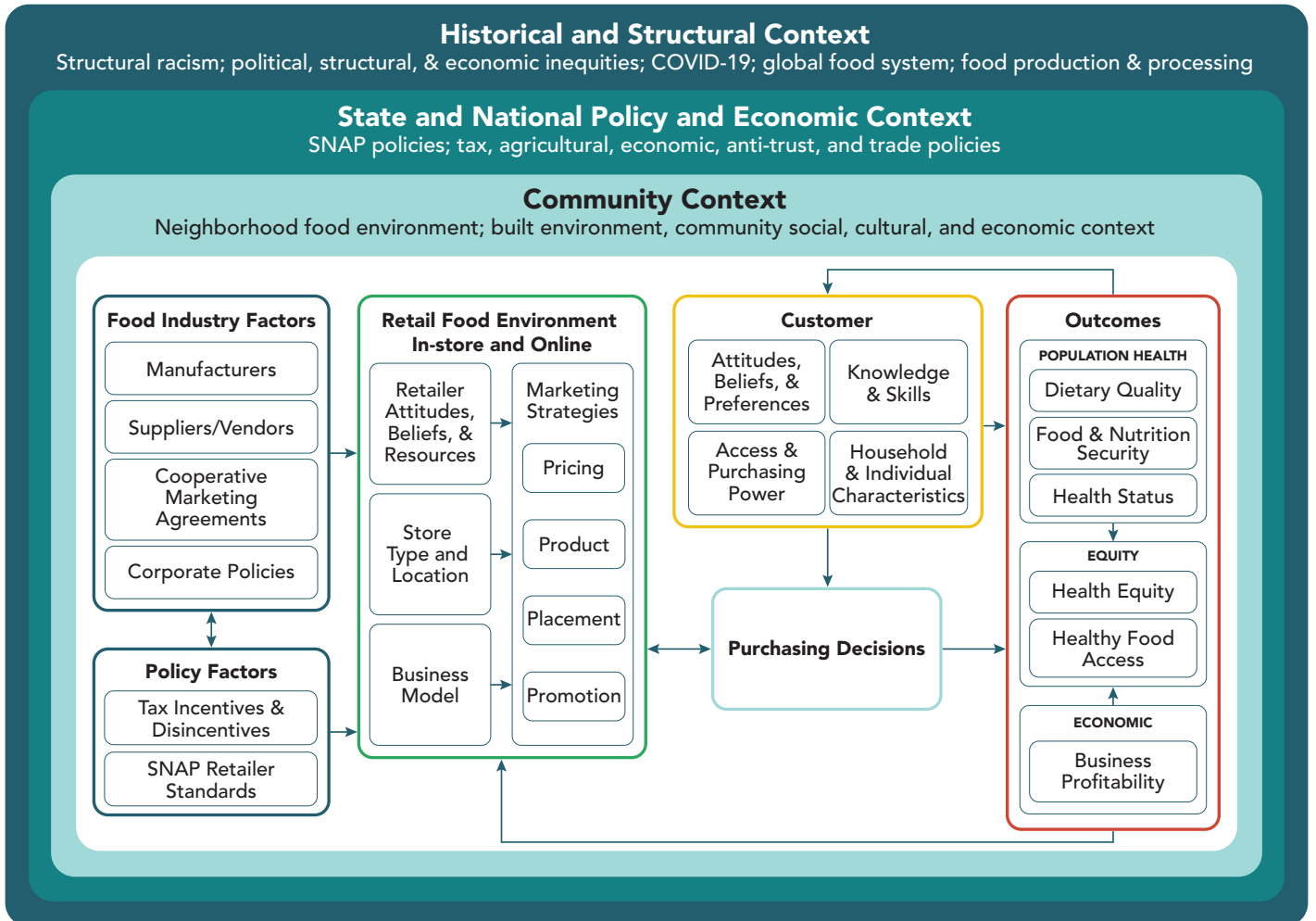


HEALTHY RETAIL FOOD ENVIRONMENT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



The retail food environment plays an important role in guiding consumer purchasing decisions. Retailers leverage product, placement, pricing, and promotion (the four Ps) as key marketing strategies to influence consumer behavior both in-store and online.³ These strategies are disproportionately used to market energy-dense foods that are low in nutrients and contribute to low dietary quality.⁴⁴ Figure 1 displays a conceptual framework depicting the ways in which food industry, policy, and food retailer characteristics influence retailer marketing strategies while connecting consumer purchasing

decisions to population health, equity, and economic outcomes. Additionally, the framework situates the retail food environment, customer level factors and purchasing decisions, and resulting outcomes within broader systemic, historical, cultural, and structural contexts.

FOOD INDUSTRY AND POLICY FACTORS

The retail food environment is directly shaped by food industry factors and policy factors. Specifically, food and beverage manufacturers shape the retail food environment through

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cooperative marketing agreements (CMAs) in which manufacturers pay retailers to preferentially promote specific products in prime locations throughout the store with competitive pricing.²⁹ Contracts with suppliers and vendors influence product availability, while major food retailers have corporate policies that dictate marketing strategies within individual stores.²⁹ Policy approaches can be leveraged to influence both industry and retailer characteristics that shape retail product, placement, pricing, and promotion. Tax incentives to promote healthier food and beverages and/or disincentives for promotion of unhealthy items and SNAP retailer standards are identified in the framework as important opportunities for facilitating healthier food retail marketing strategies.

RETAIL FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Within the retail food environment, marketing strategies are a result of the food industry and policy factors, as well as characteristics of the retail food environment itself, such as retailers' attitudes, beliefs, and resources. For example, small retailers with fewer resources may have a limited capacity to stock healthier foods if this strategy poses a real or perceived risk to profits.⁴⁵ Retailer type (e.g., supermarket, small grocery store, convenience store, online retailer) and business model additionally influence marketing strategies. For example, online retailers use unique marketing techniques such as ordering search results, personalized price offers, and product recommendations.⁴⁶ However, Moran et al. found that over 60% of items marketed online had low nutritional quality.³¹ Conversely, community-owned food stores may prioritize promoting healthful foods over less healthful foods, given that these stores are often mission-oriented with goals of promoting public health and social justice within communities.^{47,48} There are further differences in marketing practices by retailer size. Smaller retailers face more barriers to stocking healthy foods. Though major food and beverage manufacturers, which sell predominantly processed and unhealthy foods, deliver and set up displays for their products,²⁹ smaller retailers must often self-source fruits and vegetables which creates barriers to stocking these products.⁴⁹ Additionally, smaller retailers perceive stocking fruits and vegetables as higher risk, as fresh produce is perishable and smaller

retailers might have to invest in additional refrigeration.⁴⁵ Thus, approaches for improving the retail food marketing environment must be tailored to different store types.

CUSTOMER CHARACTERISTICS

While there are contextual systemic and structural factors that affect the accessibility of food and purchasing behaviors, the retail food marketing environment also interacts with customer characteristics to influence purchasing decisions. Numerous customer characteristics that shape purchasing decisions have been identified in the literature. For example, consumers' attitudes, beliefs, and preferences shape where they shop and how food marketing impacts their decisions.^{50,51} Additionally, consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by their purchasing power, proximity to stores, and ability to physically or digitally access those retailers.^{20,27} Consumers' knowledge and skills may further inform purchasing decisions.^{20,52,53} For example, consumers confident in their cooking skills may be more influenced by marketing strategies that emphasize ingredients for scratch cooking, whereas consumers with limited cooking skills and resources might prefer ready-to-heat and ready-to-eat meals. Lastly, individual and household characteristics such as age, physical ability, work schedules, time availability, number of children, and access to housing and cooking facilities and equipment can all affect food choices, purchasing decisions, and dietary intake.^{20,54,55} Food retailers can respond to consumer purchases by stocking and promoting items they believe their customers want.⁴⁵

POPULATION HEALTH, EQUITY AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

Ultimately, purchasing decisions shape population health, equity, and business outcomes. Most directly, purchasing decisions affect consumers' dietary quality,⁵⁶ which over time can affect diet-related disease risk and health status.^{57,58} Food and nutrition security are also directly impacted, based on the quality and sufficiency of foods consumers can purchase. It is similarly important to acknowledge the role of business profitability, as economic stability is a cornerstone of thriving communities that

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foster health for all. Business profitably, in turn, influences healthy food access, while dietary quality, food and nutrition security, and health status determine health equity outcomes. Taken together, population health and equity outcomes feed back into customer characteristics, while business profitability shapes the retail food environment, demonstrating the dynamic connection between outcomes and the factors that shape food marketing and purchasing decisions.

COMMUNITY, POLICY, HISTORICAL, AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXTS

Finally, these processes must be understood within a broader context. At the community level, important contextual factors include the

overall food environment, built environment, and local cultural and economic factors.^{59,60} In addition to the opportunities for intervening in policy discussed above, there are broader state and national policies and economic factors, such as SNAP benefit adequacy and eligibility rules, which lay a foundation for the ways consumers will interact with the retail food environment.^{61,62} Encompassing all of these are historical and structural factors including structural racism, repercussions of COVID-19 on the economy and supply chains, and the global food system, including food production and processing.