support them in making different food choices.

These aims were met using three strategies:

1. The exploration of information about food marketing and advertising (including product placement, packaging, branding and labelling) with the project implementers, volunteers, and sector professionals;
2. The development of practical skills in research, interviewing and film-making, to allow the young people to investigate key issues and their responses to them;
3. The experience of working as a team (a film crew) to create a film to be shown in the local community and which can be used by schools, youth clubs and community groups.

A group of eight¹⁵ young people (six girls and two boys) aged 9-14 years of mixed ethnic and religious heritage (Black British, European, African, South Asian and Arab; Christian, Jewish and Muslim) participated in the project. They were recruited locally through visits to schools and youth clubs, online promotion, and word of mouth. All were resident in the borough of Hackney.

Project activities were held during the school holidays of summer 2016, spanning the two-week period from 25th July to 5th August, with an introductory session on 16th July. A total of seven sessions were held, taking a total of 24 hours. The project was implemented by two Cordwainers Grow staff members (called 'the implementers' in this report) and five volunteer assistants. Activities included practical exercises, discussions and interviews with the guests, filming interviews with the public, peer interviewing, and editing the film. The public premier of the film at Hackney Picturehouse on 26th November was followed by a question and answer (Q&A) session with the young people. An overview of the project schedule, themes and activities is shown in Table 1. The film is available at: <http://www.cordwainersgrow.org.uk/project/frampton-film/>.

¹⁵ Three other young people attended only one or two sessions and have not been counted in the core group.

Table 1: Project schedule, themes and activities

| Date (2016) | Themes | Activities |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 16/07 | Getting ready | Introductions and advert walk/photos Mapping food outlets on route from school to home |
| 25/07 | Advertising | Reading an advert (how ads are designed and targeted at different audiences, including children) Analysis of a short documentary (energy drinks) Interview with advertising industry experts |
| 27/07 | Filming and interviewing | Film-making and roles of film crew Interviewing skills/analysis of news interviews Interviews with members of public |
| 28/07 | Product placement and packaging | Packaging strategies Exercise to design a food product package Interviews with members of public Interview with shopkeeper about product placement |
| 3/08 | Branding | Branding strategies Exercise to guess the product without product name Skype interview with academic |
| 4/08 | Labelling, ingredients and healthy food myths | Distinguishing misleading health claims using nutrition information Selecting foods for a family breakfast; sugar content Taste tests (cereal bars and fruit juices) Interview with local footballer on food choices |
| 5/08 | Film-editing | Review of film content using story-board |
| 12/09 | Script recording | Rehearsing and practicing script with professional actor |
| 4/10 | Script recording | Rehearsing and practicing script, extra filming. |
| 26/11 | Film premiere | Public film premiere at Hackney Picturehouse Question and answer session with young people |

3. Evaluation purpose, scope and methods

The evaluation was guided by the project theory of change illustrated in Figure 2. The project sought to promote the short-term outputs and outcomes in columns 2 and 3: an increase in knowledge, understanding and awareness of food marketing and advertising and healthy eating; a shift in attitudes towards the food industry and food retailers and the HFSS food and drinks promoted by them; and a readiness to change food choices away from HFSS foods. It is hoped that these short-term changes will contribute in the longer-term to changes in behaviour (lower consumption of HFSS foods) among project participants and their families, and to health benefits, including prevention of childhood obesity (columns 4 and 5).

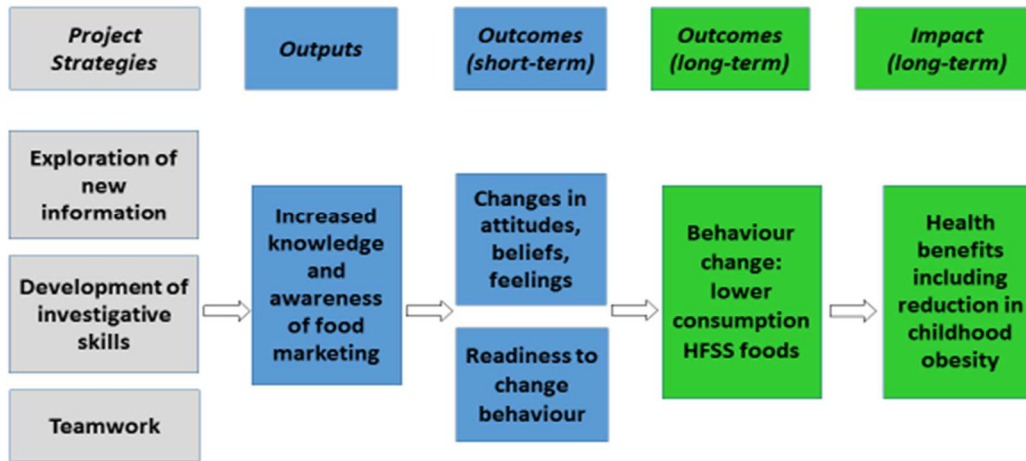


Figure 2: Project theory of change

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess if the project achieved the intended short-term outputs and outcomes in columns 2 and 3, but not the longer-term outcomes and impact, which could take months and years to manifest, although the Q&A session with the young people four months after completion of the project provided some evidence on behaviour change. The evaluation also explored if the young people had acquired new skills in research, interviewing and film-making, along with additional benefits such as greater self-confidence and new friendships. Additionally, the evaluation assessed the project processes (promotion and recruitment, organisation and logistics, themes and content, and methods and activities) in order to recommend how the implementation could be improved if the project were to be replicated or scaled-up.

Table 2: Overview of evaluation activities

| Date (2016) | Evaluation activity | No. of participants |
|-------------|--|---------------------|
| 16/07 | Baseline group discussion with young people and maps | 9 ¹⁶ |
| 4/08 | Endline peer interviews | 5 |
| 5/08 | Endline group discussion with young people | 6 |
| 5/08 | Interview with mothers of young people | 3 ¹⁷ |
| 19/08 | Skype interview with implementers | 2 |
| 26/11 | Public Q&A session with young people | 7 |

The outcomes evaluation used a primarily qualitative before/after approach. An overview of the evaluation activities and the number of participants present at each activity is shown in Table 2. The activities were conducted by the external evaluator, with the exception of the peer interviews (the

¹⁶ One of the participants on 16th July did not return and hence has not been counted in the core group.

¹⁷ Mothers of a 14-year old boy and 10-year old girl (brother and sister), 11-year old girl and 9-year old girl.

young people interviewing each other), and the public Q&A session (questions asked by members of the audience). All interviews were audio-recorded, and the peer interviews were filmed. In addition, an interview with the implementers to assess what worked well and what they would do differently in a follow-up project, and debriefing notes made by the project implementers at the end of each session, were used for the process evaluation.

4. Findings

4.1 Changes in project participants' knowledge, awareness, attitudes and feelings in relation to food advertising and marketing

"The project is really good...it actually helps change your mind-set on food"
(girl, 13 years).

We looked at evidence of changes in knowledge, awareness, attitudes and feelings by comparing information from the young people before the start of the project (a group discussion and awareness of exposure to food adverts) with information from them on the last two days of the project (peer interviews and a final group discussion), and four months after completion of the project (at the public Q&A session). The comparison revealed a significant increase in knowledge and awareness, a shift in attitudes, and the emergence of strong feelings.

Before the project, the young people showed some basic insight into advertising and marketing strategies. When asked why companies spend millions of pounds on adverts they replied:

"So you can remember the product and think 'I want that product'.... for memorisation, so you associate certain things with the products" (boy, 11 years);

"With food, you can feel hungry after seeing the advert" (boy, 11 years);

"Because they want their product to be more popular, everyone buying it" (girl, 9 years);

"Because they are going to make twice as much money" (girl, 12 years).

When asked how many times they remembered seeing a food advert the day before, the responses varied from two to eleven, with an average frequency of 5.7 times. They were very conscious of brand names, but stated that other factors were more important than brand when choosing which foods and drinks to buy after school, namely cost (deals and price reductions in supermarkets), taste, and in some cases, health (based on information from their parents).

In terms of packaging, the young people were aware of some of the written information conveyed (flavour, fair trade/organic, health warnings (on energy drinks), allergens and the list of ingredients) but did not comment on strategies to make packaging attractive to consumers, or on the nutritional

and health claims made on some packets. They were aware that packets showed information on the fat, salt and sugar content of the food, but were not familiar with the nutritional information – the traffic light system and the table of nutrition information - provided on most packets. None were in the habit of reading the nutrition information and using the information to inform their choices.

By the end of the project the young people exhibited much more sophisticated knowledge and awareness of how marketing and advertising strategies are designed to influence what they and others buy. They were much more acutely aware of the power of advertising and packaging to influence choice, that adverts are designed to make it difficult to resist temptation even when you know a food is unhealthy, and that this contributes to people making unhealthy choices. They also said that their new awareness would make it easier to resist. They were aware that most adverts and special offers (two-for-one for example) are for junk rather than healthy food, and that junk food is almost always placed at the front of a shop or supermarket, while fresh produce tends to be further back. They had also learned that food companies design adverts, branding and packaging to target and influence children’s choices from a very young age.

The young people also showed an increased ability to understand and evaluate the nutritional and other information provided on product labels, to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy ingredients, and to identify false or misleading claims. Practical exercises like the analysis of the ingredients and nutritional value of breakfast foods (Figure 3) and use of the Smart Sugar app helped them to assess product ingredients against official health recommendations on sugar, fat and salt intake. During taste testing of cereal bars and fruit juices they were shocked at the amount of sugar in products that appeared to be healthy according to claims or images on the packaging.



Figure 3: Analysis of the ingredients and nutritional value of breakfast foods

They observed that there was often a discrepancy between information on the front and the back of the packet:

“They put fake stuff like ‘low cholesterol or fat’ [on the front]....but when you see the back it’s higher than you expected” (girl, 13 years);

“When you buy things you should always check the back not the front because that’s where all the lies are” (girl, 13 years);

and they noticed that the labelling was very poor on some products, written in small type-face and sometimes hidden under a flap:

“It’s like they’re trying to hide it from me, like they might have a flap covering it, most people won’t be bothered to try to find it” (girl, 13 years).

During the peer interviews and the final group discussion, and in the film, the expression of **strong sentiments of anger and shock at the strategies used by the food industry and retailers, and feelings of betrayal, distrust and confusion** caused by manufacturers which they perceived to be making false claims and disregarding their health:

“I feel angry because they deceive us and try to manipulate us, they give us these lies..... All they want is for you to buy their product, they don’t care about your health” (boy, 14 years);

“I feel like they are tricking us..... I learnt that you can’t trust the companies because they might just be trying to get money” (girl, 9 years);

“I feel confused; I don’t know what’s healthy and what’s not and if they’re lying to me or telling the truth” (girl, 9 years).

The young people’s awareness of their exposure to food adverts also increased. When asked on the last day how many times they remembered seeing an advert during the previous day, the responses varied from four to thirty, with an average frequency of 12.7 times, just over double the average reported before the start of the project. As one participant commented:

“.....because we have been talking about it a lot we notice the adverts much more” (girl, 13 years).

This greater level of knowledge and awareness, and a change in some attitudes, was confirmed by the interviewed mothers, who repeated some of the things their children had told them. **Some of the information reported by the children was new to the mothers.** One mother reported that her daughter had encouraged her to look out for added sugars in foods that are marketed as healthy, and another said her children had told her that shop-bought fruit juices have a high sugar content and suggested they make their own juices from fresh fruit, saying:

“Mum, be careful when you buy things, they’re not [always] healthy even if they say they’re healthy” (mother of boy, 14 years and girl, 10 years).

Four months after completion of the project the young people showed that they had retained much of the information they learned during the project, and continued to express strong emotions. Table 3 records the young people’s answers to the question “what made you angriest and what made you happiest about what you learned?”.

Table 3: Responses to the question “what made you angriest and what made you happiest about what you learned?”

| Child gender and age | What made you angriest? | What made you happiest? |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Girl, 13 | Finding out how much junk food there is, I didn't really notice it before | Learning what I've got to do to stay healthy |
| Girl, 13 | Finding out that most breakfast and granola bars can actually be really unhealthy....if you look at all the calories and sugar | Learning that before just buying anything I need to look at the back [of the packet] at the calories and sugar |
| Boy, 11 | Walking down Mare Street and seeing continuous ads and then seeing the shop itself...the subliminal messages saying 'go to the shop' | Knowing how to look at the back [of packets]...knowing where the ads are and how to cancel them out |
| Girl, 10 | When they say there's no added sugar and there's really more added sugar than normal | Now I know not to believe when they say 'no added sugar' |
| Girl, 9 | Most people ...are lying to us about what they add in their food eg [a cereal bar] was the unhealthiest thing there | Finding out what was actually in the food that I eat |
| Girl, 11 | Sometimes people stop having chocolate bars and switch to breakfast bars that also have so much sugar and unhealthy stuff it doesn't make much difference | Now I know what is healthy |
| Girl, 12 | On the packaging they say there isn't sugar and salt but actually there is more than you think | Most of the companies are actually honest about what they say they put in the food |

4.2 Readiness to change behaviour among project participants

“We still love sweets and junk food but now we know a bit more about advertising we might just think twice about our choices”
(girl, 13 years).

This was a short duration pilot project which did not expect to promote immediate changes in behaviour. Instead we looked for evidence that the young people might feel ready to make some changes in the longer term after the project and the evaluation.

During the baseline group discussion, the young people were asked to draw a map of their route from school to home and identify where they typically stop to buy food and/or drinks, and what they buy (see examples of maps in Figure 4). Three of the nine participants did not buy food on the way

“Just because something looks nice I shouldn’t buy it, I should look more into it” (girl, 13 years);

“It’s starting to change, now I’m starting to look at the back more” (girl, 9 years).

They were also **realistic about the difficulties they might face in changing what they buy**, particularly that healthy choices are often more expensive than unhealthy ones and might be beyond their means:

“When you see fruit and veg it’s a bit too pricey, when you look at the sweets they’re really cheap” (girl, 13 years).

Buying salad, for example, would only be an option if reduced to £1, the same price as a portion of chicken and chips. When asked whether they might find it difficult to change their choices in the face of peer pressure from friends who hadn’t participated in the project, the older girls replied:

“I wouldn’t listen to them. It goes into my stomach, they’re not the ones eating it” (girl, 13 years);

“I’d buy fruit or salad and take a few of their chips. I’m doing this for my health” (girl, 13 years).

We cannot know to what degree the intentions stated at the end of the project will translate, over time, into behaviour change. **It was therefore encouraging to hear that the young people had made some changes four months after the project.** When asked by the audience at the film Q&A if they had changed what they were eating, all said they were eating less junk food and chocolate, one had switched to eating dark rather than milk chocolate, and one who didn’t used to eat fruit was eating fruit every Thursday. The older girls said they were sometimes buying fruit, salad or a sandwich instead of chicken and chips; they had also started to make their own breakfasts, biscuits, and chicken nuggets and chips, and said that it was fun to do this with a friend. They confirmed that they were reading information on labels, looking especially at information on sugar, fat and calories, and one stated that when shopping with her mother:

“I say which ones are more healthy than the others” (girl, 10 years).

It is possible that the young people over-reported positive changes in behaviour or in their intention to change their behaviour – reporting what they believed we wanted to hear – thereby creating a ‘social desirability’ bias in our data. But **the mothers also reported encouraging signs of potential change among their children.** They all said their children were looking at food packets and reading labels more than they used to, and that some had asked their mothers to buy foods they hadn’t eaten before, including fish, oats, mango juice, and ‘chemical-free organic foods’. The mothers were realistic that their children’s eating habits were not going to change overnight, particularly one mother with two fussy eaters (that her son had eaten an apple for the first time was a big step forward). But they viewed the fact that their children were taking an interest in food and “talking about healthy eating” as an important first step. They also stated a willingness to make some adjustments to the family’s food after hearing from their children, for example, buying breakfast cereals without additives from a health food store, or organic produce if it meant the children would start eating fruit and vegetables.

4.3 New skills and other additional benefits among project participants

In terms of practical skills, none of the young people had been involved in a research project or film-making before. **When asked in the final group discussion what they had most enjoyed about the project, filming and interviewing figured in all of their responses** (see Figure 5) and when asked what they had learned during the project, the responses included:

“Filming, setting up the camera and sound and getting to know how they worked” (girl, 13 years);

“I learned you have to be looking at the person you’re interviewing....and you can’t be shouting at them” (girl, 9 years);

“I learned how to interview people, how to position myself, and look as if I’m having a conversation with them” (girl, 13 years).



Figure 5: Learning to interview and film on the street and in a supermarket

The implementers also observed that the young people’s technical skills improved over time along with their ability to ask relevant and focused interview questions, and that by the end of the project each one had learned how to exercise the different functions of a film crew.

In terms of less tangible benefits, the young people stated that they had made new friends in their neighborhood who they hoped to keep up with after the project. The implementers observed that the young people’s self-confidence grew over the two-week period: their willingness to speak up in the group increased over time, as did their willingness to engage with the implementers, and with participants who they did not know before the project. This was especially so with the younger participants, who were very quiet during the first few days of the project. They also noticed friendships developing among the mothers when they came to pick their children up.

The mothers stated unanimously that their children had enjoyed the project and wanted to return each day. They were thankful that their children had the opportunity to learn new information and skills, meet new people, and make new friends in their neighbourhood, and felt it was much better for them than staying at home and ‘playing on PlayStation’ during the holidays. One mother with a

particularly shy son said she usually has to “push him hard to go out”, but he didn’t want to miss a day on the project.

4.4 Process evaluation

The process evaluation looked at what had worked well, and what could be improved in a similar project in the future.

4.5.1 Promotion and recruitment

The project was promoted locally through word-of-mouth, visits to schools and youth clubs, and online noticeboards and newsletters. The implementers successfully recruited a good size group of diverse age, ethnicity and religion. There were generally no difficulties working across the age range (9 to 14 years), although the younger ones were initially shy and less likely to speak in the group.

The implementers were aware that they did not have many young people from a lower income background (e.g. from the Frampton and Morningside Estates). They reflected that they would need to dedicate more resources than were available for this pilot project to reach parents with whom they do not have existing relationships and who do not receive information online. This is important given that childhood obesity is higher among low-income groups.

4.5.2 Organisation and logistics

The young people and their parents felt that the timing– at the beginning of the school holidays - was convenient. The implementers and the young people felt that the two-week duration was about right, providing enough time to convey and absorb the key messages.

4.5.3 Themes and content

The implementers felt that the content and the five overarching themes (advertising/marketing, product placement, packaging, branding, labelling) were well received, and that the volume of information conveyed was about right. They were aware that the young people seemed to retain more of the information around themes addressed later in the project, particularly around labelling and nutrition information, and proposed doing a comprehensive ‘review and wrap-up’ session at the end in a future project to remind the participants of earlier learning. Several of the young people said they had enjoyed learning “interesting and surprising facts” (such as the influence of advertising on very young children), and talking about healthy and unhealthy foods.

The young people and their mothers said if the project were run again they would like the participants to learn more about healthy diets and to learn to cook healthy foods. One mother also suggested that activities involving blind tasting might help encourage the children to try new foods that they refuse at home. The implementers also suggested that teaching young people to grow food would be helpful, as they have found in past projects that young people are more likely to eat foods they have grown themselves (although this would require a project of longer duration).

4.5.4 Methods and activities

The implementers felt that the mix of activities worked well: in particular, the practical activities worked well to convey key messages and keep the participants engaged, and the young people

enjoyed the guest presentations, which were pitched at the right level. They also felt that a practical, creative activity such as film-making was essential for retention of the young people; delivering content without making a film would have felt like school, and they questioned whether the young people would have attended voluntarily. As one participant said “Filming made it fun” (girl, 13 years). It was also a useful approach for encouraging teamwork, as each participant played a different role in the film crew. Several participants also said they enjoyed the research and interviewing process and listening to different people’s opinions. The fact that a core group of eight participants remained voluntarily throughout (although absent on some days due to clashes) suggests that the themes and the activities were interesting to them.

In their interview, the implementers reflected on what they would do differently next time:

- More practical activities and less sitting and talking;
- More group work to allow the participants to get to know each other better;
- More outdoor activities and more changes of scene to energise the group;
- More varied teaching techniques, less formal teaching and more peer-to-peer learning;
- More use of electronic apps and games which are appealing to young people (the use of the Sugar Smart app was very popular);
- More unstructured time in breaks to allow the participants to chat amongst themselves and create stronger bonds;
- More autonomous activities to let the young people work things out for themselves;
- Hold the session on filming first (rather than the session on advertising) in order to engage the participants from the beginning.

5. Discussion and recommendations

In a context of rising childhood obesity, and with little in the way of evidence of what works to shift eating patterns¹⁹, this kind of intervention may provide a promising way forward. **The increase in the knowledge and awareness of the young people, the shift in their attitudes, and the emergence of strong feelings, were all quite impressive for a pilot project of short duration and limited budget.** By the end of the project, the participants were better equipped intellectually and emotionally to resist the powerful influence of marketing and make more informed choices. There may also be important ripple effects not captured in the evaluation in terms of the young people’s influence over their parents, family members, and friends. The project was effective in part due to the varied and fun activities, the development of an investigative mind-set, and the creative energy generated by working together to produce a documentary film. The combination of content on advertising literacy with information on nutrition and health may also have contributed to its effectiveness.

The documentary made by the young people is in itself perhaps the strongest piece of evidence of the new level of awareness among the young people. It shows an articulate group of young people

¹⁹ Garnett, T., Mathewson, S., Angelides P., and Borthwick, F., 2015. Policies and actions to shift eating patterns: What works? A review of the evidence of the effectiveness of interventions aimed at shifting diets in more sustainable and healthy directions. Food Climate Research Network, University of Oxford; Brand, T., et al, 2014. What works in community-based interventions promoting physical activity and health eating? A review of reviews. *International journal of environmental research and public health* 11(6): 5866-5888.

with an important message to drive home. It is important to understand the process used to create the film. This was a participant-led exercise: the young people decided what messages they wanted to convey, selected footage to best illustrate their key points, and compiled the film themselves, on the basis of what they had learned during the practical exercises, research and interviews. **The film may also be key in extending the impact of the project beyond the participants, particularly among other young people,** as a form of peer-to-peer communication.

There were encouraging signs of a readiness to change, which were maintained four months after the end of the project, with the young people taking a greater interest than they previously had in understanding what is in the food they eat, seeking nutritional information on packages, and reducing their intake of some foods with high fat, sugar and calorie content. They also expressed a relatively high level of self-efficacy in terms of believing in their ability to resist temptations and peer pressure to choose unhealthy options when with friends.

We cannot know whether the young people will successfully make and maintain changes over time. Many factors other than a concern with health drive young people's choices. The social meanings attached to foods, and the role of food as a source of identity and belonging, can create strong pressure to conform with peer preferences; as a recent study points out, healthy eating is "not cool" among young people.²⁰ Taste, cost and convenience are also important. A systematic review of studies of young people's views on healthy eating in the UK found that a preference for fast food tended to dominate food choices on grounds of taste, even when the importance of a healthy diet was acknowledged, and that fast food was perceived as cheap and easy to access.²¹

The rationale for investing in interventions to influence the attitudes and behaviour of young people around healthy eating is strong. Healthy eating habits are important for healthy growth, cognitive development, and the ability to concentrate and learn in school, and habits and preferences established during childhood tend to be maintained into adulthood.²² **A scaled-up version of this project would provide the opportunity to recruit a larger and more diverse group of young people,** including some from a lower income group. It would also provide conditions to test different approaches with different age groups, given that younger and older children may be influenced by different processes of persuasion.²³ Content on the environmental implications of different food choices might be introduced as another angle likely to appeal to young people. The project should be viewed as one piece of a broader strategy of dietary change and obesity prevention that also tackles some of the wider environmental determinants, including advertising regulations, food

²⁰ Stead M., McDermott L., MacKintosh A.M., and Adamson A., 2011. Why healthy eating is bad for young people's health: Identity, belonging and food. *Social Science and Medicine* 72(7):1131-1139.

²¹ Shepherd, J., Harden, A., Rees, R., Brunton, G., Garcia, J., Oliver S., and Oakley A., 2006. Young people and healthy eating: a systematic review of research on barriers and facilitators. *Health Education Research Theory & Practice* 21(2): 239–25.

²² Martin, A.A., and Davidson, T.L., 2014. Human cognitive functions and the obesogenic environment. *Physiology and Behaviour* 136:185-193

²³ See Livingstone, S., and Helsper, E., 2006. Does advertising literacy mediate the effects of advertising on children? A critical examination of two linked research literatures in relation to obesity and food choice. *Journal of communication*, 56 (3). pp. 560-584

labelling and information, availability and pricing of healthy options, and social support systems to help young people to make changes to their diets.

A larger project would also provide the opportunity for **analysis of differences in changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours by gender and age group**. This was not possible in this study due to the small number of participants, but other studies suggest that the effectiveness of interventions to increase media literacy may vary by age²⁴, and that interventions to promote healthy eating may be more effective among young women than young men.²⁵ This information would underpin the design of interventions tailored to the needs of different age and gender groups.

The final word on the value of the project goes to some of the young people:

“The project is really good...it actually helps change your mind-set on food. Everyone thinks junk food doesn’t affect you but when you look more deeply....it’s actually really, really scary”
(girl, 13 years);

“The project is really good. At first it may seem boring, but then it turns out really good. More young people should be encouraged to do this (girl, 13 years).

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations, based on the evaluation findings, may be useful to Hackney Council, Cordwainers Grow, and other public and community agencies:

- Make the film publically available on social media, and use networks to ensure it is widely circulated to a variety of audiences in and beyond the borough of Hackney, including as an educational tool in schools and youth clubs;
- Conduct a follow-up evaluation with the young people one or two years after completion of this project to ascertain if and how they have made sustained changes to their food choices, and the factors that have facilitated or hindered their desire to make changes;
- Fund and evaluate a follow-up intervention with a larger and more diverse group of young people, including young people of lower income groups; use the evaluation to explore differences in changes by gender, age group and income group in order to provide information to tailor interventions to the needs of different demographic groups;
- Explore the potential ripple effects in a follow-up intervention by evaluating changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour among parents and other family members, friends, teachers, youth workers, and others in regular contact with the project participants;
- Consider seeking the views of young people in a preliminary scoping exercise during the planning phase of a follow-up intervention in order to incorporate their ideas of what will work into the intervention design.

²⁴ See studies in Livingstone and Helsper, 2006.

²⁵ Shepherd J., et al, 2006