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Advertisements Effects on Childhood Obesity

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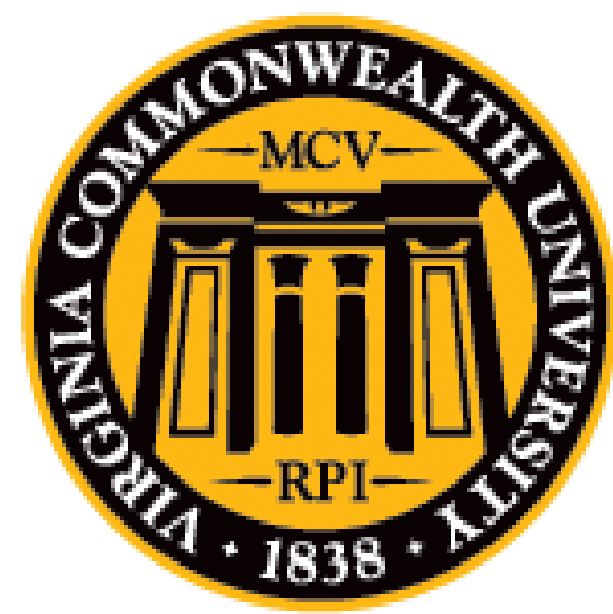
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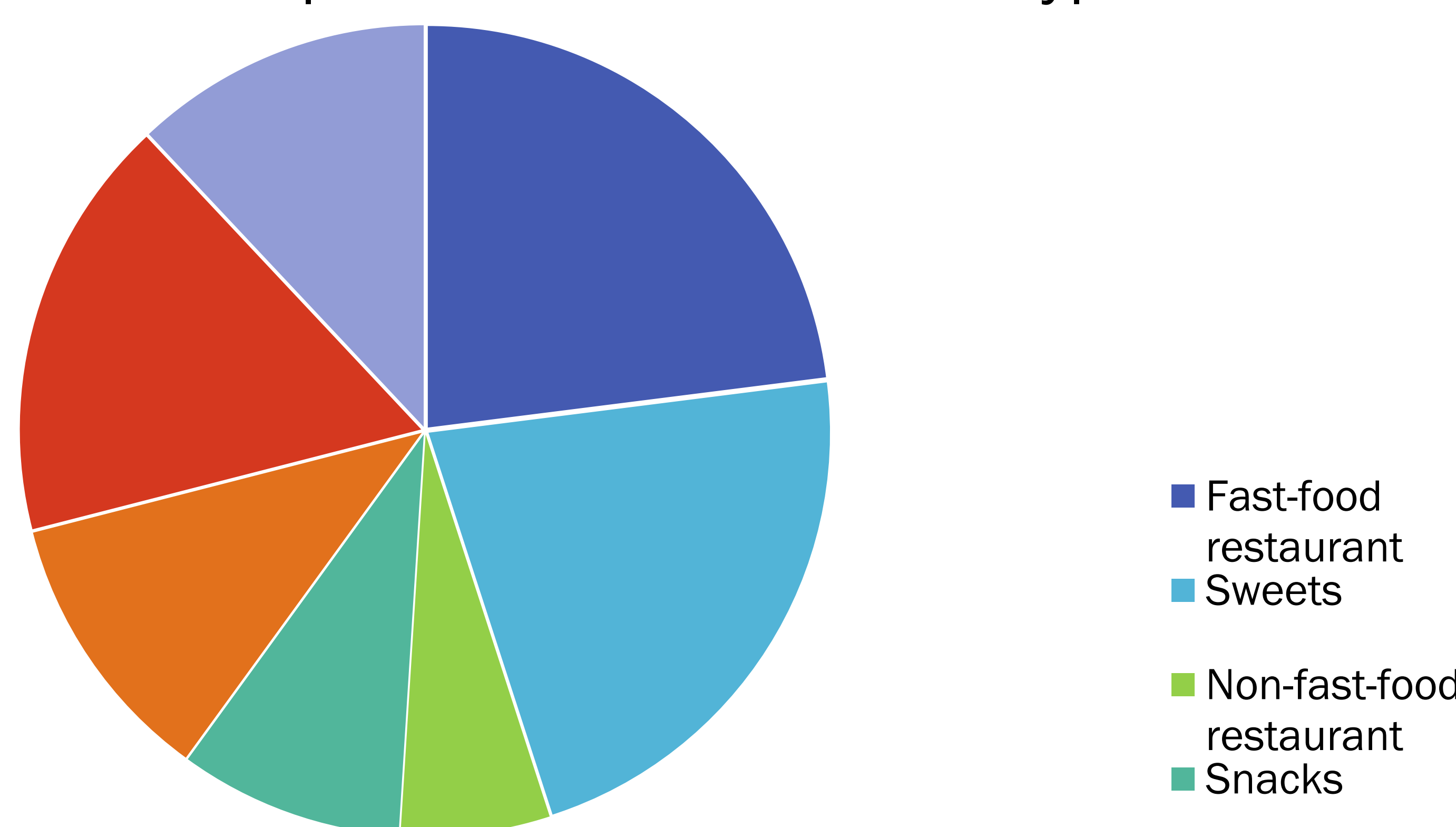
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Introduction

- There is a growing rate of obesity in America, especially in children. According to the Food and Drug Administration (2004) fifteen percent of children from six to nineteen are classified as overweight and this number is growing.
- The risks of childhood obesity include diabetes and hypertension, health problems that can affect children for life (CQ Press, 2005). Children who suffer from childhood obesity are also more likely to be obese in adulthood. Obesity is now the second highest cause of preventable death, second only to smoking (Chou et al., 2005).
- The Coca-Cola Company states that the issue of childhood obesity is “more complex than selecting targets to blame” (2013), yet high calorie food and soda is a known contributor to the obesity epidemic and soda and fast food are the two largest spenders on advertising to children (Abramson, 2009).
- While these companies may not be the only culprits, they are a huge contributor to the obesity epidemic, not only because of the foods that they produce but in the way that they market these foods.
- Advertising aimed at children has an incredibly strong influence on their food choices. Veerman et al. (2009) states that approximately one in seven to one in three children could have avoided childhood obesity if unhealthy food advertisements were eliminated.

Proportion of Advertisement types



Presence of Advertisements

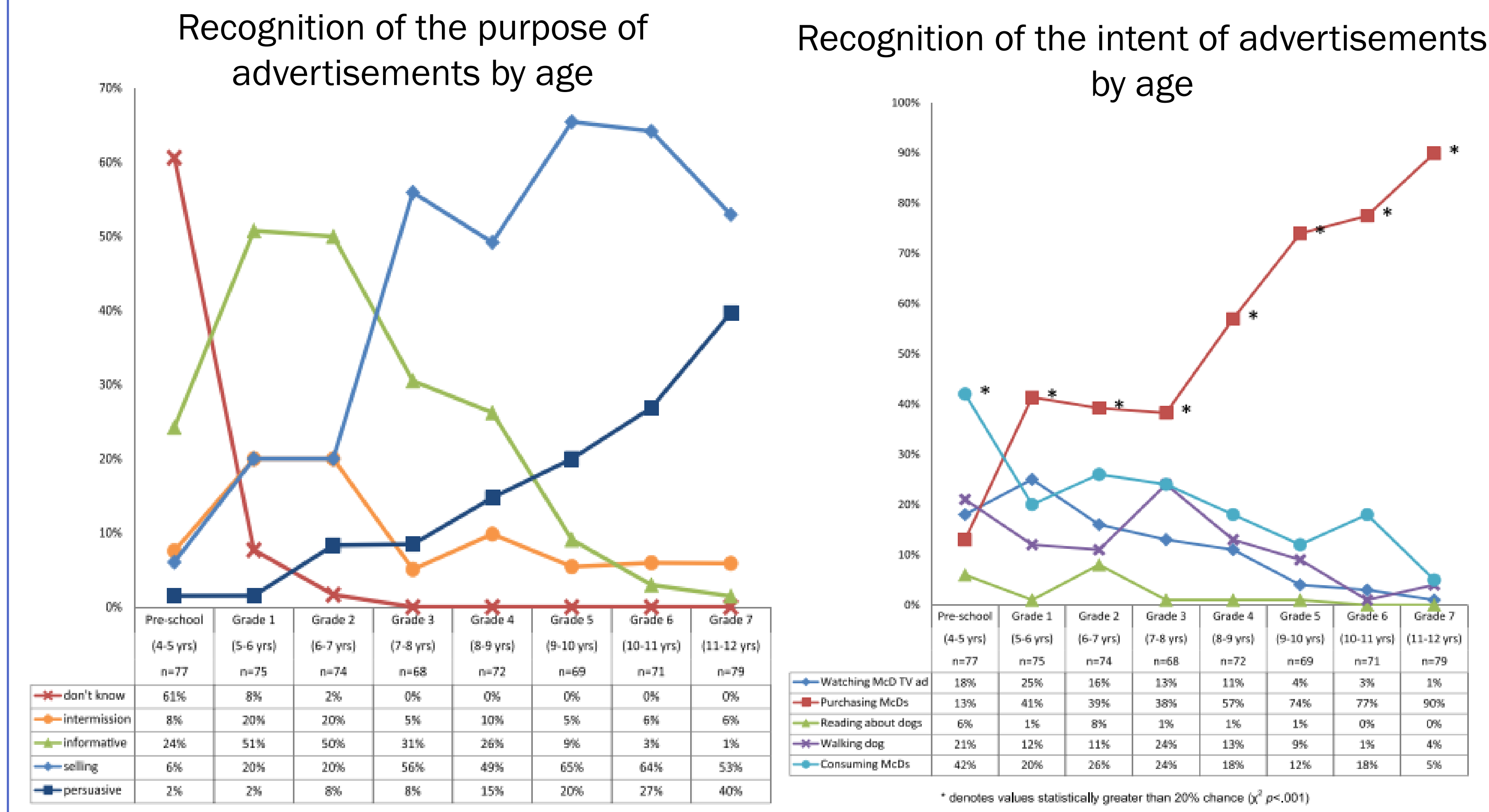
- At approximately the same time that obesity began to rise drastically so did the prevalence of televisions in the home (Chou et al.). These advertisements are an inescapable pressure in children’s lives to which they very often succumb.
- Children view approximately eleven food ads an hour with over eighty percent being food related and ninety percent of those being unhealthy foods (Strasburger et al.).
- Borzekowski et al. notes that children pay just as much attention to the advertisements being played as they do to the programs they are actually watching.

Summary of the Problem

- Advertisers are targeting children from birth and forming food brand bonds at incredibly young ages. These food brand bonds are intrinsically stronger than those formed at a higher level of cognitive development as there is no logical reason for children to not love the product.
- Before a child can completely communicate their own ideas, much less defend against the arguments and persuasions of another, they are being targeted by professional advertisement companies and marketing teams with years of experience and college degrees.

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Food Brand Bonds

- Boyland et al. also notes that brand bonds formed in children are “thought to be more imbedded than those formed later” (p. 238) and thus exert more power not only over the child in the present day but also the child for the rest of their lives.
- Keller et al. affirmed this observation that children prefer branded foods when they found that children increased consumption of fruits and vegetables when they were branded with characters and incentives were included in the packaging.
- Overweight children seem to have underdeveloped cognitive defenses that may have contributed to their weight status or may simply form stronger brands with foods as a function of their exposure to these brands through consumption.



Children's Cognitive Defenses

- Children do not fully develop cognitive defenses until the ages of eleven and twelve yet they are targeted by food brands from birth. They are not able to critically evaluate the claims being made at such a young age, especially if they have not been taught to do so.
- Children are not able to accurately evaluate when they are being lied to or even when it is likely that they might be lied to. Without this sort of critical evaluative thinking they are left vulnerable to the claims made by food companies.
- Heyman argues that while children may be able to see the reason advertisers lie, they may not put this knowledge into practice if they are presented with a “rapid stream of audiovisual information” (p. 346) such as a commercial in which their attention is otherwise occupied.

Cartoon Characters in Advertising

- These characters are used to increase the strength of the food brand bond and decrease the level of neophobia in children. Putting a recognizable character on the screen, which children have either formed a bond with through the product or through a television show, helps to draw a child’s attention, recognition, and later requests for the brand (Boyland et al.).
- Keller et al. (2012) asserts that “cartoon characters may serve as a colorful, fun visual stimulus” (p. 380) that not only distracts children but also enhances the appeal of the branding.
- Boyland et al. asserts that “the association of known and liked brand characters,” including characters that are solely associated with a certain food brand as well as cartoon characters seen in other contexts, increase a child’s likelihood to “prefer the taste of and choose” (238-9) certain foods.
- Food advertisers use bonds that children have already formed with licensed characters, such as Dora the Explorer, Elmo, and even Santa Claus, to form even stronger food brand loyalty (Boyland et al.).
- The Kaiser Family Foundation notes that the use of cartoon characters in advertisements increases a child’s ability to recall the product being advertised. These cartoon characters are “believed to assist with generating brand identity” (238) to help sell these products, according to Boyland et al.



What we should do

- Critical thinking and cognitive defenses against these brands come from education. If children are taught that only bad people lie and that good people can be trusted without a depth of critical thinking than they will naturally trust the brands they have formed a bond with (Heyman).
- Children will also trust the cartoon characters used in advertising as they have formed strong bonds with these characters. If children are not taught to think critically about the claims made by everybody they will be unprepared to critically evaluate commercials.
- Keller et al. argues that the strength of food brand bonds among children even at such a young age indicates that it “might be possible to manipulate food branding cues to promote intake of healthful foods among children” (p. 384).

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The Start of a Solution

- Some companies are taking voluntary action. The three biggest soda companies; Coca-Cola, PepsiCola, and Cabury Schwepps, have agreed to dedicate fifty percent of ads aimed at children under twelve to promote healthier lifestyles (Abramson).
- However, there are no official regulation for all companies. Government regulation should be placed on these companies to prevent them from advertising only junk food to children.
- At the same time educational programs should begin to help build children’s cognitive defenses and critical thinking skills.
- In the fight against obesity, education is the best defense. By finding specific groups to educate, and determining how they need to be educated, the growing rate of obesity could be reduced.