Fast Food Advertising Is Linked to Rising Childhood and Teen Obesity

How Does Advertising Impact Teen Behavior?, 2012

The American Psychological Association (APA) is a professional and scientific organization that represents psychologists in the United States.

Increased advertising for unhealthy food products is strongly associated with rising rates of obesity in youths, which have nearly tripled in the last quarter century. Advertising that targets children is inherently exploitative; those under six years old cannot distinguish between advertisements and regular programming, and those under eight years old do not comprehend the persuasive nature of advertisements. Children, nonetheless, can recall the contents of and develop product preferences following a single commercial exposure. On television, advertising for fast food, snacks, and cereal dominate the rare public service announcements and commercials for health eating. Marketing aimed at youths online confuses advertising and information and in schools it blurs the line between education and targeting a captive audience.

The childhood obesity epidemic is a serious public health problem that increases morbidity, mortality, and has substantial long term economic and social costs. The rates of obesity in America's children and youth have almost tripled in the last quarter century. Approximately 20% of our youth are now overweight with obesity rates in preschool age children increasing at alarming speed. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the prevalence of obesity has more than doubled among children ages 2 to 5 (5.0% to 12.4%) and ages 6 to 11 (6.5% to 17.0%). In teens ages 12 to 19, prevalence rates have tripled (5.0% to 17.6%). Obesity in childhood places children and youth at risk for becoming obese as adults and associated poor health such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some forms of cancer. Prevention efforts must focus on reducing excess weight gain as children grow up.

Today's children, ages 8 to 18, consume multiple types of media (often simultaneously) and spend more time (44.5 hours per week) in front of computer, television, and game screens than any other activity in their lives except sleeping. Research has found strong associations between increases in advertising for non-nutritious foods and rates of childhood obesity. Most children under age 6 cannot distinguish between programming and advertising and children under age 8 do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising. Advertising directed at children this young is by its very nature exploitative. Children have a remarkable ability to recall content from the ads to which they have been exposed. Product preference has been shown to occur with as little as a single commercial exposure and to strengthen with repeated exposures. Product preferences affect children's product purchase requests and these requests influence parents' purchasing decisions.

Impact of Advertising and Obesity on Children's Behavioral and Mental Health

- Food industry advertising that targets children and youth has been linked to the increase of childhood obesity.
- Advertising by other industries often objectifies girls and women, contributing to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.
- Many adolescents, particularly teenage girls, have body image concerns and engage in
unhealthy weight control behaviors.

- Unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., fasting; skipping meals; eating very little food; vomiting; and using diet pills, laxatives, or diuretics) have been found to co-occur with obesity.

- Weight bias may marginalize children and youth considered obese by their peers and teachers and place them at risk for teasing and bullying.

- Body dissatisfaction and weight-related concerns extend across all ethnic groups and weight-related stigma has been found to co-occur with depression, low self esteem, and suicidal thought.

In very young children, research has found that for every one-hour increase in TV viewing per day, there are higher intakes of sugar-sweetened beverages, fast food, red and processed meat, and overall calories.

**Television Advertising and Childhood Obesity**

- Obesity in children increases the more hours they watch television.

- Children's exposure to TV ads for unhealthy food products (i.e., high-calorie, low-nutrient snacks, fast foods, and sweetened drinks) are a significant risk factor for obesity.

- In very young children, research has found that for every one-hour increase in TV viewing per day, there are higher intakes of sugar-sweetened beverages, fast food, red and processed meat, and overall calories (48.7 kcal/day). Excess weight can be gained by the addition of only 150 calories a day.

- Other research has found that children who watch more than three hours of television a day are 50 per cent more likely to be obese than children who watch fewer than two hours.

- Food and beverage advertising targeted at children influences their product preferences, requests, and diet.

- The food and beverage industry has resolved to self-regulate their marketing to children, but this has not resulted in significant improvement in the marketing of healthier food (i.e., fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat or non-fat milk or dairy products, lean meats, poultry, fish, and beans) to children. Almost three out of every four foods advertised to children falls into the unhealthy categories that contribute to the obesity epidemic.

- Food ads on television make up 50% of all the ad time on children's shows. These ads are almost completely dominated by unhealthy food products (34% for candy and snacks, 28% for cereal, 10% for fast food, 4% for dairy products, 1% for fruit juices, and 0% for fruits or vegetables). Children are rarely exposed to public service announcements or advertising for healthier foods....

- Clearly, children between ages 8-12 are receiving the highest rates of ad exposure. They are entering a critical stage of development where they are establishing food habits, making more of their own food choices, and have their own money to spend on the types of food they enjoy.

**Online Marketing of Foods to Children**

- Marketing of food to children on the internet is even more complex since the boundaries between content and pure advertising is often less clear than on television. Only a minority of advertisers include reminders distinguishing content from pure advertising.

- One study has shown that children find it harder to recognize advertisements on websites than they do on television; 6 year olds only recognized a quarter of the ads, 8 year olds recognized half of the ads, and 10 and 12 year olds recognized about three quarters of the ads.

- The majority of food brands advertised to children on TV is also promoted on the internet and often includes online games which are heavily branded, i.e. "advergames".

- Advergames can provide a more highly involving and entertaining brand experience than what is possible with conventional media.

- Websites also contain other brand-related content such as television commercials, media tie-ins,
promotions, viral marketing and website membership opportunities.

- Viral marketing is used to encourage children to talk to one another about a brand's website by emailing friends in the form of an e-greeting or invitation and inviting them to visit the site.
- Marketers also often provide brand-related items that can be downloaded or printed and saved (e.g., brand-related screensavers and wallpaper).
- The continual branding through these sites reinforces and amplifies the product message to children, who have a remarkable ability to recall content from ads to which they are exposed.

In-School Advertising

- There is also a creeping commercialism of America's schools.
- Children spend a considerable amount of their time in school settings, where compulsory attendance makes it difficult to avoid exposure to commercial content.
- Commercial content delivered in schools may be assumed to have the tacit endorsement of respected teachers and school officials, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the advertising.
- Advertising and marketing in schools takes several forms:
  - a. Direct advertising in school classrooms (via advertiser-sponsored video or audio programming)
  - b. Indirect advertising (via corporate-sponsored educational materials)
  - c. Product sales contracts (with soda and snack food companies), and
  - d. School-based corporate-sponsored marketing research.
- Ads are now appearing on school buses, in gymnasiums, on book covers, and even in bathroom stalls.
- School advertising also appears under the guise of educational TV. For instance, Channel One, which is available in 12,000 schools, provides programming consisting of 10 minutes of current-events and 2 minutes of commercials. Advertisers pay $200,000 for advertising time and the opportunity to target 40% of the nation's teenagers for 30 seconds.

Further Readings

Books


- Paco Underhill *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping—Updated and Revised for the Internet, the Global Consumer, and Beyond.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.


**Periodicals and Internet Sources**


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