



## Identifying motives of mothers who purchase healthy convenience snacks for their children: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

*Mothers account for over two trillion dollars of the purchasing power in the United States (Bailey, 2008). Women are responsible for ninety-three percent of all food purchases (Duke, 2010) and Healthy Food Moms are a growing segment of mothers influencing the food industry. Despite the recognition of the purchasing power of moms and their changes in food choices, a majority of food companies are not effectively communicating with them. Identifying what influences the food purchasing decisions of Health Food Moms can enhance food-marketing strategy and positively influence the purchase decisions of other moms. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to interview a subset of mothers in order to identify what motivates them to purchase healthy snacks for their children. The findings show that the surveyed mothers lack a trend in brand loyalty; are less inclined to let their children influence food purchase decisions; children's snacks purchased by this cohort differ from that of the general population; and the subjects mainly rely on the ingredient list and amount of sugar as benchmarks to determine whether kids' snacks are healthy. This article is prepared for those in the retail health food industry in order to provide insight into the purchase motivators of mothers who value providing healthier food for their children. Future related studies may also unlock the core values of these mothers, which could help public health experts can encourage other moms to adopt healthier shopping methods.*

**Keywords:** convenience, snack, food, nutrition, mothers, children, kids, healthy food moms, healthy food trends, purchasing motives of mothers, segmented marketing, qualitative, phenomenological

### Introduction

Several food trend reports indicate that there is growing consumer interest in purchasing healthier food. According to Food Marketing Institute, eight in ten Americans are making some

or a lot of effort to eat healthy (as cited in Sloan, 2012). Packaged Facts claims that thirty percent of consumers say they always or usually purchase grocery products labeled for improving specific conditions (e.g., heart, digestive, or blood sugar issues); thirty-six percent say they sometimes do (as cited in Sloan, 2012). These trends reflect the growing sales in the healthy food sector.

According to Packaged Facts, U.S. retail sales of natural and organic foods and beverages rose to nearly 39 billion in 2010, an increase of nine percent from the previous year. They project that the natural and organic foods industry will grow by 103 percent between 2010 and 2015, with total annual sales exceeding 78 billion in 2015 (Packaged Facts, 2011). Consumers are moving away from highly processed foods and moving toward less processed, nutritionally rich whole foods (Singer, 2012). Sally Wyatt, from Information Resource Inc., reports that healthier snack sales are growing at triple the rate of indulgent snacks. The health food industry is expected to continue its growth for the next several years.

As the health food industry grows, so will the competition. Healthy food companies seeking a competitive edge need a great tasting product as well as a successful marketing strategy. Communication efforts need to resonate with the segment of shoppers who prioritize buying healthier food. Of these shoppers, mothers are the ideal segment to capture because they have the most purchasing power.

### **Mothers as Target Food Purchasers**

Women in general are responsible for ninety-three percent of all food purchases (Duke, 2010). Despite the recognition of women's purchasing power, a majority of food companies are failing to understand how to market and communicate to them. This is evident in that an estimated fifty-nine percent of women feel misunderstood by food marketers (Skoloda, 2009). Moms are a segment of great importance within the female category. Mothers alone control over two trillion of the total purchasing power in the United States (Bailey, Maria 2008). They are also a segment of shoppers within the food industry who are buying healthier food more often. The 2010 Bohan Advertising Group Dining Survey revealed that 44 percent of moms buy healthier food at the grocery store at least once a week. More than half (53 percent) stated they will buy healthier food at the store more often in the future (Bohan, 2010). They are also a multi-segmented group. Healthy food companies wanting to capture moms need to analyze the food purchase intentions of the Healthy Food Moms segment.

It is apparent that there is a distinct difference between moms who prioritize buying healthier food options and those who do not. There are no theories that identify the differences between these two segments of moms. Identifying influences on the food purchasing decisions of moms who prioritize buying healthier food could enhance food-marketing strategies and positively influence the purchase decisions of other moms. There is limited literature on the purchase intentions of Healthy Food Moms. The principal investigator will explore, through phenomenological research, the purchase intentions of this segment of mothers who prioritize purchasing healthier food for their family.

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to interview a subset of Healthy Food Moms in order to identify what prompts them to routinely purchase healthier snacks for their children. The

investigation is a phenomenological study. Phenomenology is the study of conscious phenomena or simply an analysis of the way in which things or experiences reveal themselves to individuals (Dertouzos, 2012). The major advantage to conducting a qualitative study is that it produces more in-depth and comprehensive information (Key, 1997). This type of qualitative research aims to identify gaps in our understanding of certain relationships or experiences. In the case of this study, the principal investigator analyzed written accounts of a subset of Healthy Food Moms in order to identify shared experiences that play a significant role in their food shopping habits. A major weakness of the phenomenological method is that conclusions depend on the participants who were selected for the study and their ability to articulate their beliefs and experiences within the survey.

In this study respondents' attitudes were measured using an electronically distributed qualitative survey. The major advantage to this method is that Internet surveys are cost-effective and convenient for respondents to complete (Malhotra, 2009). In the case with moms, convenience is an important factor. A disadvantage to using the survey method is that respondents might be unwilling to provide enough of the desired information (Malhotra, 2009).

Another potential disadvantage of the research methodology is that the PI used a qualitative sampling technique. Subject selection is based on respondent availability and the principal investigator's judgment of who would be representative. This is justified because there are no current studies that have evaluated the motives of mothers who routinely purchase healthy snacks for their children. Information collected and evaluated in this pilot study will provide insight for healthy snack food companies, helping them with their brand strategy and marketing campaigns targeted to mothers fitting the subject criteria.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The PI originally contacted 21 subjects. Of the 21 moms contacted, 18 fit subject criteria established by the PI. Data from the qualitative survey was collected over a period of two weeks. The survey consisted of open-ended questions aimed to identify why these mothers routinely purchase packaged snack foods, which snack foods they typically purchase and how they identify whether these foods are healthy. Open-ended questions allow respondents to include more information, which can help researchers better access the respondents' true feelings on an issue (Colorado State University, 2012). Summative content analysis was the method used in order to identify similarities between the subjects' responses.

## **Respondents' Characteristics**

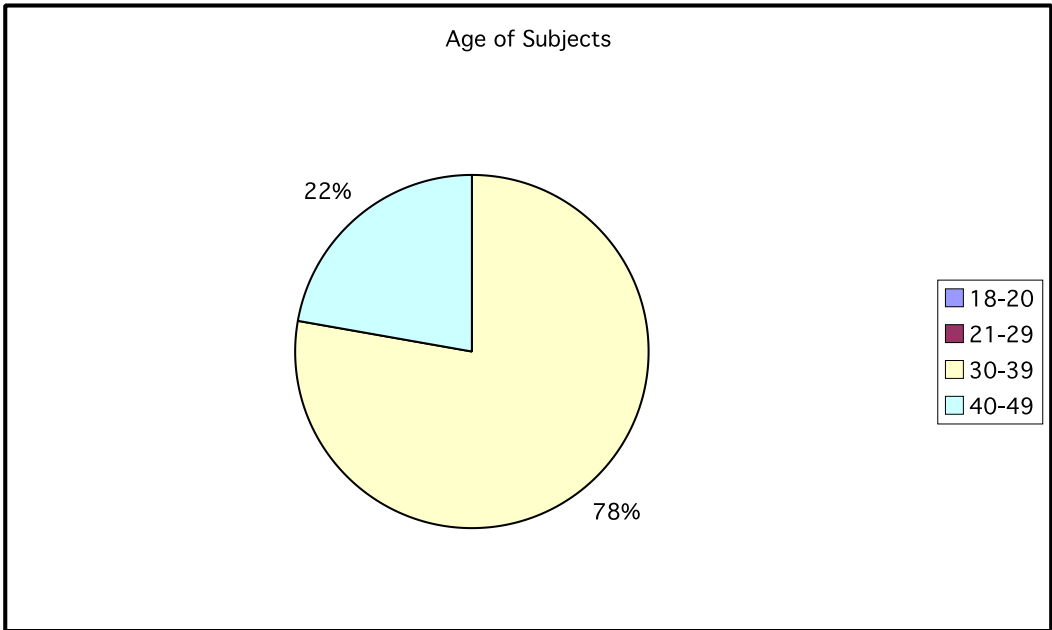
Before being accepted as potential subjects the initial cohort of mothers were provided with a definition of a healthy convenience snack, which was developed by the PI (See Figure 1). Eighteen mothers fit subject criteria by self-identifying themselves as those who routinely purchase healthy convenience food snacks at least seventy-five percent of the time. All eighteen mothers agreed to participate in the study. The mothers surveyed were between the ages 30 and 49 years old (See Figure 2). A majority of the respondents were between the ages of 30-39. The children of the surveyed mothers were between the ages of one and 15 (See Figure 3).

**Figure 1: Definition of Healthy Convenience Snack Food**

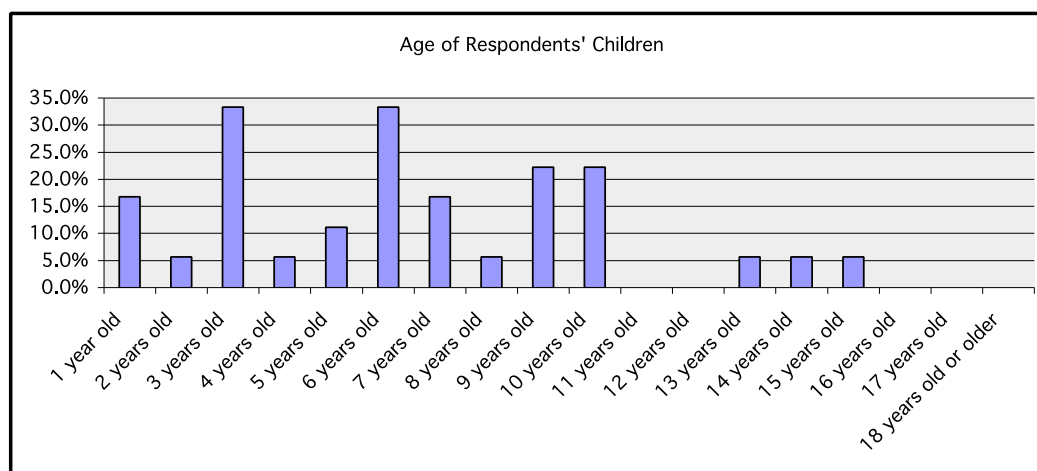
The survey questions refer to healthy convenience snack foods. For purpose of this survey, a healthy convenience snack is defined as the following:

- No trans fats or partially hydrogenated oils
- Contains no more than 35% of its total calories from fat
- Contains no more than 10% of its calories from saturated fat
- Contains less than 360 mg sodium
- Contains no more than 10 grams of sugar, unless the snack has 100% fruit
- Contains no more than 175 calories per serving
- Contains at least 5% of DV or more or at least one: Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium or fiber
- Grain based snacks (such as crackers, cereal bars, granola bars etc.) should have a whole grain appear as the first or second ingredient. Examples of whole grains include whole wheat, oats, rye, popcorn and rice. They should also have at least 3 grams of fiber
- Fruit and vegetable based snacks have whole food ingredients with no artificial flavors
- Is a product that requires no preparation, it can be portable and easy to eat
- Examples of healthy convenience foods are: rice cakes, real fruit leathers, dried fruit, baked vegetable chips, carrot sticks, apple slices, certain granola bars, low sodium pretzels, plain popcorn, etc.

**Figure 2: Age Distribution of Subjects**



**Figure 3: Distribution of Subjects' Childs Ages**



## Results

Four major similarities emerged amongst the subjects:

1. They have no trend in brand loyalty.
2. Their children tend to have little influence in food purchase decisions, or their children select healthier food options.
3. Routinely purchased snacks differ from that of the general population.
4. Participants highly rely on the ingredient list and amount of sugar as benchmarks to measure whether the snacks are healthy.

Exploration of these themes will be reviewed and illustrated by verbatim extracts from the surveys. The identified themes discussed do not cover all aspects of the participants' views. The selected themes were selected due to their relevance to the research question. It is acknowledged that they are a subjective interpretation and that another researcher may have focused on different aspects.

### No trend in brand loyalty

Respondents were asked what brands of healthy convenience snack foods they typically purchase and why. Of the 18 mothers surveyed, six, or 33 percent specifically commented that brand names do not matter to them. Four of these individuals made references that whether a product is on sale is more important than the brand. This was demonstrated by the following responses

- *"Brands don't matter a lot for me. Typically it is the sale items that draw me in."*
- *"Depends on which brands are on sale."*
- *"Whatever is on sale. Store brands if possible...no brand loyalty at all."*
- *"No specific brands."*

The remaining majority of respondents listed various brands they typically purchase however; there was no trend in brand loyalty among the respondents (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Brands Routinely Purchased By Respondents**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Organic, additive free, artificial color free brands | 2 |
| Doesn't matter                                       | 2 |
| Whatever is cheapest                                 | 2 |
| Kashi  | 1 |
| Healthy Harvest                                      | 1 |
| Quaker   | 3 |
| Store Brand  | 1 |
| Natures Choice                                       | 1 |
| Trader Joes  | 3 |
| Cascadian Farms                                      | 1 |
| Cliff Kids   | 1 |
| Monkey Bars  | 1 |
| RW Garcia  | 1 |
| Stretch Island                                       | 2 |
| Baby Bell  | 1 |
| Brown Cow  | 1 |
| Fiber one  | 1 |
| Motts  | 1 |
| Dole   | 1 |
| Glutino  | 1 |
| Gogo Squeeze   | 1 |
| Chobani yogurt                                       | 1 |

The lack of trend in brand loyalty amongst the surveyed mothers correlate with preliminary marketing data indicating that consumers are becoming less brand loyal. Their children tend to have little influence in food purchase decisions, or their children select healthier food options. Food companies tend to target children in order to establish brand loyalty, however in the context of healthy food, this may not be a viable marketing technique. While it has been shown that children have considerable influence on the purchase decisions of mothers (McNeal, 1999), the effects of children on the purchase intention of Healthy Food Moms appears to be less.

While children possess a certain amount of influence on food purchase decisions, research also shows that nutrition gatekeepers ultimately have the majority of control of their child's diet. Wansink estimates that the 'nutritional gatekeeper' of the family has direct or indirect control over seventy-two percent of food eaten by their children (Wansink, 2006). The nutrition gatekeepers also account for ninety-two percent of food purchased in the home (Wansink, 2005).

Mothers in this survey were asked how much say does their children have in their food purchase intentions. The PI found fifty-six percent of surveyed mothers reported that their children exerted little control over the food purchases. They mentioned that when the children shop with them, they do have some say, but mom has the final veto power. This was reflected in the following statements:

- "Very little unless they say it is something they absolutely do not like the taste of."

- “Not much (say).”
- “The children's opinions are valuable, because I won't buy what they don't want to eat. But I retain veto power.”

Another subset of mothers allows their children to participate in food purchasing decisions. Four (22 percent) of the mothers stated that their children have equal or even more say in what convenience snack foods are chosen. Interestingly, there was a theme in the responses in that the children tend to choose healthier items or foods that are typically purchased. These mothers made the following testimonials:

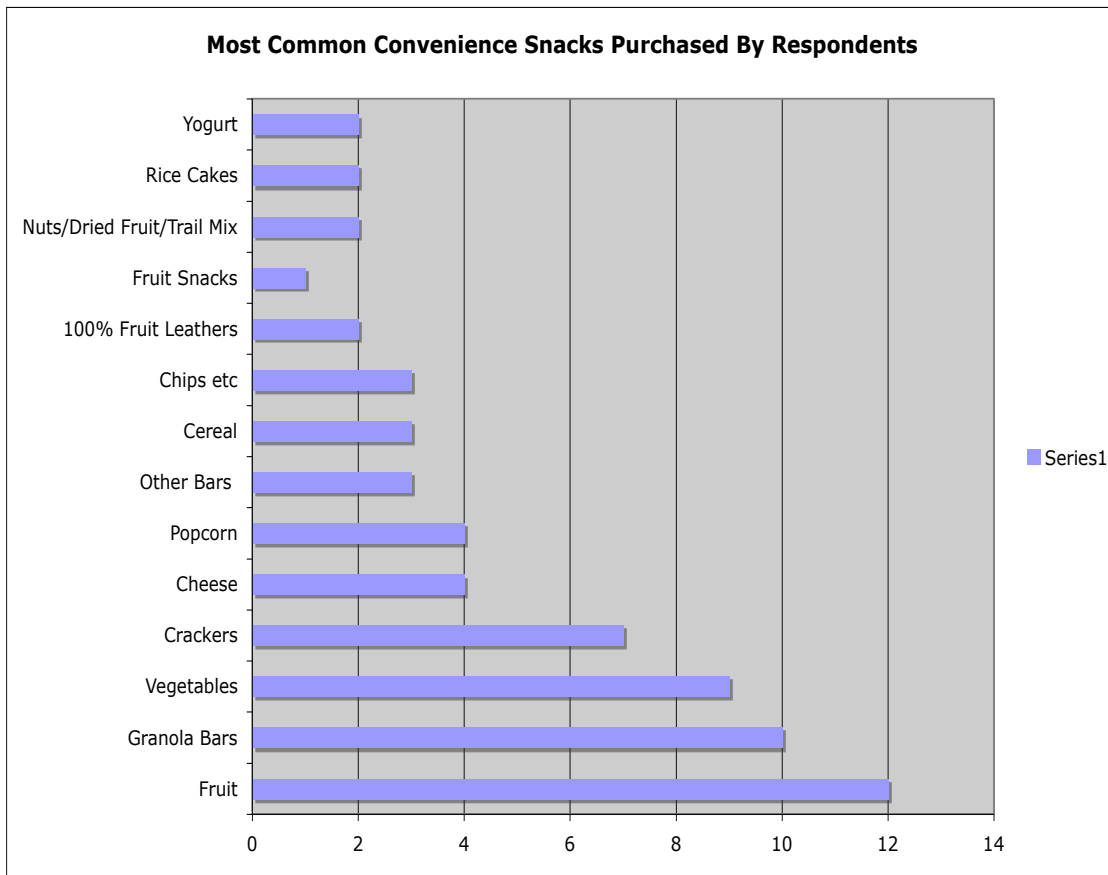
- “My children have a lot of say in purchases but I generally buy the same thing if they are with me or not.”
- “They have equal say, but it does not change when they shop with me. The rules on healthy items still apply.”
- “If they are shopping with me they can typically pick out what they want. They typically have good healthy food choices. They are aware of the differences between junk and healthy food.”

It appears that the children of these mothers either have little influence on the food purchasing decisions or they positively contribute to healthier food choices at the point of purchase. This coincides with Wansink’s research indicating that nutrition gatekeepers account for most of the food purchased for the home. The surveyed mothers’ perceptions of children’s influence may or may not be accurate. Future studies should also gather information that included the perceptions of the children in order to provide more insight as to whether the perceptions of mothers and children match.

### **Routinely purchased snacks differ from that of general population**

Snacks routinely purchased by the subjects were dramatically different than those compared to the general population. For example, the surveyed mothers reported that fruit, granola bars and vegetables were most often purchased (See Figure 4). Whereas the data from NHANES III showed that children in those surveyed soft drinks, salty snacks and cookies as being the most frequently consumed snack, with fruit being ranked last (Figure 5). This suggests that mothers who customarily purchase healthier snacks likely purchase different packaged snacks than the average American mother.

**Figure 4: Snacks Routinely Purchased by Subjects**



**Figure 5: Snacks Routinely Eaten By Children, NHANES III**

NHANES III analyzed by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley demonstrated that 83 percent of kids reported eating one or more snacks on they day that they were surveyed (Porter Novelli, 2002). The NHANES III analysis showed the most frequently reported foods eaten at snack time for the children interviewed are in order:

1. Soft Drinks
2. Salty snacks such as potato chips, corn ships and popcorn
3. Cookies
4. Non-chocolate candy
5. Artificially flavored fruit beverages
6. Whole milk and chocolate milk
7. White bread
8. Chocolate candy
9. Cake ice cream
10. Fruit



## **Participants highly rely on the ingredient list and amount of sugar as benchmarks to measure whether the snacks are healthy**

All respondents referred to using the Nutrition Facts Panel as a measure to how healthy a product is. This is noteworthy because research indicates that individuals who read the nutritional label on food products tend to report making both healthier food choices and have improved nutrient intakes. One study, conducted by a team of researchers from Colombia University, examined whether using nutritional labels affected individuals' nutrition intake. Using 2005-2006 NHANES data, researchers found that those who used food labels reported higher nutrient consumption (Ollberding, Wolf &Contento, 2010).

A majority of the mothers surveyed specifically mentioned using sugar content and the ingredient list as a measure of how healthy prepackaged snack are for their children. Participants were asked "how do you determine whether a child's convenience snack food is healthy?" Some of the mothers responded by saying:

- "I look at the ingredients, look for whole grains, real fruit, no sugar or high fructose corn syrup."
- "How short the ingredient list is, if I cannot pronounce it, it is a rare treat if it is something like candy or cookies..."
- "I look mainly at how many grams of sugar it contains."
- "Try to figure out from label. Amount of sugar, sodium and saturated fat."
- "I look at the ingredients, look for whole grains, real fruit, no sugar or high fructose corn syrup."

Additional research evaluating nutrient intakes of the children would provide better insight as to whether their nutrient intakes correspond with mothers' food label reading. This could replicate findings by Ollberding and colleagues, further adding to the value of reading labels. This can impact front of label packaging as well.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this phenomenological study warrant further qualitative and quantitative research identifying the food purchasing motives of Healthy Food Moms. In order to determine if the findings are consistent with this segment, a larger sample size of mothers with similar characteristics is necessary.

It is interesting to note that the typical snacks purchased by this cohort are considerably different than those consumed by the American children surveyed in the NHANES III cohort. Whether this characteristic is unique to the mothers from this cohort, or is representative among other mothers with similar purchase intentions remains to be seen. This would be a unique theme to explore in future studies.

A majority of the surveyed mothers believe their children have little to no influence in their food purchase decisions. Some mothers also report that their children know how to make their own healthy choices in the grocery store. The mothers' perceptions of children's influence may or may not be accurate. Gathering information that included the perceptions of the children may provide more insight as to whether the perceptions of mothers and children match. Identifying the intrinsic values of these mothers that propels them to prioritize healthy food

purchases for their children could unlock a great amount of information for public health officials who want to educate parents.

Snack food companies can use some of the preliminary data in order to engage in more meaningful marketing research related to this target segment of Healthy Food Moms. Having a clear understanding of mothers who prioritize buying healthier food for their children can improve marketing and brand strategy techniques.

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