



Investigating whether Irish parents’ purchasing behaviour regarding breakfast cereals is swayed by the ‘health halo.’

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Submitted to the National College of Ireland (August, 2025)

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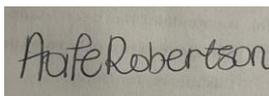
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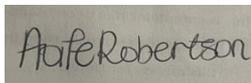
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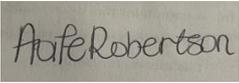
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Abstract

This study will investigate whether Irish parents' purchasing behavior is swayed by the "health halo" effect when purchasing breakfast cereals for their children. The term "health halo" refers to a cognitive bias in which consumers may overlook less favorable characteristics in a product in favor of a single nutritional claim, such as a "high in iron" or "low in sodium". This research examines perceptions that Irish parents have regarding the nutritional values of breakfast cereals. Such research has not been conducted in Ireland before and could provide an insight for marketers and governmental agencies in policies on nutritional claims in the future.

A phenomenological approach was employed in this research, utilising in-depth interviews with six parents of children aged 6 to 12. Thematic coding was used to highlight key themes relevant to the research objectives. The qualitative research approach examined the relationship between "health halo" claims, purchase behaviour, and nutritional literacy. Qualitative research gives the opportunity to gauge a deeper understanding of parents' convictions, motives, and trade-offs between health and other factors such as brand familiarity, child's taste preferences and price. Findings indicated that all parents had been deceived by the health halo effect in the past and there was a reliance on governmental intervention to prevent such practices. Results suggest that the presence of specific health claims can significantly influence parents' decisions, although all parents show strong intentions to adopt healthier options. These findings emphasise the need for more thorough and precise front-of-pack information to mitigate the effects of the health halo, which has implications for labelling legislation, public health policy, and consumer education.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Aim of the study

This study aims to investigate whether Irish parents are swayed by the ‘health halo’ effect when purchasing ready-to-eat breakfast cereals. Attention is given to how parents perceive marketing techniques used by cereal companies and how these techniques affect their purchasing intentions. The literature review has identified that clever marketing is impacting parents' purchasing decisions of ready-to-eat cereals and that parents are influenced by the ‘health halo’ effect of these products (Jaslow, 2011; Cardiff University, 2018; Harris et al, 2011; Martin, 2018; Stolze et al, 2021). This study offers insights into parents' perceptions of nutritional labelling and the marketing techniques employed by ready-to-eat cereal companies. The questions that emerged from the literature are fundamental to the aims of this study. These questions include:

- How do Irish parents interpret and react to ready-to-eat breakfast cereal packaging regarding the health halo?
- Do Irish parents believe that ready-to-eat cereal companies are genuine and truthful in their advertising methods?
- Do Irish parents believe that the government and marketing firms should safeguard consumers from the deceptive advertising of ready-to-eat cereals?

1.2 Current research situation

Research indicates that ready-to-eat (RTE) breakfast cereal companies invest billions annually in marketing efforts to persuade consumers to purchase their products (IMT, 2022; Statista, 2025). However, there is compelling evidence that these companies are using the health halo effect to boost these hefty profits (Driessen et al, 2022; Quinn, 2022; Parra Murrillo et al, 2021; Harris, 2010; Martin, 2018).

It was in the mid-20th century that Davis (1954) suggested, “Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dinner like a pauper.” Since then, the notion that breakfast is the most important meal of the day has become almost universally accepted. Numerous studies have demonstrated the significance of a healthy breakfast. (O'Neill et al., 2015; Mayo Clinic Health System, 2024;). It is particularly important that children receive a healthy breakfast daily, as it aids both physical and mental development (Wesnes et al., 2012; Widenhorn-Muller et al., 2008). Childhood obesity is a significant public health challenge for countries

worldwide, including Ireland. Research indicates that eating a healthy breakfast can help reduce the prevalence of obesity in children (Duan et al., 2022; Dhurandhar et al., 2014).

The literature provides an insight into the use of a ‘health halo’ effect when advertising RTE cereals. The phrase ‘health halo’ emerged in recent decades, referring to a marketing strategy employed by businesses that generates the impression that their products are more nutritious than they actually are (Verrill et al, 2017; Harris et al., 2010). The literature maintains that RTE cereal companies use this ‘health halo’ effect to deceive consumers into believing that they are purchasing nutritious products (Parra-Murillo et al., 2021; Brentnall, 2017; and Chepulis et al., 2020). Health agencies, such as the Irish Heart Foundation (2022) and Obesity Ireland (2022), are deeply concerned about the lack of government intervention in these practices.

1.3 Gaps in the literature

While much research has focused on the use of the health halo effect in the marketing of RTE cereals, very little research has investigated parents' perspectives on this subject. Parents ultimately decide what breakfast to give to their children, but an investigation is warranted as to why they buy certain RTE cereals. Kosti et al. (2010) recommend that further research is warranted among the different types of RTE cereals, and only cereals with the best nutrient content should be recommended to parents and children. Likewise, Parra Murillo et al 2021 suggest future research is needed to consider how parents understand implicit claims on RTE cereals.

Further qualitative research is needed to analyse parents' views and perspectives on nutrition claims on RTE cereals. Further exploration is also warranted on who, parents believe, should monitor and protect against the health halo effect on these products. Such research has not taken place in Ireland, and given the importance of a healthy breakfast for children, parents should be aware of deceptive marketing practices and misleading nutrition claims.

1.4 Research Justification and Rationale

Research into this topic is important because a nutritious breakfast is an essential part of a child's day, serving both physical and academic purposes (Ahadi et al., 2015). The health halo effect can mislead parents into believing they are giving their child something more nutritious than it is.

Marketing practitioners must be more cognisant of the effect that the health halo has on parental purchases of RTE cereals. Obesity and health-related diseases are rising annually (WHO, 2023; Mayo Clinic), and marketers need to consider the social and ethical consequences of targeting children and their parents for products that are not as healthy as they may seem. A discussion on neo liberalism is made as parents accept responsibility for their children's diets. However, the government may need to implement additional preventive measures to protect parents from deceptive marketing techniques.

1.5 Structure of the dissertation

Chapter 1 -Introduction

The selected research project is briefly introduced in the first chapter. The dissertation's objectives are examined, and gaps in the literature are outlined to support the justification of the research topic.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The second chapter provides a detailed insight into the existing literature on the phenomenon of obesity, RTE cereals, misleading marketing techniques, and responsibilities for fair marketing strategies. This provides an overview and understanding of existing research, to which this research study contributes. Deceptive marketing practices are investigated from government, marketers and parental perspectives.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter outlines the justification for the methodological approach, which is outlined using Saunders Lewis and Thornhill's (2019) 'Research Onion' framework. The objectives of the research are outlined, and an explanation is provided of how the research was conducted robustly. An explanation of the research instruments and an in-depth

analysis are carried out, followed by a discussion on ethical considerations and the study's limitations.

Chapter 4 – Findings

This chapter presents details of the findings from the interviews, employing a thematic approach. Salient themes are outlined relating to the research objectives and existing literature. Direct quotes from the study participants will be used to facilitate a deeper understanding and reflection of the phenomenon under investigation. The health halo effect was found to influence parents' decisions when purchasing RTE cereals.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The fifth chapter presents a critical discussion of the overall findings from the interviews. To provide a theoretical understanding of the research findings, these findings are examined in conjunction with key evidence from the literature review. Parents accepted responsibility for what their children ate but believed the government had stringent rules in place to protect against deceptive marketing practices.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter concludes the research study by summarising the overall findings and evaluating whether the research aims and objectives were achieved. Recommendations for future studies are identified. This includes the use of social media to check the nutrition content of foods and further analysis of the battle between parents and marketers.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review Introduction

This literature review will systematically examine key research on the health halo effect of Ready to Eat breakfast cereals. The importance of a healthy breakfast for children will be outlined with an overview of how breakfasts can help to reduce obesity (Duan et al., 2022; Dhurandhar et al., 2014). Insights into RTE cereals will be made, and past research on the health halo effect on these cereals will be examined (Quinn, 2022; Harris et al., 2010; Stolze et al., 2021). An analysis of neoliberalism will connect the apparent reluctance of the government to prevent misleading RTE cereal marketing. Finally, a deep dive into who is responsible for allowing parents to be misled by the health halo effect will be analysed.

2.2 Healthy breakfasts

2.2.1 Importance of healthy breakfasts for cognitive function, weight and nutrient needs

Researchers have shown that breakfast is the most important meal of the day (Sifferlin, 2013). Studies such as that by O'Neill et al. (2015) show a correlation between breakfast consumption and increased daily nutrient intakes in children. However, these benefits of breakfast consumption are dependent on the type of food eaten at breakfast. Healthy breakfasts can help children get the essential nutrients needed for growth and development and support their learning (Adolfus et al., 2013). The Mayo Clinic Health System (2024) maintains that children who eat healthy breakfasts score significantly higher on standardized tests, have better brain function and memory, and show increased focus and alertness. Such is the importance of a nutritious breakfast for children that many schools now offer breakfast clubs to ensure all children have access to a healthy breakfast (Graham et al. 2015).

On the contrary, Rampersaud (2009) suggests that there is insufficient data worldwide to support the argument that there is a correlation between eating breakfast and weight maintenance or increased cognitive function. Adolfus et al. 2013 agree that evidence is quite mixed regarding the correlation between the effects of breakfast on children's cognitive performances.

However, Williams (2014) found that regular breakfast cereal consumers usually have higher daily milk intakes and are more likely to meet their nutrient needs, particularly fibre, B-vitamins, folate, calcium, iron, magnesium, and zinc. This research also found that breakfast cereal consumption is associated with lower levels of obesity. Likewise, Sandercock et al

(2010) found that children who do not eat breakfast are likely to be less physically active and have a lower cardiorespiratory fitness level than those who do eat breakfast. This perspective is further highlighted in studies by Ahadi et al. (2015), who found that the quality and regularity of breakfast consumption are associated with mental performance, academic achievement, physical activity, and quality of life. Studies generally illustrate that breakfast eating has a positive effect on children's cognitive performance, particularly in the domains of memory and attention (Wesnes et al., 2012; Widenhorn-Muller et al., 2008; Ahadi et al., 2015).

2.2.2. Obesity and weight-related diseases

Childhood obesity is a significant public health challenge for countries worldwide (Duan et al. 2022, Mayo Clinic). Childhood obesity can affect a child's self-esteem and lead to depression (Mayo Clinic). High sugar intake is associated with higher rates of obesity. Worryingly, Farugue et al. (2019) found that in the Western world, we consume more than 300% of the daily recommended amount of added sugar. The WHO (2023) states that childhood obesity increases the risk of obesity, noncommunicable diseases, premature death, and disability in adulthood. Simmons et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis to understand the long-term impact of childhood and adolescent obesity on adult obesity. Assessing over 200,000 participants, the authors determined that obese children and adolescents were about five times more likely to be obese in adulthood than those who were not obese.

Researchers have shown the correlation between breakfast consumption and a healthy body weight (Duan et al., 2022; Dhurandhar et al., 2014). Public health authorities worldwide recommend breakfast consumption to reduce obesity as it jumpstarts the metabolism and helps burn more calories during the day.

Clearly, children must eat breakfast daily and monitor sugar intake to reduce the chances of being overweight or obese in the future.

2.2.3 An Irish perspective.

Obesity is costing the Irish government over 1.6 billion euros annually (Safe Foods Ireland 2012). This figure is set to rise if no intervention is taken. O Donoghue (2025) believes the cost of obesity in Ireland is expected to reach €13 billion by 2030.

Research shows the importance of a healthy breakfast to reduce obesity in children as identified in 2.2.1 above. The Irish government is aware of the significance of breakfasts for children, and breakfast clubs have been in Irish schools in disadvantaged areas for over a decade now and are commonplace in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings. Irish organisations such as the HSE, Irish Heart Foundation, and Bord Bia all encourage parents to give their children breakfast daily, stating firmly, “Make sure your child eats breakfast every day” (HSE, 2022). A study by Bord Bia in 2016 found that cereal is the most popular breakfast for Irish children, with parents choosing them as "they know the children will eat it" and "to get something into them."

2.3 Breakfast cereals

2.3.1 Cereal consumption

Strait’s research (2025) found that the market size of global breakfast cereals was valued at USD 47.14 billion in 2024, but this is projected to grow from USD 49.07 billion in 2025 to USD 72.19 billion by 2033 (Bothare, 2025). According to Bothare (2025), there is a growing demand for Ready to Eat (RTE) cereals for convenience and portability in our fast-paced modern society. In Ireland, revenue in the breakfast cereals market amounts to US\$90.04m or 80m euros in 2025. The market is expected to grow annually by 2.49% from 2025 to 2030 (Statista, 2025).

Studies have shown that the main reason for RTE breakfast cereal consumption is convenience (Chaudhury,2010; Santos et al, 2022). Dominic et al.’s (2018) study further determined that price was the second most important factor when purchasing RTE cereals. In fact, healthiness is in third place when it comes to a reason to purchase these cereals. Research by Santos et al (2022) corroborates the fact that health comes after convenience and price when deciding to purchase RTE cereals. It is argued that food marketers’ primary motivators are taste, convenience, and price. Therefore, the current food system promotes tasty, convenient, and inexpensive foods which contain enhanced flavours through added sugar, salt, and fat, leading to overconsumption and a higher risk of obesity (Chandon & Wansink, 2010).

Ireland is the top country for breakfast cereal consumption per capita, and there has been a growth in claims such as no additives/preservatives, no added sugar, high/source of fibre, and vitamin/mineral fortified (Innova Market Insights 2024). In Ireland, revenue in the breakfast cereals market amounts to US\$90.04m or 80m euro in 2025 (Statistica, 2025). Clearly, breakfast cereals have a dominant place in the Irish market, and this market continues to grow.

2.3.2 Are RTE cereals healthy?

The fortification of Ready to Eat (RTE) cereals helps children meet some of the recommended daily nutritional requirements. RTE cereals are quick and easy and can be a great resource in today's busy world. Children can serve themselves RTE cereals as there is no cooking or toasting involved. Cereals such as Weetabix and shredded wheat have less than 5g of sugar per 100g and are fortified with vitamins and minerals. Smith et al (2019) found that children who ate RTE cereal had higher diet quality than those who did not.

However, a study by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) in the USA in 2011 found that some breakfast cereals targeted at children have 56 per cent sugar by weight. (Jaslow, 2011). The EWG quotes nutrition professor Marion Nestle as saying,

"Cereal companies have spent fortunes on convincing parents that a kid's breakfast means cereal, and that sugary cereals are fun, benign, and all kids will eat. The cereals on the EWG highest-sugar list are among the most profitable for their makers, who back up their investment with advertising budgets of \$20 million a year or more". This is a startling revelation and warrants investigation.

Research by Cardiff University in 2018 is concerning as it found that 8 out of 13 top breakfast cereals provide more than half the Public Health England recommended daily sugar intake for 4–6-year-olds. This research also found that the "majority of products featured potentially misleading nutritional claims, designed to offer a 'halo effect', leaving consumers to consider them healthier than warranted" (Cardiff University 2018). Equally concerning, Harris et. al. (2011) conducted experiments and found that children who ate sugary cereals ate nearly twice as much as children who ate non-sugary cereals.

Dr Rana Conway, a registered nutritionist at University College London, draws attention to the fact that there is no legal definition of breakfast 'cereal'. However, manufacturers tend to use the term 'cereal' on packaging to encourage consumers to think the product is healthy

when this is not necessarily the case. Some ‘breakfast cereals’ are the same as sugary biscuits (Quinn,2022).

The food and beverage industry spends approximately \$2 billion per year marketing unhealthy foods to children. (Kovacic, W 2008). Longacre et al.2017 point out that breakfast cereals represent the most highly advertised packaged food on child-targeted television, and most ads are for cereals high in sugar.

So, while parents are being encouraged to give their children breakfast daily, some of the RTE cereals have questionable nutritional benefits. While there are nutritious RTE cereals on the market, as pointed out by Smith et al. (2019), there are other RTE cereals that are very high in sugar and salt. Research by Owens (2024) suggests that eating an unhealthy breakfast has a similar effect on a child’s school day as having nothing at all.

2.4 Health Halo

2.4.1 What does health halo mean

The term ‘health halo’ has been in use in recent decades and describes a marketing tactic used by companies which creates the perception that products are healthier than they are. An experimental study carried out by Verrill et al 2017 found that when a food item carried a nutrient claim for vitamin fortification, participants were

- Less likely to look for nutrition information on the Nutrition Facts label,
- More likely to select the product for purchase,
- More likely to perceive the product as healthier, and
- Less likely to correctly choose the healthier product.

Harris et al. (2010) state that nutrition experts express concern that the proliferation of nutrition-related claims on product packaging is confusing to consumers, makes it difficult to assess overall nutritional quality accurately, and can be misleading. Using the health halo effect is a very clever marketing tactic, enticing consumers to buy a product which they perceive to be healthy. Health halos can deceive purchasers. Martin (2018) argues that

“parents are being hoodwinked by health claims everywhere they turn” and believes food manufacturers should be held to account for using health halos to trick parents into purchasing their products.

2.4.2 RTE cereals and health halo

Researchers have found that many RTE cereals are marketed with health halo effects (Harris, 2010; Martin, 2018). Research by Cardiff University in 2018 found that the “majority of products featured potentially misleading nutritional claims, designed to offer a 'halo effect', leaving consumers to consider them healthier than warranted”. They discuss the appeal factor of these RTE foods and the effect that nutritional and health claims have on consumers when they see them on a product’s packaging. Marketers have managed to create a “health halo” effect by adding positive health claims on product packaging.

A study on breakfast cereals by Stolze et al. (2021) in Chile found “the presence of nutrient content (NC) claims suggesting benefits from being “high in fibre” and “wholegrain” produced the anticipated health halo effects by improving consumers’ perceptions of the healthiness, vitamin content, naturalness, and quality of the product”. Furthermore, such NC claims led to positive intentions towards the product. They would encourage the consumer to recommend it to others or give it to children, despite it not being in their best nutritional interest. According to Stolze (2021), positive halo effects occur when one favourable claim on a product's package impacts consumers' judgments of other product attributes not mentioned on the package. Such misperceptions of the product's healthiness have been shown to encourage greater consumption of the product. Similarly, Provencher et al. (2009) found that perceiving a food as healthy increased intake of that food.

A noteworthy study conducted by Parra-Murillo et al. (2021) analysed whether Ready to Eat (RTE) cereal packages with nutritional claims are healthier than those without such claims. Out of each of the 178 RTE cereals tested, they found there was at least one area of concern (e.g., high sugar, high calorie) that exceeded the recommended amount. Additional studies by Brentnall (2017) and Chepulis et al. (2020) validate claims by Cardiff University Parra-Murillo et al., illustrating the breakfast cereal industry's lack of care for the true nutritional value of RTE breakfast cereals.

As shown, there is significant research indicating that most RTE cereals are not an ideal breakfast choice for children (Cardiff University, 2018; Jaslow, 2011). However, marketers use catchy drivers such as ‘fortified/ healthy/ low sugar’, etc, to confuse the consumer and give them a false sense of security as they believe they are purchasing something healthy.

2.5 Responsibility

Considering the apparent lack of government regulation or marketing safeguards regarding messaging on RTE’s packaging or advertising, how should parents proceed to ensure they are protecting their children and making better nutritional choices? Who is responsible for ensuring that the health halo effect does not deceive parents?

2.5.1 Neoliberalism

It can be argued that most democratic welfare states are neoliberal nowadays (Garland, 2016). That is, they share distinctive ways of governance such as self-management, risk prevention, and accountability (Navarro, 2007). Individuals are expected to take control of health matters through self-discipline and adopting healthy lifestyles while minimising the role of the state in ensuring optimal health (Navarro, 2007). De Souza (2025) argues that the process of neoliberal subjectivation shifts the burden of health onto individuals, holding them solely responsible for failing to meet healthy outcomes. Put simply, neoliberalism encourages a shift from collective responsibility, where the government provides for the needs of its citizens, to individual responsibility, in this case the parents or indeed children themselves. The food industry is no different, wherein corporations and governments have retracted their responsibility, exacerbating the need for individual scrutiny and informed decision making. Fraser (2020) criticises the level of neoliberalism in Ireland and argues that the food corporation’s only priority here is increased capital. He further condemns the neoliberal discourse ‘blaming the victims’ rather than the corporate powers. Fraser (2020) asserts that

“Corporations fund biased research, co-opt policy makers and health professionals, lobby politicians and public officials, encourage voters to oppose public health regulation, and ultimately implement sophisticated campaigns to undermine public health interventions” p.1.

Moodie et al. (2023) and Nestle (2013) agree with this sentiment, maintaining that global food corporations use huge budgets to protect and expand the power of the food industry. Sinnott (2017) states “The state takes a back seat in neoliberalism” which seems to be the case in Ireland. It seems that neoliberalism is affecting food choices and that Irish parents are essentially ‘on their own’ when trying to make informed decisions about what breakfast cereal to purchase.

2.5.2. Government intervention

Food marketing to children is pervasive across the globe, and marketing of unhealthy foods clearly influences children’s food and brand knowledge, preferences and requests (Cairns et al., 2013). This has resulted in public health scholars and leading global health agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommending the implementation of policies to restrict unhealthy food marketing, including breakfast cereals, to children as a critical strategy for obesity prevention (Taille et al., 2019).

In 2007, Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006, which regulates nutrition and health claims made on foods within the European Union, came into effect. This regulation aims to ensure a higher level of protection for consumers and that products put on the market must be safe and adequately labelled, and “Directive 2000/13/EC generally prohibits the use of information that would mislead the purchaser” (Eurlex, 2006). As Ireland is part of the EU, the regulation was written into law by Minister of Health, James O Reilly in 2014. It is up to individual countries or states primarily to enforce the regulation within their territories. The European Breakfast Cereal Association (EBCA) lobbies to influence policies related to their industry in Europe and spends approximately 350000 euros annually on these lobbying costs (Lobby facts 2020). Boer et al. (2015) question European regulations regarding food claims, as their research showed fragmented national enforcement practices.

Whilst in Ireland, the Department of Health has policy and legislative responsibility for the Food Information to Consumers (FIC), it is the Food Safety Authority (FSA) of Ireland which enforces the regulations.

2.5.3. Effects of government input

While the government has tried to implement some safeguards restricting unhealthy food marketing, the results are worrying. The WHO (2004) states that there are concerning gaps in regulations applicable to the marketing of food to children. They claim that

“Existing regulations do not recognise food as a category in need of special consideration from a public health standpoint. Rather, regulations aim to guide the content and form of promotions, not to minimise their ability to encourage consumption of certain foods”. (WHO 2004).

Closer to home, a study by the FSAI in 2020 “*Finding Healthier Breakfast Cereals and Yogurts in Ireland*” recommended a *healthier choice* portion of cereal which was defined as ‘low sugar’ if it contained ≤ 6 g of sugar, ‘low fat’ if it contained ≤ 3 g of fat, ‘low saturated fat’ if it contained ≤ 1.5 g of saturated fat, ‘low salt’ if it contained ≤ 0.3 g of salt, and a ‘source of fibre’ if it contained ≥ 3 g of fibre. Of the 453 breakfast cereals studied, only 13% of them reached the proposed ‘Healthier Choice’ criteria.

Likewise, in 2021, the FSAI conducted a study “*Reformulation of Breakfast Cereals: The Accuracy of Nutrition Declaration on Food Labels for the Monitoring of Food Reformulation in Ireland*”. This study aimed to “examine the accuracy of the declared nutrition information in line with EC guideline nutrition labelling tolerances” (FSAI, 2021). Breakfast cereals in Ireland were examined in a laboratory using recognised methods for total fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. However, of the tested breakfast cereals, 14.1%, 5%, 9.6% and 1.5% were outside the EC guideline nutrition labelling tolerances for total fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt, respectively (FSAI, 2021). Unfortunately, there is no regulation of the overall nutritional quality of foods bearing health claims regarding fat, saturated fat, sugar and fibre content (FSAI, 2020), which leads to a grey area for consumers.

Following the aforementioned surveys, the FSAI recommended that the contents of the report be considered by a working group on obesity that is tasked with developing a reformulation monitoring programme. The FSAI concluded, “Based on the findings of this study, reformulation monitoring programmes using declared nutrition labels need to be fact-checked at regular intervals using nutrition label verification” (FSAI 2021). These conclusions are hardly a deterrent to cereal manufacturers and indicate neoliberalism referred to earlier.

The Irish Heart Foundation (IHF,2022) is so concerned about misleading marketing for children that they have started the ‘*Stop Targeting our Kids*’ campaign. Director of Advocacy, with the IHF, Chris Macey said, “We had a commitment in the Programme for Government in 2020 on this issue; it is now urgent that we have legislative action in the Public Health (Obesity) Bill to protect children’s health” (IHF, 2022). The *Stop Targeting Kids* campaign aims to build support for Government action to protect children's health through strict controls. Such controls are not yet in effect, some three years later, according to the IHF. This foundation believes that the government must take more responsibility in protecting children against unhealthy food marketing, stating, “Only the State can effectively protect children’s health through national policies, safeguarding them from a proliferation of cheap and intensely marketed energy-dense food that is blighting their lives” (IHF, 2022). The IHF maintains that almost 4 out of 5 adults in Ireland want a ban on the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and drink to children. They further claim that under the present complaint mechanisms, even when the rules have been broken, the consequences are minimal (IHF, 2022). This reinforces the point made earlier about consequences (or lack thereof) by the FSAI when foods are found to be outside of EC guideline nutrition labelling tolerances.

In the same vein, Dr Catherine Conlan from the Irish Medical Times believes it’s time to put Irish children’s health ahead of the profits of the global food industry and is unimpressed that five years after the launch of the voluntary agreement between Government and the food industry to reduce children’s exposure to junk food promotion, the agreement has not been implemented (IMT, 2022). Katharine Jenner, director of the Obesity Health Alliance, is shocked that the government has delayed junk food advertising restrictions, adding that there is no valid justification for this delay (Obesity Health Ireland, 2022).

Evidently, the Irish government is taking a back seat when it comes to marketing RTE cereals and is being urged to do more to ensure parents are not being misled.

2.5.4 Marketers/ Cereal companies.

It is well documented that food marketers are contributing to the worldwide obesity epidemic through increased access to continuously cheaper, bigger, and tastier calorie-dense food. (Chandon et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 2011). Chandon et al. (2011) are highly critical of the food industry, which is now perceived as the “new tobacco industry”, as both industries have used similar tactics, such as emphasising personal responsibility in purchases.

According to Conway (2022), phrases such as ‘added goodness’ and illustrations of grains of wheat suggest in a non-specific way that the cereal inside is good for us, but in essence, manufacturers do this to create a health halo effect (as quoted in Quinn,2022). Dr Conway also points out that there is no legal minimum requirement when it comes to the amount a product needs to be promoted as ‘wholegrain’, which can again mislead consumers. The need for standardised definitions of "whole grain" is being emphasised by researchers and health organisations (Foster et al, 2020; Ferruzzi et al., 2014; Public Health England, 2014), aiming to ensure its accurate representation of actual whole grain content.

RTE cereals have a long history of using child-appealing mascots such as Kellogg’s Tony the Tiger and promotional tie-ins with movie characters such as Sponge Bob SquarePants to promote their products. (Longacre et al.2017). The use of these brightly coloured, animated characters appeals to children and evidence suggests that this marketing approach leads children to “pester” their parents for the advertised product (Huang et al., 2016). This is known as ‘pester power’ and can undermine parents’ intentions to provide their children with healthy, nutritious food. Vinnakota and Mohan (2020) argue that the pressing concern of pester power marketing is that “it is considered unethical and socially irresponsible to consumers, namely the parents”. They further argue that “oppressive high-pressure sales tactics make parents feel helpless” (Vinnakota & Mohan, 2020). Major cereal companies have pledged to adopt self-regulatory initiatives when it comes to marketing to children. However, Sharma et al. (2019) believe that this is only motivated by external threats such as negative public attitudes and government action that restricts key business practices. Linn and Novostat (2008) agree with this sentiment and maintain that:

Under industry self-regulation, child-targeted marketing has become so ubiquitous and sophisticated that it presents a challenge to parental influence over children’s food choices, particularly when companies frequently work with huge budgets and employ child psychologists to exploit children’s developmental vulnerabilities.

Furnham 2000 believes that ‘pestering’ is a natural part of children’s consumerism, and it is up to parents to be responsible and ignore this tactic. Nevertheless, Stanley thinks it is unfair that marketers are targeting children directly rather than their gatekeepers (parents). According to Mayo (2005), children are relentlessly targeted by companies and advertisers, operating on occasion with the ethics of the playground bully. So, while the food industry argues that it is up to parents to decide what foods to give their children, they simultaneously spend billions trying to encourage children to eat unhealthy food.

2.5.5. Effects of Marketing Techniques

Encouraging pester power in children is a lucrative marketing strategy. Studies have shown that emotive words used on cereal packaging are appealing to both children and parents (Heben et al., 2011). Words such as ‘whole grain guaranteed’, ‘yummy’, and ‘tasty’ are likely to encourage parents and children to purchase a product at the point of sale. Russell et al. (2011) state that food packaging has a significant effect on consumers’ choices at the point of purchase. Unhealthy food marketing directed at children increases such food purchases and consumption (Qutteina et al., 2019; Omoruyi et al., 2025).

Children are strongly influenced by front-of-pack features such as cartoon characters, colourful packaging, exaggerated attributes of nutritional benefits, and the use of misleading health/nutrition claims (Omoruyi et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2023). The influence of front-of-pack labelling features on consumer food choices is significant enough to impact public health at a population level. According to the UK Dental tribunal (2018), RTE cereal boxes are “a toxic mix, with claims of ‘nutritional benefits’ designed to blind consumers to sugar content, images of super-sized portions to encourage overconsumption, and emotive language to fuel pester power”. Most researchers agree that food packaging warrants more recognition as a marketing tool and more regulation overall (Berry & McMullen, 2008; Elliott, 2012b; Mehta *et al.*, 2012; Page *et al.*, 2008; Hebden *et al.*, 2011; Chapman *et al.*, 2006; Harris *et al.*, 2010).

Savvy marketers are taking advantage of modern busy families where time is often an issue. Parents find the power of marketing techniques overwhelming, and Williams (2019) is correct in declaring, “It is clear that families are being influenced by surreptitious food packaging, and we strongly support the researchers’ call for stricter regulations on composition and labelling.”

In 2023, several organisations signed a letter to the CEO of Nestlé UK and Ireland stating the nutritious claims on their KitKat breakfast cereals are inaccurate and that the marketing techniques were ‘irresponsible’. The letter was signed by Sustain, the Obesity Health Alliance, the British Dental Association, the British Heart Foundation, and Action on Sugar and Salt, among others, and it was argued that marketing this KitKat cereal as ‘nutritious’

was audacious (Wihlander, 2023). Nestle received this backlash for marketing a product as nutritious when in essence it contains a day's worth of sugar in one bowl of cereal. The letter maintains that "it is cynical in the extreme to try and claim, as it did, that this is 'nutritious'". Nestle was forced to remove this 'nutritious' claim. Wihlander (2023) draws attention to the fact that "It should not take consumer outrage to get the biggest food manufacturer in the world to take responsibility for its products".

2.5.6 Parental responsibility

In response to the backlash received by Nestle for their 'nutritious' KitKat cereal referred to above, Michael Deacon, journalist for the Telegraph, wrote:

"Personally, though, I find this pious nanny-statism even harder to stomach than the cereal. It is not the Government's responsibility to ensure our children eat a healthy diet. It is ours. So, if British children are consuming too much sugar, the people to blame are their parents".

Clearly, Deacon believes in neoliberal ideology and pushes all purchasing responsibility on individual parents. Interestingly, he omits the deceptive choice of wording and manipulative intent on behalf of the corporation involved.

Parents are indeed the primary gatekeepers when it comes to what children eat. Children's eating habits are mainly determined by their parents. Put simply, it is up to parents to ensure that children have a healthy breakfast. However, Noble et al. (2007) found that even though mothers can differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food options for their children, other factors appear to influence their food-related decisions, such as time, money, and avoiding stress during mealtimes. Darcy and McCarthy (2007) found that many Irish families have two working parents and find it difficult to balance their parental responsibilities. This work-family conflict is becoming more prevalent in Irish families, as evidenced by the lack of time to prepare nutritious meals. As Schor (2014) notes, "Time-starved households have become easy prey for marketers". As stated earlier, health comes in third place after convenience and price as a reason to purchase RTE cereals (Santos et al, 2022). Time constraints, working long hours, children's activities, and weariness from overwhelming schedules can result in parents going for the easy option (Nepper & Chai, 2016).

Mac Donaill (2024) points out that many parents do not realise that RTE cereals are ultra-processed, which means they have probably undergone multiple processing steps where sweeteners, emulsifiers, preservatives, colourings, and flavourings are added. Cowburn and Stockley (2005) found that consumers reported difficulties in comprehending nutrition labels, and similarly, Harris et al. (2010) found that most consumers misunderstood nutrition label meanings. Marketers have spent decades convincing parents that RTE cereals are a healthy option for their children. Misleading claims and health halo effects are exacerbating this issue and making purchasing decisions very difficult for parents. While it is true that parents are responsible for what their children eat, they are facing an uphill battle against savvy marketing firms. Driessen et al. 2022 argue:

“Attempts to regulate children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing through government-led policies are challenged by commercial interests. Parents shoulder the responsibility of counteracting the effects of omnipresent unhealthy food marketing that children are exposed to within the food environment... unhealthy food marketing leads parents to feel undermined in their ability to provide healthy foods to their children”.

Supporting this argument, Martin (2018) maintains that parents are being deceived as food manufacturers are using sophisticated tricks to make products appear more nutritious than they are. Parents are expected to counteract the impact of unhealthy food marketing on their children's food behaviours and ensure they meet the recommended dietary intake for healthy development.

Enhanced safeguards are necessary to shield parents from the manipulative tactics employed by food marketers. Fraser (2020) argues that Ireland is indeed a neoliberal state, and the government wants little or no involvement in restricting big corporations’ lucrative marketing mechanisms. Food marketers are engaging in deceptive practices by making unsubstantiated health claims (Harris et al, 2010; Stolze et al. 2021).

2.6 Literature review summary

Evidence shows the importance of children getting a healthy breakfast every morning (HSE, 2022; Duan et al., 2022). Ireland relies heavily on RTE cereals as a breakfast option due to convenience, price and health benefits. However, many RTE cereals are not healthy and are high in sugar. Consumers are being duped by clever marketing tactics that imply their cereal is healthier than it is. This health halo effect encourages families to buy and even consume more RTE cereals. While the government has made small steps to limit this health halo effect, marketers continue to deceive consumers. Fraser (2020) blames Ireland's neoliberal stance for allowing firms, not government or public health experts, to decide how products are marketed. While the government seems to have taken a back step on the health halo effect, the marketing companies are making hefty profits (Statista, 2025). Parents are being forced to navigate the RTE cereal world with children pestering them for a particular brand, whilst simultaneously being duped by misleading claims and health halo effect.

Health experts believe that the government needs to do more (IHF, 2022; Obesity Health Ireland, 2022), but to date, individuals carry most of the burden of deciphering RTE cereal claims. There has been no investigation into the beliefs that Irish parents have when purchasing RTE cereals. Are they being deceived by the health halo effect? Do they look at nutritional guidelines? Do they take the marketers' word and believe that the government would protect them against misleading claims? Do they have an inaccurate evaluation of how healthy RTE cereals are?

Such questions will be researched more in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Methodology Introduction

This chapter will outline and thoroughly discuss the methodological considerations of this study. The structure of this chapter mirrors the research onion framework outlined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012). This begins with the research aims and objectives, which are relevant to this study. The research method and philosophical reasoning will be identified followed by details of the research approach and strategy. An outline of the sample group, data collection and data analysis will be made and finally there will be a discussion of the study's ethical considerations.

The research methodology chosen for this study is qualitative research, as it enables the researcher to explore and understand individuals' subjective perceptions surrounding a social phenomenon prior to contrasting the results with the current literature (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

3.2 Research aims and objectives

Researchers must have a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of a study, ensuring their research question and hypothesis are precise and relevant to the study (Saunders et al., 2019). Methodology methods, data collection instruments, and the strategies used are all determined by the research question, making it crucial for the researcher to carry out extensive research on the topic ahead of creating the research questions (Sim & Wright,

2000). Hancock et al. 2007 state that all research must involve an explicit, disciplined, systematic approach to gathering strong and reputable data, using the method most appropriate to the question being asked. The purpose of this research is to build on the existing literature regarding RTE cereals and analyse Irish parents' perspectives of the nutritional quality and marketing claims on RTE cereal boxes. This study aims to find out if parents are being deceived by a health halo effect on RTE breakfast cereals. It is hoped that this study will inform parents and RTE cereal companies about misconceptions arising from nutritional claims of cereals targeted for children as proposed by Parra Murrillo et al, (2021).

Clearly defined research objectives are crucial for answering research questions. The outcomes of research can vary based on the objectives of the study (Saunders et al., 2019). The following research objectives will tackle the research question.

3.2.1 Research objective 1

“Examine how Irish parents read/respond to RTE breakfast cereal labelling regarding the health halo”

There is much research done on the health halo effect as identified in the literature review (Harris, 2010; Martin, 2018). As Irish families are the biggest consumers of RTE breakfast cereals worldwide (Innova Market Insights, 2024), this objective will examine the level of scrutiny Irish parents engage in when looking at nutritional guidelines on cereal boxes? Do parents read the nutritional content, or do they glance at the headlines on the box, such as ‘fortified,’ ‘nutritious’? Researchers have found that parents have difficulty comprehending nutritional content (Cowburn and Stockley 2005, Harris 2010) and may take the marketer’s word that the product is ‘healthy and nutritious’. To what extent do Irish parents scrutinise the health claims of RTE cereal before buying it? Riley (2015) conducted a study on parents’ experiences of using labelling information when making breakfast cereal choices for their children in the U.K. She found that parents interpret products with nutrition claims to be of a superior nutritional status. This is in line with the theory of Hamlin et al. (2015), who maintain that people are affected by the presence of the label rather than the actual nutritional content.

The WHO (2019) maintains that “*the principal aim of Front of Pack Labelling (FOPL) is to provide convenient, relevant, and readily understood nutrition information or guidance on food packs, to assist all consumers to make informed food purchases and healthier eating choices*”. However, many researchers question the validity of this statement and believe that the aim of FOPL is to confuse consumers and manipulate them into purchasing products (Mazzu, (2025), Conway, (2022), IHF, (2022)).

This research will assess parents’ understanding of front-of-package nutrition claims on children's cereals and their influence on purchase intent. Harris et al. 2011 conducted a similar study in the USA over a decade ago. They found that the

majority of parents misinterpreted the meaning of claims commonly used on children's cereals. They inferred that cereals with claims were more nutritious overall and might provide specific health-related benefits for their children; and these beliefs predicted greater willingness to buy the cereals.

However, no such research has taken place in Ireland, and this objective will examine whether Irish parents are more ‘savvy’ in their purchasing decisions.

3.2.2 Research objective 2

Do Irish parents believe the RTE cereal companies are authentic and honest in their marketing techniques?”

Page et al. (2008) conducted research in the US, analysing Promotional Techniques and Content Features on Ready-to-Eat Cereal Product Packaging. They found that many aspects of cereal packaging are intended to increase children's impulsive buying decisions. Furthermore, they argue that a serious examination is needed of public policy concerning children's food marketing of cereal packaging (Paige et al., 2013)

Research indicates that marketers intentionally exploit pester power in children to boost sales (Mayo, 2005; Linn, 2004). Does pester power work in Irish households? Are parents deceived by other clever marketing techniques, such as the portion size, clever front-of-box displays, and cartoon imagery? Research into parents' perspectives on RTE cereal marketing has not been conducted in Ireland. As disclosed earlier, misleading marketing targeted at children worries the Irish Heart Foundation (IHF, 2022), prompting their ‘Stop Targeting our

Kids' campaign. This objective examines parents' views on this campaign, and whether these encourage children to request particular products. The techniques marketers use that encourage Irish parents to buy will also be examined.

3.2.3 Research objective 3

“Do Irish parents believe that the government and marketing companies need to protect the consumer against misleading advertising of RTE cereals?”

As stated earlier, the Irish government seems to be taking a back seat when it comes to marketing for children (IMT, 2022; IHF, 2022). The FSAI is aware of misleading claims, but to date, has taken no action to rectify this (FSAI, 2021). Health agencies such as Irish Medical Times, Obesity Ireland, and IHF all believe that the government needs to do more to protect consumers against misleading claims on breakfast cereals. It is unclear, however, if Irish parents are aware of this relaxed attitude towards misleading advertising. They likely believe that it is a heavily regulated area, so they do not need to investigate further, as the government ‘has their backs.’

Through his research, Nikam (2020) argues that the health department needs to impose strict regulations on unhealthy food advertising in Ireland, as it affects Irish children's food preferences. Research into food marketing to children in Ireland is limited (IHF, 2018). There may be a misunderstanding that contemporary marketers refrain from using deceptive marketing practices, despite the literature review indicating otherwise.

3.3 The Research Onion

The Research Onion, developed by Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2019), is a model that illustrates the stages involved in research development, as depicted in Figure 1 below. The

framework aims to provide researchers with a clear strategy for developing concise research plans. Raithatha (2017) believes that the primary benefit of using this model is that it provides a firm foundation for developing a valid research strategy through its step-by-step method. The “research onion” framework (Figure 1) comprises six layers and is used to illustrate the research process of a study. The steps of the research process highlight several tasks that the researcher must carry out to gather trustworthy and accurate data (Saunders et al, 2019).

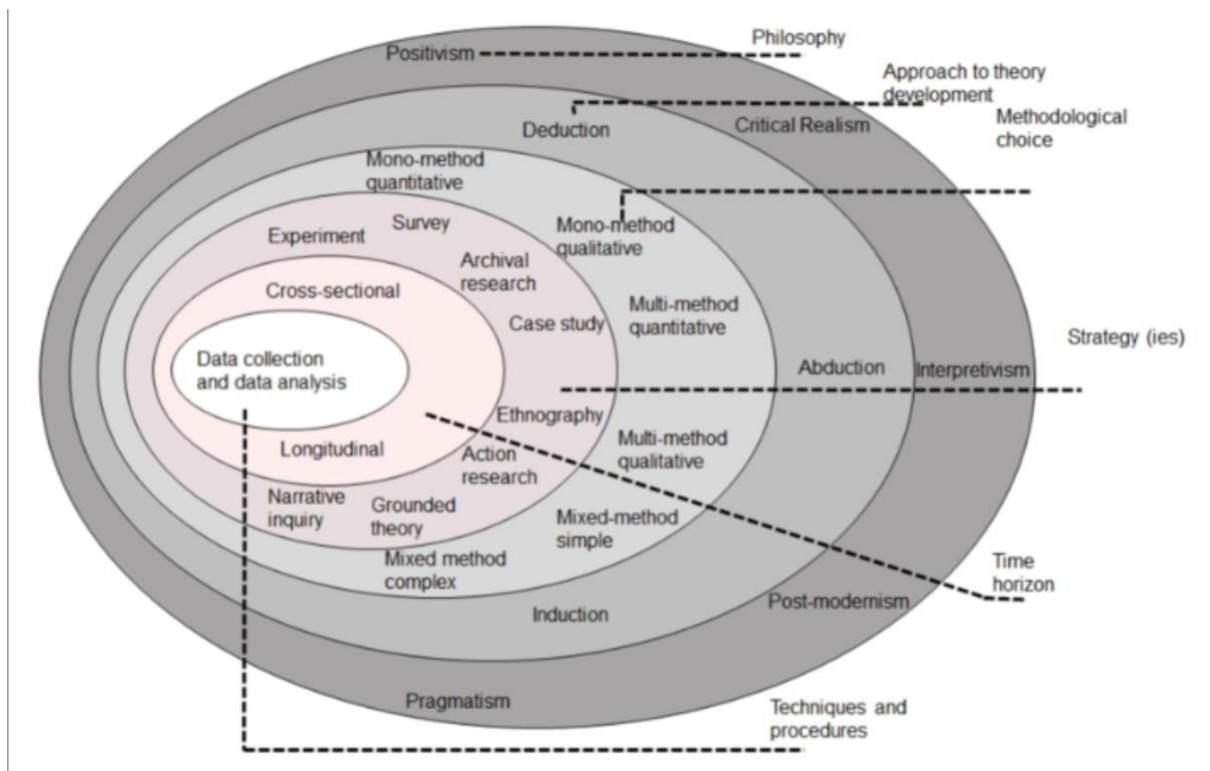


Figure 1: Research onion (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 108)

3.3.1 Research Philosophy

Sobh & Perry (2006) state a research paradigm is the belief system that guides the researcher. Research philosophies provide researchers with theories about the nature of the reality under investigation (ontology) and the validation and creation of this reality (epistemology) (Mauthner, 2020). It is indisputable that identifying the research philosophy is one of the most challenging undertakings for a researcher, and the researcher must invest system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge about research” (Saunders et al., 2019, p.815) The researcher’s chosen philosophy

must be determined by the aims and objectives of the study as it describes the set of beliefs the research is built on. (Hornibrook et al., 2015). Research philosophy can be described from either an ontological or an epistemological perspective.

Ontology is an area of metaphysics that has a variety of meanings. It may pertain to the study of reality or existence in general or to particular aspects of reality, such as monadology (reality is composed of many substances) or monism (reality is composed of one substance). To establish basic principles as the foundation of knowledge, metaphysics investigates the world beyond experience and explores questions that go beyond what we can see and touch (Kant, 2014). Guarino et al., (2009) reports that unlike the experimental sciences, which seek to identify and model reality from a certain perspective, ontology emphasises on the structure and nature of objects in and of themselves, irrespective of any further considerations including their actual existence. For example, it makes complete sense for a researcher to research the ontology of a fictional being such as a wizard since, despite their non-existence, their structure and nature can be explained in terms of general categories and relationships.

Sol and Heng (2022) describe epistemology as a field of philosophy that focuses on the study of knowledge theory. It is considered to be a fundamental field of philosophy because it addresses the nature of our knowledge. The word “epistemology” has Greek roots, coming from two Greek words episteme (meaning “knowledge”) and logos (meaning “the study of”). The study of epistemology relates directly to how knowledge and the researcher engage during the discovery process.

The four philosophies discussed within the ‘Research Onion’ in Saunders et al. (2019) are Positivism, interpretivism, realism and pragmatism. Positivism in research philosophy relies solely on the evidence of science derived from observable, measurable, and objective data (Prime, 2024). Prime (2024) states that positivism “implies a focus on quantifiable phenomena and the use of scientific methods to uncover objective truths about the world”. Interpretivism involves the understanding of feelings or behaviours which cannot be gained through numerical analysis. In this philosophy, human viewpoints, actions, thoughts, and meanings are all considered important.

Realism is an ontological philosophy that focuses on the belief that real entities influence human experiences in a non-predictive manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Realism acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while recognizing that social and historical contexts shape our understanding of it. Saunders et al. (2016) maintain that pragmatism highlights the practical consequences of research and the significance of using the most

suitable methods to address research questions. Pragmatism links both theory and practice and includes researcher involvement and subjectivity.

Stuart Hall (1973) stated that the message encoded by the author is not necessarily the message that will be decoded by the audience. He believes that the decoding of a message is defined as how effectively someone can receive and understand a message. Hall (1973) placed great emphasis on message decoding and argues that there may be differences in how individuals might absorb and understand the information that is being passed on. This is a pertinent issue to be investigated in this research as parents may decode the messages on RTE cereal boxes differently. The way consumers interpret nutritional claims and food packaging information is subjective and influenced by numerous factors. Individual knowledge, motivations, and even pre-existing beliefs about health and food can lead to differences in how people understand and apply the information, potentially influencing their food choices

Therefore, this research will involve an interpretative approach, as the research will focus on individual's thoughts and perspectives. Interpretivism supports a qualitative research methodology as researchers can build relationships with participants to subjectively interpret study data. This interpretive approach will provide an insight into parents' perceptions of RTE cereals and their views on misleading marketing techniques. Nickerson (2024) states that the interpretative research approach focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within their social context, which is the most suitable approach for this particular study.

3.3.2 Research Approach

There are two main research approaches: inductive and deductive. Deductive reasoning focuses on creating and evaluating hypothesis.

Ormerod (2009) suggests that deductive logic is unable to describe how individuals react to their surroundings, while Ayalon and Even (2008) have determined that deductive reasoning does not accurately represent how people think.

The primary difference between the two approaches remains that deductive reasoning attempts to test an existing theory, whereas inductive reasoning seeks to develop a new theory (Saunders et al, 2019). Inductive reasoning proceeds from observations to broad generalisations, while deductive reasoning works the other way around (Kumar, 2024).

Trochim (2006, as cited in Soiferman, 2010) states that the most effective method for expressing arguments based on observation or experience is inductive research approaches, while the most effective method for expressing arguments based on rules, laws, or other widely accepted principles is deductive research approaches.

Researchers have also been critical of the inductive research approach as conclusions may be probabilistic rather than definitive (Popper, 2001; Bergdahl & Bertero, 2015). However, Woiceshyn & Daellenbach (2018) maintain that researchers do not need to establish a fundamental hypothesis or a particular set of questions to verify when conducting exploratory research. The research or phenomenon at hand can be examined through observation.

In this research, an inductive research approach will be taken. Saunders et al. (2019) maintain that the inductive approach involves the researcher gathering applicable data surrounding their research topic before analysing and identifying patterns within the collected data. With the inductive approach, the theory is the outcome of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this case, the researcher will collect rich, detailed data through interviews and analysis of texts or documents. The inductive approach works from the bottom up, where the researcher will gather thoughts and opinions on RTE cereal marketing, with the outcomes of the data collection likely to lead to the development of a new theory (Jebreen 2012).

3.3.3 Research Strategy

The research strategy based on the aims of the study will outline how the research will be conducted. There are several research strategies or designs. Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2019) say that although no one method is inferior to another, it should be at least partially consistent to the rest of the methodology. Strauss and Corbin (2019) define Grounded theory as “the theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process”. Grounded theory research is typically qualitative and takes an inductive approach (Tie et al., (2019). Grounded theory-based studies usually start with a research question and qualitative data collection to try to answer the question. (Chapman, Hadfield & Chapman, 2015). Grounded theory is not without its critics. Bryman et al. (2011), for example, argue that grounded theory rarely yields formal theories.

Nonetheless, this researcher agrees with Charmaz and Thornberg (2020), who argue that “grounded theory method offers useful strategies to develop researchers’ theoretical

analyses” and “generates new concepts in their discipline and the larger research literature”. Grounded theory research strategy will be used in this research because with grounded theory it is data that informs the development of a new theory, model, or framework. Berg (2002) used grounded theory when researching influences on school children's dietary selection at breakfast.

Through analysing interview transcripts, the researcher will identify key themes in parents’ attitudes towards nutritional content in RTE cereals. However, Saunders, Lewis & and Thornhill (2019) maintain that there can be confusion around the labels attached to the strategies associated with qualitative research, which can often lead to the researcher overlapping strategies. This may be the case in this research, and a grounded theory approach will be taken rather than strictly applying grounded theory.

3.3.4 Methodological Choice

There are three methodological choices available to researchers:

- Qualitative approach
- Quantitative approach
- Mixed methods approach

3.3.4.1 Quantitative Research Methods

The cornerstone of evidence-based decision making is Quantitative research. Its significance cannot be overstated: quantitative research techniques offer empirical rigor, allowing practitioners (business), preachers (academia), and policymakers (government) to extract actionable insights from data (Lim, 2024). Quantitative research involves asking questions such as “how long,” “how many,” and “the degree to which.” (Ghanad, 2023). The primary objective of quantitative research is to measure data and extrapolate findings from a sample of a study with various viewpoints (Ghanad, 2023). Bryman (2016) states that with an emphasis on testing theory and based in a logical approach, quantitative research relies on data collecting and analysis that is inspired by empiricist and positivist ideologies. When employing this research approach, researchers choose methods such as secondary data, questionnaires, surveys, and observation. The researcher maintains objectivity whilst

conducting the study and seeks precise measurement and analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Although quantitative data provide valuable insights into measurable variables and relationships, they might overlook the richness and complexity of human experiences, emotions, and behaviours. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Likewise, Creswell & Creswell 2017 argue that quantitative methods help researchers test specific hypotheses and control for known variables, but they can also miss unexpected variables or confounding factors that could affect the results. Many quantitative research studies have been conducted on breakfast cereal claims (Parra Murrilo et al, 2020, Williams, 2014; Harris et al, 2011; Tong et al, 2018)). But to this researcher's knowledge, no research into the attitudes and perspectives of parents regarding RTE cereals has taken place in Ireland. This research seeks to take a deep dive into why parents might purchase certain RTE cereals. As identified earlier, Hall's (1973) encoding model aims to ascertain incredibly subjective viewpoints, and such a depth of information which is required by the present study would not be achieved using a quantitative approach.

3.3.4.2 Qualitative Research Methods

'We can never achieve a complete 'scientific' understanding of the human world. The best we can do is to arrive at a truth that makes a difference that opens up new possibilities for understanding' (McLeod, 2001, p. 4). Qualitative research, according to Ugwu et al., (2023), is the study of the nature of phenomena, including their quality, various manifestations, the context in which they occur, or the perspectives from which they can be perceived; however, it does not include their range, frequency, or position in an objectively measured chain of cause and effect. Qualitative research draws from constructivist and interpretivist paradigms and seek to understand a research problem on a deeper level rather than predict the outcomes (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

A common criticism of qualitative research is that the results of a study are rarely generalisable due to the small sample sizes and the participants are not chosen randomly (Leung, 2015). But Agius (2018) correctly points out that in qualitative research "generalisability is based on the assumption that it is valuable to begin to understand similar situations or people, rather than being representative of the target population". Barnham

(2015) states that when a “deep” understanding of customer behaviours, attitudes and motivations is needed, qualitative research is needed.

A study conducted by Meyerding and Aherns (2024) explored the perception young adults have of food healthiness with qualitative methods, using the Kellogg’s brand as an example when conducting focus group discussions. The study aimed to increase customer knowledge on food healthiness by highlighting to younger consumers the potential disparities between nutritional claims made on food packaging and real nutritional value. Similar work is needed focusing on perceptions of parents on the RTE cereals they are giving their children

3.3.4.3 Mixed Methods Approach

Quantitative and Qualitative research methods investigate different types of questions, gather different types of data, and produce distinct types of solutions from one another. Both sets of methods offers a particular strategy to answer specific kinds of research, and each method comes with inherent advantages and disadvantages (Wasti *et al.*, 2022). Almeida (2018) maintains that by using mixed research methods, it allows the researcher to access valuable data that would be impossible to obtain by using just one method. While mixed methods may seem ideal, this is not always the case. Integrating findings from both methods can be challenging, especially when trying to present a cohesive narrative (Pattera, 2024). Additionally, combining both approaches requires more resources in terms of time, effort, and money.

As noted earlier, quantitative research is abundant on RTE cereals. The researcher has outlined why a quantitative study would not suit this research in 3.3.3.1. There is a clear lack of qualitative research in this subject area, particularly in Ireland. The qualitative method presents the findings in the consumers’ own words and employs multiple perspectives to understand reasoning, viewpoints, and motivations. This research process is adaptable enough to allow for the emergence of new understandings throughout the study of RTE cereals and enable the interpretation of real experiences. This could be valuably corroborated using Hall’s Encoding Model, referred to earlier, outlining different responses requiring research that allows the respondent full capacity to voice their experiences in their own words. This further justifies the need for more qualitative

research surrounding nutritional claims on RTE cereals, particularly within an Irish context, ensuring the researcher has an in-depth understanding of parents' perspectives when it comes to the marketing of RTE breakfast cereals.

3.3.5 Research Time Horizon

There are two types of time horizon: the cross-sectional and longitudinal. The longitudinal research approach involves gathering information over an extended period of time so that researchers may monitor how a phenomenon or group evolves. Caruana et al. (2015) maintain that the longitudinal study refers to the study of a phenomenon or a population over a period.

The cross-sectional study design is a style of observational study. During a cross-sectional study, the researcher will simultaneously measure the outcome and the exposures in the study participants. Participants are selected based solely on the exclusion and inclusion criteria specified for a cross-sectional study, unlike other observational studies, such as cohort studies or case studies (Setia, 2016). Cross-sectional studies examine data from a population from one specific point in time, making them relatively inexpensive and simple to conduct. There is no prospective or retrospective follow-up with the participants. This study design is helpful in collecting preliminary data for planning a more advanced study in the future, allowing researchers to collect data and evaluate relationships between exposures and outcomes on the research subject (Wang and Cheng, 2020).

A longitudinal study is not deemed necessary in this research as it is exploratory and a cross-sectional study suits best. The data for this study was collected from individual, semi-structured interviews with six participants throughout two weeks in July 2021, and is deemed as cross-sectional (Saunders et al., 2016).

3.3.6 Techniques and Procedures

3.3.6.1 *In Depth Interviews*

In-depth interviews are a suitable method for learning about a phenomenon and gaining insights into what is occurring in an exploratory study (Saunders et al. 2015). In-depth interviews were used for this research as it is used to collect data on the participants' subjective experience. The objective is to gather comprehensive information that highlights an individual's viewpoints and the meaning they attach to a particular subject, problem, or process (Rutledge and Hogg, 2020). This study used in-depth interviews meeting with parents across Ireland, investigating their views, opinions and thought processes when it comes to purchasing breakfast cereals for their children.

Despite having a predetermined list of questions, a semi structured interview is flexible enough to allow for the emergence of new themes and additional inquiries. By using this research technique, it allowed interviewees to discuss the subject at end freely and in their own words. Interviews with participants of this study lasted from 40 minutes to over an hour.

Jennings (2005) notes that the key to a successful interview is the development of rapport, respect for one another, and reciprocity. The benefit of using in-depth interviews in a research process is that it allows the researcher to obtain rich and detailed information about the research topic. A disadvantage, however, is the time needed to collect and analyse the findings following the interviews, and there is potential for bias by the interviewer (Jupp 2011). The author addressed bias by making sure the interviewee was not led or directed in any way by the researcher and that the questions were written impartially. During the data analysis phase, the author took care to interpret the interviewee's experiences and only use the participant's words.

A pilot interview was conducted to determine the suitability of the questions, test transcript and recording logistics, and to identify any gaps or overlaps across the questions. The pilot test proved that the questions were being asked were too long and used language that made them difficult to follow at times. A copy of the final interview questions used for the in depth interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3.6.2 Focus Group

A focus group entails gathering a group of people and asking them for their honest opinions toward a product, concept, or idea (Leung and Savithiri, 2009). This qualitative research method encourages participants to talk to one another, share stories, offer comments, and ask questions about one another's experiences and viewpoints. Freitas et al. (1998) maintain focus groups combine aspects of group observation and in-depth interviews by interviewing participants as a group. Focus groups can offer robust conversations that may offer greater insights where respondents feel more validated in their behaviour through hearing other members share similar views.

Although the format of a focus group aims to avoid the risks of a nominal group process, an outspoken participant can “hijack” and control a discussion (Leung and Savithiri, 2009). Focus groups were not deemed appropriate for this study as there was a risk of the possibility of ‘groupthink,’ where some group members adhere to the prevailing viewpoint and results are contaminated (Hair et al 2010). The purpose of this research is to garner a deep understanding of parents' purchasing behaviours relating to breakfast cereals for their children. Parents might feel reluctant to speak openly about RTE cereal purchasing for fear of being judged by other parents. In-depth interviews are a more appropriate method of research as they allowed the researcher to speak one-on-one with parents and garner deep insights relating to each parent’s individual experiences without fear of criticism.

3.3.6.3 Sampling

The selection of a subset from the larger population is known as sampling, and it is critical to research since it determines the generalizability and nature of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). The appropriateness of a study’s sampling strategy will determine the success of any research study. A thorough selection process is an essential element for any research project in order to establish the same size accurately using an appropriate sampling strategy (Ahmed, 2024). Sampling is categorized as “probability” or “nonprobability” (Saunders et al., 2016). . In probability sampling each unit in the population has a known, nonzero probability of being included in the sample but it is more appropriate for survey and experimental design strategies (Henry, 1990).

Three well-known methods of non-probability sampling are quota sampling, purposive sampling, and convenience sampling (Battaglia, 2011). For this research study, the sample

was gathered employing purposive sampling techniques. A purposive sampling method was chosen for this research because it allows researchers to choose specific participants who will most effectively respond to the research questions (Saunders et al., 2015). The method is particularly suitable for smaller samples and when highly informative insights are required (Saunders et al., 2015).

3.3.6.3.1 Purposive sampling:

Purposive sampling, according to Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024), is commonly used in research articles because it can be applied to any research paradigm and ensures that the researcher selects a high-quality, bias-free sample. This in-hand increases the credibility and reliability of the research findings. Thomas (2022) credits purposeful sampling, saying that the approach makes research planning more customizable, and ultimately saves the researcher time and expenses by hand-selecting their sample based on precise qualities. Purposive sampling suits this research as the researcher needed to interview parents of children aged 6 to 12 in Ireland. Adopting this sampling technique allowed the researcher to connect with the target sample group, meeting the study's criteria. A type of purposive sampling known as judgement sampling occurs when units are selected for a study using the researcher's professional opinion.

3.3.6.3.2 Sample size:

Before the interview process began, a sample size was not established but was determined once theoretical saturation was reached. Discursive saturation describes the point in research when no new ideas or themes emerge. Saunders et al. (2017) maintain that discursive saturation has been cited as an essential methodological component of qualitative research. Fusch and Ness (2015) argue unequivocally that 'failure to reach saturation has an impact on the quality of the research conducted'.

For this research, parents of young children from three different Irish demographics were used. The researcher contacted primary school principals in Tipperary, Dublin, and Cavan, who in turn gave details of two families interested in taking part in this research. Three parents met with the researcher face-to-face, while three parents met through Zoom due to time constraints and distance. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by Microsoft

Teams and analysed by the researcher, enabling them to explore topics, tendencies, and reach conclusions that fits well with the thematic and qualitative nature of this study.

3.3.6.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is used to identify the themes gathered during the data collection process. The qualitative data analysis of this study was carried out based upon an interpretivist research philosophy and an inductive approach in line with similar studies such as Harris et al, 2021, Barnett, 2016). The Literature Review section is beneficial at this stage of data analysis since the information collected throughout the research will be examined alongside what other scholars have written on the subject. This is presented in Chapter 5 Discussion.

One strategy used by qualitative researchers to maintain the study's trustworthiness while balancing the demands of qualitative analysis is the use of coding stages or phases (Bingham, 2023). Saldana (2008) maintains that a code generally refers to a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a salient, essence-capturing, summative and/or emotive quality. First cycle coding and second cycle coding are the two primary stages of coding as stated by Saldaña (2013). First cycle codes are those that are first applied to the data whereas second cycle codes can be applied to the data within the generated first cycle codes.

Thematic analysis is a research technique that is used to find and analyse themes or patterns in a collection of data which often presents the researcher with new perspectives and understandings (Boyatzis, 1998). However, Naeem et al (2023) states that it is imperative that researchers refrain from allowing their own preconceptions to interfere with the detection of key themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis of data identifies, analyses, and interprets patterns of meanings or themes within qualitative data. The themes were then further categorised in line with the three research objectives.

Eslami et al, 2024 used a thematic approach when studying the barriers and facilitators of parental adherence to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's dietary guidelines for young children. Similarly, in this research a thematic approach was taken with themes initially divided into major and minor themes. The themes were then further categorised in line with the three research objectives. Themes that emerged were consolidated following the coding process, and key, recurring themes were recognised. This thematic approach aligned with

Creswell and Poth's (2016) guidelines, which emphasise the importance of exploring participants' underlying reasons, perspectives, and emotions related to each identified theme.

According to best practice, the researcher's thorough examination of the interview transcriptions and observations identified significant words, concepts, or phrases that align with or oppose the existing theory, which is referred to as 'open coding' (Saunders et al., 2016; Quinlan, 2011). The gathered information was carefully read and listened to by the researcher offering the opportunity to comprehend the results and amend any misinterpretations from the automated transcriptions.

Each interview transcript was meticulously analysed to identify relevant themes and patterns. The coding process began by reading through the data and identifying key concepts, patterns, or features. Related segments of information were clustered together according to their assigned codes. Codes were then grouped into larger themes, which are meaningful patterns linking related ideas and highlighting important insights. Body language during the interview process was also acknowledged, and similarities/mannerisms were documented. This open coding process facilitated 'fracturing or breaking open the data' and resulted in the summarisation of the information into descriptive low inference codes (Punch, 1998, p.211). A manual thematic analysis was performed, providing insights into the relationships between the literature and the themes identified (Kozinets, Dolbec and Early, 2014). The themes which emerged are detailed in Chapter 4; Findings.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Miteu (2024) states that ethics are a guiding principle that influences the conduct of researchers. Ethics affect the process of discovery as well as the uses and implications of scientific discoveries. Respecting human rights, managing data, honesty, integrity, using

resources responsibly and the dissemination of research findings are a few examples of ethical considerations that need to be made whilst conducting research. According to Razali et al., (2025), the Research ethics Consultation Services (RECS) have emerged as a vital tool for addressing ethical regulation issues we see in the research industry across the world to tackle the challenge of gross research misconduct. Researchers can foresee and resolve such challenges early in their research with the help of REC'S structured support, which ensures adherence to ethical principles and fosters ethical planning.

The researcher of this paper read and adhered to the National College of Ireland's (NCI) "Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants" and adhered to GDPR for the collection, storage, and usage of data. Informed consent was secured since all participants are entitled to understand the following: that they are part of a study, the research's objectives, and what will be required of them. Additionally, the participants were assured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be preserved.

3.5 Methodology Summary

This chapter detailed the research objectives, approach and methodology used within this study. The research design was defined following Saunders et al., (2019) 'Research Onion' framework, incorporating 'inductive' methodology and 'interpretivist' philosophy. The topic for this study is parents' perceptions of nutritional labels on RTE cereals, and a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was determined as the best approach to achieve research objectives.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

The central focus of this research is to understand parents' perceptions of nutritional labelling on RTE cereals and whether they are being deceived by the health halo effect. As outlined in the methodology chapter, six in-depth interviews were carried out in July. This chapter will offer a detailed overview of the parent's views on the advertising of RTE cereals and their understanding of their nutritional value. The findings from the interviews are presented in thematic groups. A variety of direct quotes will be presented to ensure an accurate reflection of the interview process and the parents' views.

4.2 Research Objective 1

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1

“Examine how Irish parents read/respond to RTE breakfast cereal labelling regarding the health halo”

THEMES

Misleading Health Claims

Nutritional Labels and Fact Checking

When asked about the importance of breakfast, all respondents believed that breakfast was the most important meal of the day. They agreed that breakfast prepared their child for a demanding day ahead, both physically and mentally.

4.2.1 Misleading Health Claims

The themes emerged from questions regarding the labelling on RTE cereal boxes. Parents were asked how often they read such labels and their views and perceptions of them.

Findings central to the objectives are that the interviewees who participated in the study believed they had been given false or misleading marketing information when purchasing breakfast cereals in the past. Several participants admitted to reading claims such as “high in fibre” or “low in sugar” on the front of cereal boxes and buying the product with confidence in these attractive claims. The participants agreed that they would be more likely to buy a product with such claims than one without. However, 2 out of 6 interviewees report that they have become savvier when grocery shopping in recent years and will always check the nutritional label on the back when selecting breakfast cereals, rather than just looking at the front. This suggests that consumers are growing increasingly sceptical of marketers and are taking it upon themselves to challenge health claims made by marketers, rather than simply following them blindly.

When asked if they had ever been misled by untrue or exaggerated claims made on breakfast cereal boxes, all participants could recall a moment where they had felt deceived by an advertisement they have seen. Half of the participants mentioned Special K’s misleading adverts in the late 1990s.

“So, I remember, I used to buy Special K thinking that I was really being really healthy. And then I found out after that it’s full of sugar. More sugar in Special K than chocolate Wheatos!.” (Interviewee 2)

Sweeney (2016) reports that the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) banned a Kellogg’s Special K television ad over misleading claims of being “nutritious” and “full of goodness”.

Participant 4 recalls “I read an article in the paper once about the amount of sugar in kid’s breakfast cereals and couldn’t believe how unhealthy they were”.

However, despite having been deceived in the past, most participants admitted that they continue to buy RTE cereals.

“I do check a bit, but my three love breakfast cereal, and sometimes it’s just easier to give them what they’ll eat.” (Participant 5)

“I know they’re not ideal, but at least ‘Sarah’ will eat it. She’s so fussy. I need to get something into her in the mornings” (Interviewee 4). As identified in the literature review, the convenience of RTE cereals can outweigh the health value (Bothare, 2025)

Only one participant had heard the term ‘health halo’ but all participants agreed that there is a health halo effect on RTE cereals once the term was explained to them.

4.2.3 Nutritional Labels and Fact Checking

Some of the parents said that they look at the nutritional labels from time to time but not often. Most parents reported that they found the nutritional labels at the back to be confusing and rarely read them. This can be down to the small writing size, the complicated language or the parent doesn't have the knowledge to understand the labels.

“To be honest, I’d never look at that little box at the back. It doesn’t really make sense to me. I’d chose the cereal more because I know ‘John’ would eat it.” (Interviewee 5).

“I do check the nutritional labels sometimes but if I buy that cereal once I won’t ever check it again as I kinda know what it’s about. I’d never go home, and fact check what was written.” (Interviewee 4)

Not every parent felt this way, with three reporting that they follow a popular Irish Tik Tok account Sophie Morris who educates viewers on food nutrition and reading food labels. They use her page and other social media health influencers as a guide when food shopping as they trust her food knowledge and her intentions as a parent herself.

“I like looking at Sophie Morris’s TikTok videos. She explains how to read the nutritional labels on food and sometimes exposes misleading information. It has helped me be more aware when shopping” (Participant 1)

“I never used to read nutritional labels because I thought all foods were made the same way. But from watching Sophie Morris’s videos, I know now how important it is to read these labels carefully.” (Participant 4)

The use of social media videos was discussed widely throughout the interviews with every participant agreeing that they have seen several social media videos on what foods were healthy and unhealthy including RTE cereals. Such videos demonstrated health halo effects,

even if the term itself was not used. These social media videos were the source of most nutritional information for the parents interviewed.

4.3 Research Objective 2

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2

“Do Irish parents believe the RTE cereal companies are authentic and honest in their marketing techniques?”

THEMES

Breakfast Cereal Packaging. Targeted Towards Adults or Children?

Healthy vs Unhealthy Cereal Marketing

Scrutiny from parents when buying cereal

4.3.1 Breakfast Cereal Packaging. Targeted Towards Adults or Children?

When asked about what they first notice about a breakfast cereal's packaging when in the grocery shop, most of the respondents said they're drawn to nutritious claims on the label. Nevertheless, this did not seem to impact purchasing in half of the respondents. Most participants mentioned that they prefer to grocery shop alone to avoid any pester power from their children. They find that their children are drawn to cereal boxes featuring popular children's characters, even if they don't particularly like the cereal.

When discussing children's characters featured on breakfast cereal boxes, Participant 2 stated: “it makes it very easy for the children to think they want the cereal. They mightn’t even like the taste of it, but the look of the box makes them want to have it.”

Five of the respondents could recall a time when they were pressured to buy a breakfast cereal because their child was drawn to the colourful and playful packaging. Two respondents noted that grocery shops often place sugary and brightly coloured cereal boxes at eye level for children to catch their attention. Pester power is evident when the parents shop with their children.

“I never bring my kids grocery shopping with me because they constantly ask me to buy stuff. If I had my youngest with me and she saw any food item with a character on it, she would just beg me for it. I try not to, but sometimes I give. Life’s short!” (Participant 4).

Participants 3 and 5 admit to buying what their children demand. They acknowledged that there might be extra sugar, but at least the child would eat it, and they wouldn’t have to ‘nag’ them to finish a bowl. This correlates to research identified in the literature review, where Vinnakota & Mohan (2020) maintain that high tactic cereal marketing makes parents feel helpless.

On the other hand, Participant 1 is confident that she can take her children shopping with her as her two children ‘know better’ than to try pestering her for unhealthy foods.

4.3.2 Healthy vs Unhealthy Cereal Marketing

Breakfast cereal companies customise their marketing practices to target a specific audience. All parents were asked whether they could see any differences between how healthy and how unhealthy breakfast cereals are marketed. Everybody agreed that there was a notable difference between the two and that advertising for healthy cereals tended to be “boring.” All participants acknowledged the brightly coloured boxes with interesting characters that entice children’s attention. There was a consensus that marketers did not need to entice consumers to buy healthy cereals, as those who wanted to purchase such products would do so regardless of advertising.

“Well, I suppose the branding that *‘All Bran’* uses makes you assume that it's more suited for older people. But then you have brands like Coco Pops, which is full of fun with the little monkey and is targeted more for kids.” (Participant 2)

“I don’t know if it’s in my imagination but all the kiddie cereal seems to be at the front at the kid’s level. The boxes always look so exciting and fun. My pair are always nagging me to buy them. They wouldn’t even look at a healthy cereal!” (Participant 3)

“Sure, they’re miles apart. The breakfasts targeted at children have mascots, animated characters, free toys and so forth. Healthy breakfasts are just plain” (Participant 4).

The above comments illustrate the clever use of marketing to entice children to want the product. Pester power can challenge parental influence over the children’s food choices. All participants acknowledged the clever marketing tactics used by RTE cereal companies to attract children and persuade them to want the product.

4.3.3 Scrutiny from parents when buying cereal

It can be argued that the responsibility lies with parents to ensure their children have a nutritious diet. This study found that parents often lack the time to read the nutritional labels on the back of every product when shopping for food, and they want to be able to identify healthy foods easily. This research corroborates Cowburn and Stockley's (2005) research, which found that consumers reported difficulties in comprehending nutrition labels. Four parents reported that they have difficulty following nutritional labels. Reasons varied, including unfamiliar ingredients, writing that was too small, and difficulty understanding the metrics. When asked about a traffic light system, all parents were positive towards the idea, stating it would make understanding the nutritional value of RTE cereals easier.

When asked about the level of scrutiny they pay when grocery shopping, only two out of six interviewees report following nutritional labels and comparing brands. This suggests that not everyone has the time or knowledge to read nutritional labels, yet they still want to opt for the healthier choice.

“I don’t look at those little boxes. I wouldn’t have a clue what they’re talking about. I know that cereal is usually quite healthy, and even though there might be a lot of sugar, they’ve loads of added nutrients, which is good for the kids” (Participant 3).

Such a comment aligns with Quinn (2022) who maintains that the use of the term ‘cereal’ encourages consumers to think it is a healthy product.

“No, I don’t check those labels. I’m usually in a rush in the shops and wouldn’t be standing there checking labels. I usually buy the same cereals every week, but to be honest, I don’t check the nutritional labels.” (Participant 5).

On the other hand, two participants have checked the nutritional value of the cereals they bought and researched the ingredients at home. They both try to stay away from cereals with many additives or flavourings. Both participants mentioned Sophie’s videos, with one mother stating “Sophie’s videos are great. She has done all the hard work for me. I would be more likely to buy something she recommends. She even compares the nutritional value of own brand products to cereals by Kellogg’s.” (Participant 6).

4.4 Research Objective 3:

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3

“Do Irish parents believe that the government and marketing companies need to protect the consumer against misleading advertising of RTE cereals?”

Themes:

Lack of Transparency and Regulation

Responsibility for Parents

Call for Government Intervention

4.4.1 Lack of Transparency and Regulation

A strong theme that emerged as part of this research objective is the perception amongst parents that there is a lack of transparency on behalf of breakfast cereal companies towards consumers. A common opinion among parents was that these companies exaggerate the nutritional value of their cereal with misleading claims to conceal its high sugar and calorie content. There was consensus among all parents that the marketers were there to make money, regardless of the consequences. The child's nutritional welfare was not a priority for marketers.

"I believe there is a lot of trickery with cereal marketers. They advertise products that seem healthy but are not that healthy at all. I don't think they should be allowed to get off with this. Sophie Morris' videos are very insightful, and they show how corrupt marketing companies are" (Participant 6).

Similarly, Participant 2 states that "I don't really trust those marketing companies. They try to push us into buying unhealthy things. I have seen loads of TikToks about this". Participant 3 tends to check the nutritional value of cereals because of these TikToks and states that she doesn't take marketing slogans at face value anymore.

All parents noted a lack of transparency with RTE marketing companies, with most mentioning that they received this information through social media videos. Five of the six parents believed that marketers should not be allowed to give free toys or use cartoon characters to market sugary cereals. However, only one parent seemed to have information on the regulation.

"I believe it's the FSAI that monitors regulation in Ireland but I'm not sure how strict they are. I know they did a big survey on breakfast cereals a few years ago and the findings weren't great" (Participant 1)

Four participants believed that the government would not allow anything 'too misleading' to be put on cereal boxes and thought that rules were in place to prevent such misleading information. Interestingly, this is even though they also agreed to having been misled in the past.

"I know there's laws for that kind of thing. The cereal companies wouldn't get off with lies" (Participant 3).

Most parents felt secure that the government had measures in place to prevent anything very misleading from being allowed on cereal boxes. However, when probed, it seems that there

was a blind faith that the government would allow something so untoward to be tolerated. Most parents had not researched what regulations, if any, were in place.

Participant 1, however, was sceptical of how transparent cereal companies are

“I don’t trust those companies at all. I’ve seen numerous videos and articles about this, and it’s shocking. As a teacher, I think it is unfair for lower socio-economic background parents, as I think they are being deceived outright and might not have the literacy skills to make sense of the deceptive advertising.”

4.4.2 Responsibility for Parents

All parents agreed that it was their responsibility to ensure their children ate healthy breakfasts. Most parents had faith in breakfast cereals and saw them as a healthy option for breakfast. They had eaten RTE breakfast cereals themselves as children and were comforted by the fact that cereals were fortified with vitamins and minerals. Half the parents mentioned the fact that RTE cereals are served with milk, which further adds to their nutritional content.

When asked whether it is up to parents to check nutritional labels, the results were mixed. Two parents believed that it was their responsibility. Participant six was clear that it is up to parents to take responsibility for their children’s diets and not depend on a ‘nanny state.’ She believed that parents should regularly check the nutritional content of what they are feeding their children but agreed that parents also needed some protection against clever marketers.

Four parents discussed the obstacles involved in getting their children to eat healthy breakfasts and mentioned the convenience aspect of RTE cereals and how they work well during busy mornings. They reiterated difficulties in understanding nutritional labels and acknowledged that price was a key factor when purchasing RTE cereals. One mother pointed out that healthy options such as granola are nearly double the price of some less healthy options.

“I think it’s hard for mums to choose correctly. While I’d love it if my 2 ate Weetabix or something like that, it just will not happen. I get them what they’ll eat.” (Participant 5).

“It’s so hard to say ‘no’ all the time. The children believe everything that they read like ‘super tasty’ or ‘yummy’. I find it hard to always say ‘no’. They’re only kids!” (Participant 2)

Other participants were in agreement with this sentiment, agreeing that it is the parent’s responsibility but there are many factors involved when choosing RTE cereals, and ensuring that the child would eat the product was a priority. Schor (2014) argues that time-restricted parents are easy targets for parents, and that is the case in this research.

4.4.3 Call for Government Intervention

When asked whether the government should do more to reduce misleading advertising of RTE cereals, all parents agreed. Half of the parents believed that the government and food companies should be responsible for the information they present about their products and be transparent with consumers. They were happy that procedures and checks were in place to prevent “anything too misleading” on cereal boxes. There was an agreement among the three parents that protections were in place and while marketers might use tactics to entice children to purchase products, everything else was monitored.

“I do not think the government can do much more. Like there’s monitoring going on to protect customers. I’m not sure what else the government can do” (Participant 5)

This is interesting as the same parents mentioned being shocked when watching TikTok videos on the amount of sugar in certain cereals. Most parents had faith that the government was already monitoring RTE cereal adverts. However, all but one had done any research into what monitoring or preventative measures are actually in place.

Two parents were adamant that the government needed to do more to prevent the health halo effect.

Participant 1 also believes that more governmental intervention is needed. This parent was sympathetic to busy parents who are enticed by forceful marketing techniques and understands why parents might purchase unhealthy cereals.

“To be honest, the government needs to do more. These marketers are getting off with murder. Being a parent is tough, and I see children pestering their mums all the time in the shops. It’s not fair, and I believe that marketing should be more transparent to prevent this health halo effect. Only governmental input will sort that.”

The majority of the parents seemed to believe that the government is doing enough and bore the responsibility themselves in ensuring their children ate a healthy breakfast, which is often the viewpoint in neoliberal states.

“I don’t really know what you mean about government input. It’s up to us to say ‘no’ in the shop. Or not take the kids with us. Simple” (Participant 5).

4.5 Findings summary

This chapter offered a summary of the thematic presentation of the findings in this research. This included the views parents had towards the marketing of RTE cereals, their perceptions of the health halo effect and who they believed was responsible for ensuring children had a nutritious breakfast. The research objectives were achieved by uncovering the processes and reasons involved in choosing breakfast cereals by six parents using each of the research questions. These insights will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This research aimed to draw on parents’ perspectives of the health halo effect on RTE cereals. A phenomenological approach was used, with in-depth interviews carried out with six parents of children between 6 and 12 years old living in Ireland. This chapter will analyse the key themes that emerged from the data analysis and examine them in light of the literature review. The discussion will be under the three major themes outlined in the previous chapter. The three research objectives described in section 3.2, will be discussed achieving this study’s aims.

5.1 Health halo

The literature highlights that many RTE cereals are marketed with health halo effects leaving consumers to consider them healthier than warranted (Harris, 2010; Martin, 2018). Findings in this study suggest that most parents have been misled by the health halo effect in the past, and that information such as ‘high in fibre’ or ‘low in sugar’ may encourage them to purchase a particular product. Marketers target children with campaigns to entice them to want to purchase certain RTE cereals. The participants observed a notable difference between cereals advertised for children and those marketed to adults. As pointed out in the literature review, children’s cereals tend to have high levels of sugar (Quinn, 2022), and the EWG points out that those cereals with the highest sugar content are most profitable on the market (Jaslow, 2011). This research shows evidence that children in Ireland are targeted by fun, colourful, animated front-of-box RTE cereals. It was also noted that such cereals are placed at eye level for children to entice them further to pick up the box.

Studies have shown that breakfast cereal companies have a lack of care for the true nutritional value of their RTE cereals (Brentnall, 2017 ; Chepulis et al., 2020; Parra-Murillo et al., 2021). Findings in this study show some cynicism towards RTE cereal marketers and an acknowledgement that they do not have the child’s best interest. Participants seem to accept this as an integral part of marketing. There is an awareness that marketers want to make money, and they are not concerned about consequences when selling sugary cereals to children.

RTE breakfast cereals are purchased regularly by Irish parents, and the tradition of eating RTE cereals in Irish households was evident in this study. This study reveals that parents are aware that RTE cereal companies occasionally aim to deceive consumers, and the Special K advertisements stood out as the most deceptive among the cohort. This advert implied that Special K was an ideal breakfast for weight loss when in fact it was very high in sugar. The Advertising Standards Authority eventually banned the special K advert, and the fallout is still apparent almost a decade later. Most participants were aware that cereals targeted at children were likely to contain more sugar. One participant was shocked when she saw the amount of teaspoons of sugar in a single bowl of cereal in a TikTok video. Nonetheless, all parents continue to purchase RTE cereals regularly and there is an apparent resignation to the fact that they are being deceived by marketing companies.

5.1.2 Nutritional labels

Research shows that many consumers have difficulty reading nutritional labels (Cowburn & Stocklet, (2004); Harris et al., (2010)). They do not understand the terminology and find the percentage system difficult to comprehend. Additionally, the print is often very small and difficult to read (Harris et al, 2010). The findings of this study found that most parents did not attempt to read nutritional labels as they found them too confusing or time-consuming. Two participants were well-informed and examined them frequently. Interestingly, all participants used social media videos as a source of information for nutritional guidance at least once. Participants mentioned social media accounts by Sophie Morris, Keith Lee, and Aoife Hearn, and they had more faith in their expertise than in RTE marketers.

“ I like to watch TikTok’s on nutrition. They go through everything and question misleading claims. I trust them more than the cereal companies, as we all know they just want to make money” (Participant 2).

There was consensus that parents would like their child to eat a healthy breakfast. However, despite this, some participants admitted that convenience and child preferences dictated RTE cereal choices rather than the health aspect. This finding aligns with research by Santos et al. (2022) and Chaudhury (2010), who identified convenience as the primary reason for RTE breakfast cereal consumption. The researcher observed coyness or embarrassment when parents discussed prioritising convenience over health, and a need to explain the challenges of parenting in a busy working household. Four participants acknowledged that they rarely check nutritional labels.

“I don’t look at those little boxes. I wouldn’t have a clue what they’re talking about. I know that cereal is usually quite healthy, and even though there might be a bit of sugar, they’ve loads of added nutrients, which is good for the kids” (Participant 3).

Such a sentiment suggests that this parent had improved perceptions of healthiness due to the presence of nutrient content claims, as outlined in research by Stolze et al. (2021) and Provencher et al. (2009).

As identified in the literature review, Dr. Conway questioned the validity of using the term ‘cereal’ due to its lack of a legal definition (Quinn, 2022). This study showed that some participants had naïve trust in the term ‘cereal’ and the term itself had a health halo effect. The use of words such as ‘nutritious’, ‘high in fibre’ gave some parents a false sense of security and they did not feel the need to scrutinise further. Paradoxically, parents

acknowledged that marketers use deceptive marketing measures but blindly accepted front-of-the-box nutrition claims.

This is not the case with all parents, with 2 participants prioritising nutrition and health when choosing RTE cereals. Both participants claimed to frequently check nutritional labels and were careful to avoid cereals high in sugar or those containing many preservatives and additives. They had a good knowledge of nutrition and attributed some of this knowledge to the social media videos mentioned earlier. These 2 participants did not rely on marketers for advice as they were sceptical of their honesty. Instead, they took ownership of what their child ate, indicating the neoliberal ideology referred to earlier.

This research shows apparent variations in the reading and study of nutritional labels on RTE cereals. Several parents acknowledged that they found the labels too challenging to understand and purchased cereals for convenience, perceived healthiness, and taste. On the other hand, two parents were highly motivated by the nutritional content of RTE cereals when deciding what to buy.

5.2 Marketing techniques of RTE cereals

This research found clear differences in RTE cereals targeted to children and adults. Those targeted at adults were deemed ‘boring’ while those aimed at children were fun, colourful and exciting. The use of appealing mascots, free toys, animated characters, and promotional tie-ins with movie characters has the anticipated effect on children, according to this research.

RTE cereal marketers have relied on the ‘pester power’ marketing technique to undermine parents’ intentions to provide their children with healthy, nutritious food. (Huang et al, 2016; Linn and Novostat, 2008). Most parents, in this research, decided that it was easier to shop without their children, so pestering would not be an issue. It was also found that parents were frustrated by colourful RTE cereal boxes being displayed at the child's eye level, encouraging them to grab the box themselves and add it to the basket. Research shows that marketing companies relentlessly target children (Heben et al, 2011; Mayo, 2005). This study found that such marketing strategies are prominent in Ireland, and every parent admitted to being the victim of pester power at least once. There was a consensus that free toys and animations should be withdrawn from RTE cereal boxes to reduce the pester power technique.

Vinnakota and Mohan (2020) maintain that the marketers' use of pester power is unethical, while Mayo (2005) suggest that these tactics are similar to the playground bully. This research aligns with this sentiment as parents seem overwhelmed by the power that clever marketers have. The participants expressed alarm at how exposed their children were to marketing and how easily it was to sway them into purchasing a product. Parents admitted difficulties saying 'no' all the time and pester power was a powerful instrument in purchasing power.

"I try not give into them nagging me in the shops. But it's very hard sometimes. They really believe that it's going to taste great and I do give in sometimes" (Participant 5).

The literature review pointed out the billions spent on marketing of unhealthy food items for children (Kovacic, 2008) while tens of thousands is spent on lobbying to influence policies relating to breakfast cereals in Europe alone (Lobby facts, 2020). This money is having the desired effect with some parents apparently overwhelmed by relentless omnipresent food marketing, which makes it difficult for them to say 'no'.

Half of the parents in this research were frequently swayed by pester power and the clever marketing techniques used in RTE cereals. Nevertheless, the other half were not regularly impacted by such marketing techniques. A common tactic to prevent pester power was not to take the child shopping. Two of the parents were strict with their children, and despite admitting having been impacted by pestering in the past, they did not generally tolerate such behaviour. This aligns with Furnham's (2000) argument that it is up to parents to be responsible for their children and to ignore pestering.

It is noteworthy that parents who ignored pestering and frequently checked nutritional labels had a higher level of education. Those who regularly gave in to pestering and had difficulties understanding nutritional labels did not have a third-level education.

5.3 Government or parental responsibility

Many researchers have indicated that food marketers, including those of RTE cereals, seek to exploit parents by employing clever techniques to make products appear more nutritious than they actually are (Driessen et al, 2022; Martin, 2018). It is apparent from the interview findings that consumers are sceptical of food marketers and believe that making a profit is their primary priority. Despite this, there is a general agreement among the parents that the government 'has their back' and that they would not allow marketers to get away with blatant

deception. The literature review, however, does not support this narrative. A study by the FSAI found that only 13% of RTE cereals met the proposed 'Healthier Choice' criteria (FSAI, 2020). A further study by the FSAI indicates that many nutrition labelling tolerances for total fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt in RTE cereals exceed EC guidelines (FSAI, 2021). So while there is consensus among most participants in this study that the government 'has their back', this is not the case. In fact, many health agencies urge the government to do more to safeguard children from the blight of intensely marketed, unhealthy foods (IHF, 2022; Obesity Health Ireland, 2022; IMT, 2022)

There were varying opinions about the extent of government involvement in RTE cereal marketing. One parent was confident that stringent laws were in place to prevent excessive deception. She did not have any information to back up this claim and seemed to believe blindly that protections are in place. This poses the question of whether parents need to take more responsibility and become more vigilant in checking what their children eat. Fraser (2020) maintains that the Irish government does not want to restrict the lucrative marketing mechanisms of big corporations. This neoliberalism ideology has been accepted by the majority in this study. However, many researchers are sympathetic to parents who are up against these huge marketing companies with astronomical budgets and believe that the government should do more (Schor 2014, Driessen et al. 2022, Martin 2018).

Two parents did not have much faith in the government and believed that marketers had free rein. Participant 1 was sympathetic towards parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as she believed clever marketing tactics were deceiving them outright. She believed that the government should do more to prevent such deceptive practices. This aligns with the findings of the sympathetic researchers mentioned above. As mentioned earlier, clever marketers employ psychologists to exploit children's developmental vulnerabilities (Linn and Novostat, 2008). Such tactics, coupled with huge budgets and lobbying groups, leave parents feeling helpless and vulnerable.

Despite being shocked at videos displaying the amount of sugar in RTE cereals, half of the parents believed the government was doing enough to prevent misleading advertising of RTE cereals. The parents were unaware of the details but felt reassured by the knowledge that laws were in place to prevent deceptive practices. On the contrary, two parents were adamant that the government needed to do more. They were aware of the lack of stringent regulations, with participant 6 referring to the FSAI studies conducted in 2020 and 2021.

Every participant accepted responsibility for their child's nutrition intake. They agreed that it was up to them to ensure that their children had a healthy breakfast each day. This is in line with the neoliberal discourse referred to earlier, where the government can take a back seat as it is the parents' responsibility. Fraser (2020) points out that it is unfair for parents to shoulder the entire responsibility when they are up against the bullying tactics of billion-euro food corporations. However, this study indicates that parents are happy to bear this responsibility, with participant 6 pointing out that we do not want to live in a 'nanny state'. The conflict therein lies with many researchers being sympathetic towards parents trying to win a gallant fight against huge marketing budgets and the acceptance by parents themselves that it is their responsibility to decide what cereals to give their children. If parents are willing to accept this responsibility, they may need to engage in higher levels of self-scrutiny when looking at nutrition.

There was tension in the narrative when parents admitted buying RTE cereals due to convenience and child preferences rather than for health reasons. Parents pointed out that both parents worked and there was little time in the mornings to argue with children about eating their breakfasts. Schor (2014) is correct in his analysis that "Time-starved households have become easy prey for marketers".

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand parent's perspectives on the health halo effect of RTE breakfast cereals. Children should eat a healthy breakfast daily as they tend to have a better diet overall and it provides energy that supports concentration and memory (O'Neill et al, 2015). The increasing obesity epidemic worldwide is of grave concern and is costing governments billions annually (Mayo Clinic). In Ireland, government and health agencies encourage children to eat a healthy breakfast (HSE 2022) and we are the highest consumers of RTE cereals per capita in the world (Innova Market Insights 2024). This research collaborates with the literature, with all participants admitting to having been deceived by the health halo effect in the past when purchasing RTE cereals. Terms such as 'high in fibre' and 'low in sugar' produced a health halo effect by improving their perceptions of the healthiness of the product. While some participants in the study were comfortable reading the nutrition labels on the back, the majority of the parents found the labels confusing and challenging to

read. Such a finding suggests that food producers should adopt a more straightforward method for displaying nutritional content, such as the traffic light system. These findings suggest that RTE cereal marketers have a moral obligation to ensure their advertising is not deceptive and to clearly and transparently disclose the nutritional content.

As identified in the literature review, many of the RTE cereals targeted at children are high in sugar and salt, and there is a consensus among researchers that marketers of the breakfast cereal industry regularly deceive consumers using the health halo effect (Brentnall, 2017; Chepulis et al., 2020; Parra-Murillo et al., 2021). This research reveals a degree of distrust among parents towards RTE cereal marketers. Pester power was acknowledged by all participants as a clever marketing tactic. This tactic has been identified by some researchers as unfair and unethical (Vinnakota & Mohan, 2020; Mayo, 2005). This study found that parents felt overwhelmed trying to compete with marketers' clever tactics and massive budgets, and some participants resigned themselves to the fact that they had to give in to their children's demands. Two participants placed greater emphasis on the nutritional content over convenience. However, both parents had a high level of education and were well-versed in the importance of a healthy diet for children.

In their study of over 7,500 people in seven countries, Pinho-Gomes et al. (2023) found that the majority of respondents believed the government is primarily responsible for ensuring transparent marketing of food items, particularly for children. This is in contrast to the apparent neoliberalism seen here in Ireland, as per the literature review. Sinnott (2007) argues that parents are 'on their own' and are up against huge budgets and sophisticated campaigns employed by the food corporations. While the Irish government may have procedures in place to protect consumers of RTE cereals, the consequences for non-compliance are minimal. (IHF, 2022).

This research confirmed Sinnott's points in the literature review, with all parents accepting responsibility for their child's nutrition intake and most participants believing that the government is doing enough to protect consumers. This is an indication of a neo liberal society where parents do not expect too much input from the government and have a reluctance towards the ideology of a 'nanny state'. The issue is that the Irish government, in fact, is not stringently regulating the marketing of children's RTE cereals. (Quinn, 2022; Obesity Ireland 2022; FSAI, 2021; Schor, 2014). This study has revealed that some parents have a blind faith that the government has strict monitors in place and they feel safe in the knowledge that when they purchase 'cereal' it is somewhat healthy. They perceive that the government is 'on top of things' and take a back seat when checking the nutritional content of

RTE cereals. This finding suggests that parents need to take more responsibility when purchasing cereals and increase their levels of scrutiny.

An interesting finding in this study is that most parents rely on social media videos for information on the nutritional content of food items and the health halo effects. The use of social media videos was prevalent when obtaining information about food marketing, and there was a clear trust in what was being relayed in these posts. This reliance on social media for information on nutritional claims is concerning, as many health experts express concern about the rise of unqualified self-styled ‘nutrition experts’ (Feighin, 2017; O Neill, 2025).

Another interesting finding is the differences in opinions and perceptions of the health halo effect among those participants with a high level of education and those without.

By completing the three research objectives described in section 3.2, it is proposed that the aims of this study have been achieved. The author used a phenomenological approach, using in-depth interviews with six Irish parents in various locations around Ireland to understand their perceptions of the health halo effect of RTE cereals. This methodological approach proved successful, as the author not only answered the research questions but also discovered some new and interesting data for further research.

Recommendations for further research

The research findings suggest future research questions that warrant further investigation. Firstly, an insight into the use of social media as a source for nutrition advice is warranted. As identified, health experts are concerned about the prevalence of unqualified self-proclaimed nutrition experts. This research found that parents placed great trust in these nutrition influencers and more research is warranted.

Another finding is that participants believed the government had rules and regulations in place to prevent very deceptive marketing practices. They are assuming responsibility but for the most part, not scrutinising the data behind the nutritional content of RTE cereals. Marketers versus parents could be a recommended topic for future research, providing a deeper insight into the ‘battle’ between the two parties. Such research would benefit the FSAI and health agencies, and could encourage marketers to recognise the impact of their marketing techniques.

As the findings in this study are specific to a small group of Irish parents, further qualitative examination of other cultures would be appropriate to gauge perspectives of other groups and nationalities.

Finally, a quantitative evaluation of a larger cohort of the Irish population would be beneficial, as it might encourage the government to take further action to protect consumers against the health halo effect of RTE cereals and encourage marketers to become more transparent in their marketing techniques.

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Appendix 2 Interview Questions

Introduction:

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself (name, occupation, where you live, number of children, etc).
2. What do you consider the most important meal of the day? Why?
3. What benefits do you believe a healthy breakfast has for your child?
4. What type of breakfast does your child eat most often?
5. Would you prefer to give your child a sugary breakfast than give them nothing at all?

6. What kinds of cereals do your children eat during the school week, and do these differ at the weekends/ holidays?
7. Are you the person in the home who does the grocery shopping most often? If so, how often do you buy breakfast cereals each week?
8. What factors do you take into consideration when purchasing breakfast cereals for your children?
9. Do your children influence which kinds of breakfast cereals you purchase? How so?

Research Objective 1 - Are Irish parents being deceived by the health halo effect on Ready to Eat (RTE) breakfast cereals?

10. When you're shopping for breakfast cereals what kinds of factors catch your attention from the front of the packaging alone?
11. If a cereal box makes claims of "high in fibre", "low sodium" or "no added sugar", on the packaging, what does this make you think about the cereal?
12. Have you ever bought a breakfast cereal by following such nutritional claims to find out later they were untrue or exaggerated? For example, Low sugar when there really was a lot of sugar?
13. Are you more likely to buy a cereal that has a claim such as 'high in iron' or 'low in sugar'? Why?
14. Have you ever heard of the term 'health halo'?
15. Now that you understand the term, do you believe you have been misled by the health halo effect when purchasing breakfast cereals?
16. How confident do you feel in judging the nutritive value of a breakfast cereal by looking only at the front of the packaging?
17. Do you ever find yourself fact-checking these nutritional claims by using the nutritional labels (such as ingredient list or traffic light system) on the back of the box? If yes, do you find these nutritional labels easy to read?

Research Object 2: *Do Irish parents believe the RTE cereal companies are authentic and honest in their marketing techniques?"*

18. Does branding, cartoon characters, or mascots play a role in your child's preference of cereal?
19. Have you noticed any differences between the way "healthy" and "unhealthy" breakfast cereals are marketed? Maybe differences in mascot, branding, packaging.
20. Can you think of a time when your child has asked you to buy a particular breakfast cereal based on how the box looked or maybe because of an advert they'd saw on tv?
21. Who do you think breakfast cereal companies want their packaging to appeal more too? Children or parents?
22. Do you think your perception about how healthy breakfast cereals really are has been swayed by marketers or cereal brands?

Research Objective 3: Do Irish parents believe that the government and marketing companies need to protect the consumer against misleading advertising of RTE cereals?

23. Do you think that marketing regarding breakfast cereals is transparent to parents and children? is their branding authentic or are they maybe just trying to gain profits
24. Have you ever felt that you have been misled by a products marketing efforts? If yes, tell me what happened
25. Do you think stricter guidelines should be in place for how breakfast cereals are marketed towards children?
26. If a cereal contains high levels of sugar, do you feel companies should be allowed to put nutritional claims on the label such as 'high fibre'? Why or why not?
27. Is there too much responsibility put onto parents for ensuring their children are eating healthy and not enough responsibility on the government or industry supplying the foods?
28. If there were warning labels or simplified health rating on the front of food packaging, do you think that it would help you make healthier choices?
29. Are there any changes you would like to see regarding how breakfast cereals are marketed?

Closing:

30. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the purchasing process you have when buying breakfast cereals?
31. if you could give any advice to policymakers or cereal companies regarding these issues, what might you say?
32. How do you think breakfast cereal marketing should change to be made more helpful or honest to Irish families?