

Future tension: Mad enough to tax soda

February 12 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

(Medical Xpress)—Simply reading about a future marketing campaign – a plan to pitch sugary soda to kids using NBA basketball and hip-hop music themes – makes some adults mad enough to slap a tax on soda.

But if news of the ad campaign is in the past tense, passions quickly cool, a Cornell communication study has discovered.

"The same action undertaken by the food industry, like marketing soda to children, may evoke stronger negative emotions and greater support for a health policy initiative when it is framed prospectively rather than retrospectively," said Jonathon P. Schuldt, assistant professor of communication in Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "The future is maddening; the past, not so much."

Together with Sungjong Roh, a Ph.D. student in the field of communication at Cornell and the lead author on this work, Schuldt analyzed reactions of 245 survey participants to past-tense and future-tense news reports about a soda company's campaign to market their sugary product to children. Their results appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Health Psychology* (online Jan. 27) under the title, "Where There's a Will: Can Highlighting Future Youth-targeted Marketing Increase Support for Soda Taxes?"

Despite their strong popularity among health professionals, taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages appear to be less popular among the American public, Roh and Schuldt observed. (Soda taxes have been proposed – and failed to pass – in 30 states or cities.) Soda tax advocates

have often tried to further their cause by highlighting previous efforts by soda companies to target children.

The Cornell researchers wondered if highlighting an upcoming [ad campaign](#) would be more motivational. If readers knew a company was about to exploit children's affections for basketball and hip-hop to help sell their product, would they feel angry and upset enough to sanction a higher tax on the stuff?

The past-tense and future-tense news stories (see sidebar) were presented on Amazon.com's crowd-sourcing worksite, Mechanical Turk. Survey takers were asked basic information, such as gender and age (most were in their 30s) and whether sugary soda products should be taxed.

"Greater support for the soda tax was observed in the future condition than in the past condition," the researchers reported. "Moreover, participants in the future condition reported heightened negative emotions toward the (soda) company's actions."

Perhaps the future seems "more controllable than the past, which may promote stronger emotional responses and other action tendencies," they wrote.

They offered this advice to health policymakers: "Attempts to recruit public opinion in favor of obesity-reducing initiatives by implicating youth-targeted marketing in the nation's health crises may enjoy greater success simply by highlighting practices that will occur."

Are you mad yet? Survey takers in the Cornell study read either past-tense or future-tense versions of this story:

Sprite launched (will launch) a new campaign last month (next month) that is encountering opposition from those who are concerned that kids are already drinking too much [soda](#). The new TV advertising campaign has been (will be) timed to coincide with a busy week in NBA basketball. Sprite has also launched (will also launch) a campaign to contribute funds to neighborhood parks and basketball courts. As a Sprite's representative said, "Basketball ... is a way to get teens around the world to express their passion and show off their moves." Another representative said that Sprite's park campaign, and its collaboration with hip-hop artist Drake, has also helped (will help) to engage teens.

More information: "Where there's a will: Can highlighting future youth-targeted marketing increase support for soda taxes?" Sungjong Roh, Jonathon P. Schuldt. *Health Psychology* 01/2014; [DOI: 10.1037/hea0000021](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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