Food marketing from preschool to teens - and the limits of advertising literacy

Dr. Mimi Tatlow-Golden

Senior Lecturer, Developmental Psychology and Childhood
Co-Director, Centre for Children and Young People’s Wellbeing
There is **unequivocal evidence** that the marketing of unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened beverages is related to childhood obesity.

WHO, 2016

Food and beverage marketing increased *intake, choice, preference, and purchase requests* in children and adolescents.

*Boyland et al JAMA Pediatrics 2022*
Preschool

When do children know their food brands?
Which brands do they recognise?
1. TV food ads: Exposure?

2. Learning from ads YouTube/TV?

3. Food knowledge Healthy or not?

4. Food brand knowledge?
Children ‘know’ their food brands before they know their ABCs.  

Unhealthy > healthy  

Unhealthy food literacy  

TV f&b ads a year  

>1000 unhealthy brands before  

brand logo recognition (similar advertising rates)
Teens

What ads do teens respond to? Unhealthy, healthy, or non-food? And in what way?
Article

See, Like, Share, Remember: Adolescents’ Responses to Unhealthy-, Healthy- and Non-Food Advertising in Social Media

Gráinne Murphy 1,4, Clara Corcoran 1,4, Mini Taitlow-Golden 5,10, Emma Boyland 2 and Brendan Rooney 1,3

1 Media and Entertainment Lab, School of Psychology, University College Dublin, Belfield, 4 Dublin, Ireland; grannine.murphy.8@collegeconnect.ie (G.M.); clara.corcoran@hotmail.com (C.C.); brendan.rooney@ucd.ie (B.R.)
2 Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK
3 Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 7ZA, UK
4 Correspondence: mini.taitlow-golden@open.ac.uk; Tel: +44-1908-652664
5 Co-first authors who contributed equally to the work.

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Abstract: Media-saturated digital environments seek to influence social media users’ behaviour, including through marketing. The World Health Organization has identified food marketing, including advertising for unhealthy items, as detrimental to health, and in many countries, regulation restricts such marketing and advertising to younger children. Yet regulation rarely addresses adolescents and few studies have examined their responses to social media advertising. In two studies, we examined adolescents’ attention, memory and social responses to advertising posts, including interactions between product type and source of posts. We hypothesised adolescents would respond more positively to ads shared by peers or celebrities than to ads shared by a brand. Outcomes measured were (1) social response (likelihood to ‘share’, attitude to peer); (2) brand memory (recall, recognition) and (3) attention (eye-tracking fixation duration and count). Participants were 151 adolescent social media users (Study 1: n = 72; 13-14 years, M = 13.86 years, SD = 0.5; Study 2: n = 79, 15-17 years, M = 15.37 years, SD = 1.35). They viewed 36 fictitious Facebook profile feeds created to show age-appropriate content. In a 2 × 3 factorial design, each contained an advertising post that varied by content (healthy/unhealthy/non-food) and source (peer/celebrity/company). Generalised linear mixed models showed that advertisements for unhealthy food evoked significantly more positive responses, compared to non-food and healthy food, on 5 of 6 measures. Adolescents were more likely to wish to ‘share’ unhealthy posts rated posts more positively when they had unhealthy posts in their feeds recalled and recognised a greater number of unhealthy food brands and viewed unhealthy advertising posts for longer. Interactions with sources (peers, celebrities and companies) were more complex but also favoured unhealthy food advertising. Implications are that regulation of unhealthy food advertising should address adolescents and digital media.

13-17y
N=151
Ennis/Dublin, Ireland

Viewed content of fictitious peers

https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/7/2181
See

Like, Share

Remember
• See: Fixation frequency/ duration
• Like: Peer evaluation
• Share: Likelihood to share
• Remember: Recall/ prompted recognition

All:

Unhealthy > healthy
Limits of advertising literacy
Unhealthy food ads: A universe of meaning - emotion and identity-building through taste, friends, love, joy, fun
Oreos:
A campaign with Lady Gaga, for instance, featured a limited-edition line of cookies and a website to create musical “Oreograms”, while special-edition cookies for Pokemon fans encouraged consumers to “catch ‘em all.”

“a 2X increase in Oreo’s ROI on Google platforms and a jump in brand health metrics”
McDonald’s purchase of AI company Dynamic Yield:
“AI is rapidly going to change the stories and frameworks we have used to define the human experience ...” (Gale, 2019, Forbes Insights)
Just out!

All emotional ads affect child preferences – not just ‘child-directed’

Mediano et al., 2022

Children aged 11-12 y (N=546) in Chile

Randomly exposed to 1 of 4:
• Child-directed emotional
• Universal emotional
• Non-targeted appeal
• No ad

Children’s exposure to universal emotional appeals
**Increased preference for sodas** (over water)
-> attitude to ad -> attitude to product
Advertising literacy: does it reduce food marketing effects?

**Informational approach – little evidence of effects**

See also: Banerjee & Kubey, 2013 (SR)
Bergsma & Carney, 2008 (SR)
Greene et al, 2015
Jeong et al, 2012 (MR)
Liao et al 2016
Martens, 2010 (SR)

? Possible: Social justice, autonomy from adult control (‘adolescent values’)

See also; Neufeld et al., 2021, Lancet, 399, 185-197
...we now believe this was a mistake
• small or null effects
• reduce support for more effective systemic actions (regulation, taxation)
“...unwittingly helped promote interests of corporations who oppose systemic change”
TAKE-HOME:

- Children consistently prefer ‘unhealthy’ ads from preschool onward
- Advertising is designed to activate emotion
- Advertisers acquiring powerful systemic targeting and design methods
- Children show increased preference for products via any ads featuring emotional appeals, not just ‘child-targeted’ or ‘child-appealing’ ads
- Resistance requires conscious awareness and motivation
- Informational ad literacy is poorly supported by evidence
- Individualised solutions are not working
- Systemic regulatory solutions are required
THANK YOU

mimi.tatlow-golden@open.ac.uk