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Advertising: Food and nonalcoholic beverages

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Abstract

For many people, it is challenging to maintain a healthy weight in an environment that heavily promotes the (over)consumption of palatable yet often unhealthy food and beverages. Each year, billions of dollars are spent on food advertising, and the vast majority is for energy-dense products, high in added fat, sugar, and/or salt. Even though traditional outlets (e.g., television, billboards) remain popular advertising avenues among marketers, the volume of digital advertising and the variety of ways in which it manifests (e.g., via social media, mobile apps, games) have massively increased in recent years. Research has shown clear evidence that exposure to food advertising increases preferences, purchases, and intake of promoted products. Children, in particular, appear to be vulnerable to advertising messages, at least partly due to their poor cognitive skills in recognizing its persuasive intent. Even though older children and adults demonstrate better capabilities in this regard, a diverse array of message strategies and other persuasive tactics salient to them (e.g., nutritional claims, emotional appeals, celebrity endorsement, embedded advertising) are used, meaning they are also highly susceptible to advertising effects. To combat the detrimental influences of food advertising, two general approaches have been proposed: restricting the amount and power of advertising, and reducing its impact. In a world of pervasive food advertising, in which digitalization has recently enabled marketers with a range of new opportunities to even better reach and persuade potential consumers, major regulatory actions are urgently needed to protect consumers in the battle against overweight and obesity.

Keywords: food advertising; food consumption; food intake; marketing; nonalcoholic beverage advertising; obesity; overweight

Obesity is one of the most pressing and complex health challenges the world is currently facing. Excess weight is an important risk factor for a range of noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and several types of cancer (GBD 2019 Risk Factors Collaborators, 2020). Our current environment has been identified as a key driver of the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity, in which overconsumption is highly encouraged through the heavy promotion of easily available, inexpensive, palatable foods and beverages. Food and nonalcoholic beverage advertising (hereafter referred to as food advertising) plays a major role in this. Each year, companies spend billions of dollars on advertising in order to increase the recognition, appeal, and/or consumption of their products, and the vast majority of this advertising is for products that are energy-dense and high in added fat, sugar, and/or salt (hereafter: unhealthy).

Television has long been the primary medium for food advertising, alongside other offline outlets (e.g., print, radio, outdoor billboards). In parallel with the rapid increases in consumers' time spent using digital media, however, companies now allocate substantial budgets to digital advertising, particularly via social media, but also via websites, games, game stream platforms, and other avenues (World Health Organization, 2016). Social media advertising offers unparalleled opportunities for brands to interact directly with consumers and to use unique features of the platforms (e.g., geo tags) to engage their audience. Although advertising is one important aspect of food marketing, it should be noted that brands also seek to promote their products in other ways to increase their power, such as through pricing (e.g., discounts), product development, or strategic collaborations (Wood et al., 2021). Companies thus have, and utilize, a multitude of offline and online avenues to reach potential consumers for the promotion of their – predominantly unhealthy – food and beverage products.

The consequences of the abundance of food advertising are well documented and evidence for its detrimental influence is compelling, particularly among children. Results from many experimental (often laboratory or school-based) studies, cross-sectional surveys, and to a lesser extent qualitative and modeling studies have consistently shown that exposure to unhealthy food advertisements increases awareness of and preference for the promoted brand and product, purchase intentions (or purchase requests), purchases, and consumption of advertised products. Additionally, there is some evidence for weight gain associated with food advertising exposure (for an overview of evidence, see Kelly et al., 2015). In addition to persuasive, brand-specific outcomes, advertised food cues also appear to produce generalized appetitive responses at the food category level. That is, they increase the acute consumption of (any available) unhealthy food (Boyland et al., 2016). This has been explained as food cue

reactivity: resulting from a learned association between perceiving external food cues (such as the sight and smell of food) and subsequent food intake, advertised foods become conditioned stimuli that may motivate food intake (Jansen, 1998).

As well as being a result of exposure to high amounts of advertising, these persuasive impacts reflect the power of advertising which relies on effective marketing strategies and creative content. Typically, advertising messages present explicit or implicit product claims highlighting the flavor/tastiness, nutritional content, novelty, convenience, and/or value for money of the advertised product. Consumers are further enticed by premium offers, such as free gifts (e.g., toys for children), vouchers, or discounts. In addition to these largely rational appeals presenting the utilitarian benefits of buying the product, emotional appeals are common as well. To create favorable brand associations, advertisement messages often include joyful music, colors, or humor. To target children specifically, marketers employ a range of message strategies to grab and hold children's attention, such as promotional characters, eye-catching animation, and themes of fun. Furthermore, products are often tied to a certain identity (e.g., being in fashion or unique), which is particularly salient for adolescents, who typically align with brands whose values reflect their developing social identity and/or support peer acceptance (Truman & Elliott, 2019).

A more creative, but common strategy is to promote products through endorsers, such as celebrities, sports persons, bloggers, or cartoon characters. These endorsers are usually familiar to and liked by consumers, and therefore more easily trusted on their product recommendations. With the rise of social media, companies even rely on consumers themselves to endorse products, for instance by encouraging them to like and share brand content, or by inviting them to create their own brand-related content (e.g., for a competition). As these brand-related consumer activities are visible on the newsfeed of the online friend network of the consumer, they are a cheap and powerful strategy for companies to promote products.

Yet another creative technique is the embedding of advertisement messages in entertainment media content, for example in TV shows or online games (i.e., product placements or perpetually visible brand logos). Compared to traditional advertising messages, such embedded advertising is more concealed and generally produces enhanced persuasive effects because viewers, particularly young children (i.e., under the age of 12), might not recognize the persuasive intent of these messages and are therefore less able to activate cognitive defense mechanisms (Folkvord et al., 2016). Even though older children and adults generally have better capabilities in this regard and demonstrate high skepticism toward

advertising claims, they do not always have the ability and motivation to resist persuasive attempts (Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009).

The ample evidence for the detrimental influence of food advertising has led to consensus among researchers and public health agencies that immediate action needs to be taken. To that end, some policy action has been implemented to reduce the amount of unhealthy food advertising and the power that advertising has to persuade (Taillie et al., 2019). So far, however, this action has mainly consisted of restrictions of broadcast advertising directed at (young) children operationalized as self-regulation by the food industry, and evaluation studies have shown little to no effect of these actions due to many limitations (e.g., narrow definitions of “unhealthy”). A small number of countries have enacted statutory regulations by adopting advertising restrictions for children. However, these restrictions often only apply to specific media platforms or marketing techniques, which encourages marketers to shift their advertising to less regulated platforms or techniques.

Another approach to reduce the negative influences of food advertising is to try to minimize its impact, for example with interventions to modify automatic, appetitive responses to unhealthy food cues (e.g., with inhibition training). Furthermore, educational programs have been developed for children and their parents, aimed at enhancing advertising literacy (i.e., recognizing and understanding advertising), but there is little evidence that improvements in advertising literacy reduce the negative impact of food advertising. In a world of excessive and highly effective advertising for unhealthy food and beverages, in which digitalization has recently enabled marketers with a range of new opportunities to even better reach and persuade potential consumers, major regulatory actions are urgently needed to protect consumers in the battle against overweight and obesity (World Health Organization, 2016).

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