Parents' Motives Underlying Food Choice for Children in Marsabit, Kenya

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Introduction

Despite international and national programs and interventions, 23% of the Kenyan population is undernourished (FAO Statistics Devision 2019) and 26% of children under the age of five are affected by stunting (UNICEF/WHO/World Bank 2020). This results in irreversible negative health effects and intensified poverty (Republic of Kenya 2019).

Malnutrition is often caused by caring practices that are not clearly linked to income (Herforth and Ahmed 2015). Understanding the dynamics of nutritional decision-making in child-feeding practices, including parental purchase criteria, is therefore important. Studies from high-income countries suggest, that child centred motives like taste were the most important considerations for parent's decision making, followed by health and nutrition, natural and ethical criteria and finally sociodemographic and cost considerations (Russell et al. 2015). A similar study conducted in a low-income environment in Latin America found that parent's food choices for children were determined by price, satiety and the taste preferences of children as well as the nutritional composition of foods (Machín et al. 2016).

As we are not aware of relevant research from Sub-Sahara Africa, the present study aims to reveal if the motives of Kenyan parents' food choices are similar to previous studies from other contexts.

Data and methods

One of the aims of the research project "NaviNut" is to analyse the nutritional decision making of mothers and caretakers in peri-urban Kenya, their child food product choices and especially their purchase criteria. In Kenya, droughts and climate change and the resulting poverty are a threat to food safety especially in the two northern counties, Marsabit and Turkana, where people often choose cheaper, less nourishing foods leading to severe mal- and undernourishment of both children and adults (GIZ 2017).

In the town of Marsabit, Kenya, the shops and supermarkets offering child feeding products were visited to select those five venues offering the largest range of child food items. The shop keepers in these five shops were personally interviewed by computer assisted personal interviews and asked to identify the different categories of child food product offered in their shops, the best-selling and unpopular products in each category and to share their assessment about the reasons, why customers like or dislike the mentioned products.

An online form was used to collect the data, namely the brand and product name, the category as well as the selling price and size of the packaging unit. Predefined answering options were given for the following questions: Bestseller (yes or no), reasons (taste, nutritional value, price, packaging, brand, presentation, origin, visibility / placement). Multiple reasons could be selected and an additional blanc space allowed the interviewer to add additional reasons as well as comments. The collected data was automatically sent to a google sheets file and photos were taken of both the best sellers and unpopular products. Simple descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the data.

Results

Data collected

The best-selling as well as unpopular products used to feed children below the age of 60 months were named in each category. A total number of 83 child food items was identified by the shop keepers, of which 54 (65 %) were best-sellers and 29 (35 %) unpopular. The products recorded belonged to the following categories: Cereals (27 products), dairy (including baby formula) (26 products), porridge (14 products), crisps (10 products), juice (3 products) and biscuits (3 products).

Frequency of reasons given to explain why a product belongs either to the group of the best-sellers or unpopular products

In the case of unpopular products, shop keepers explained that customers dislike the product's price (41 %), followed by a dislike of the product's brand (additional comments: 'unknown', 'new to the market') in 31 % of the cases, customers do not like the product's taste (28 %), its nutritional value (7 %), packaging size (7 %) and packaging design (3 %). Shop keepers believe that customers like the best-selling child food products because of their nutritional value (69 %), price (36 %), taste (22 %) and brand (16 %).
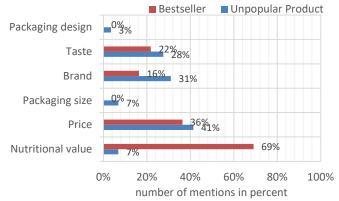

Fig 1: Frequency of reasons given to explain why a product is either a bestseller or unpopular

For bestsellers and unpopular products, the frequency of reasons mentioned differed significantly. Fisher's exact test revealed that the frequency of reasons given for best-selling and unpopular products differ for 'nutrition values' ($p < 0.001$) but there are no significant differences in the case of the other reasons.

Product photos

The frequency of packaging displaying detailed nutritional information differed significantly between locally manufactured products and those from global brands. Fisher's exact test, $p < 0.001$. While 100 % of the global products provided nutritional information, only 29.7 % of local products contained this information.

Discussion

The nutritional value of a child feeding product was by far the most frequent reason in favour of a purchase decisions in this study. Not all of the products evaluated show this information and it is therefore unclear how consumers evaluate the nutritional value of products. Social desirability bias (Russell et al. 2015), an overall difficulty experienced by low-literate consumers to read and understand the information provided (Choudhury et al. 2019) and the strong influence of advertisements, shape, colour, materials, imagery and informational cues of packaging on the perceived healthiness of a product (Fenko 2019; Plasek et al. 2020) may be reasons explaining the gap between the caretaker's motives and the fact that information is not always available.

Past studies by Russells et al. (2015) and Machín at al. (2016) suggest that the product price influences parental purchase decisions and our data shows that this applies to Marsabit, too. Prize was the most frequently named rejection criteria in the case of unpopular products. In the case of top sellers, the product price was only stated as the second most important reason for choosing a product, suggesting that even in subsistence markets the nutritional value of child food is a higher priority than its price. Taste and brand were mentioned by shop keepers as very relevant reasons both for choosing as well as rejecting a product. The mentioning of taste is in line with results from Latin America and high income countries (Russell et al. 2015; Machín et al. 2016), but 'brand' as a reason for parent's food choice motives was not mentioned in these studies.

According to the information received by shopkeepers, customers reject products based on the motive that either its brand is unknown or the product is 'new' and was only recently introduced to the market. According to Chikweche and Fletcher (2010), in Zimbabwe subsistence customers heavily depend on a product's ability to meet their needs, because they lack the financial means and access to consumer protection laws and are thus simply unable to replace a poorly performing product. These consumers therefore tend to avoid choosing unknown products, but rather buy the ones they know and trust (Chikweche and Fletcher 2010).The same might be true in the case of Kenya and explain why consumers in Marsabit mentioned 'brand' as a reason for choosing or rejecting child feeding products. Other reasons given by shopkeepers to explain the rejection of products were packaging design and packaging size. These motives were not mentioned in other studies and given their infrequent mentioning in Marsabit, they seem to be rather unimportant from a cognitive perspective. However, they might influence purchase decisions subconsciously.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that the named reasons or motives for purchase decisions in Northern Kenya are largely the same compared to those in Latin America and high income countries, namely nutritional values, economic factors and the taste of the product. Ethical considerations or satiety were not mentioned, but the specific situation in Sub-Saharan Africa let customers instead heavily rely on the performance of a specific product and 'brand' is therefore an important purchase criterion. The results cannot clarify if the purchase decisions are also influenced by underlying, subconscious reasons, like the packaging design of child feeding products. Therefore, further research should be done to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of packaging elements on purchase decisions and on consumers' perception of nutritional values in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The limitations of the study must be taken into consideration: It was conducted interviewing shop keepers instead of customers and it is therefore possible that not the underlying motives of parents were named but rather the shop keeper's interpretation of the purchase behaviour of parents and caretakers.

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