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Children and the Internet: What are "safe" websites telling our kids about food?

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Disciplines

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Children and the Internet: What are “Safe” Websites Telling Our Kids about Food?

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Abstract

Food advertising is a contentious issue in regards to childhood obesity and has increasing importance on the public policy agenda both in Australia and overseas. This study examines the nature and extent of food advertising/promotions on popular children’s websites. Three popular children’s websites were chosen: *Total Girl*, *K-Zone* and *D-Mag*. Each is linked to a top-selling magazine and targets children aged eight to 12 years. The websites were monitored daily from 1-28 December 2005, with the increase or decrease of any food product advertisements recorded as well as any competitions, games, puzzles and recipes which promoted certain food products. Food product promotions targeting children via these websites were commonplace, with food products appearing in many website links. Much of this promotion was indirect and subtle, with most products associated with games, competitions or prizes.

Introduction

Currently 19-23% of Australian children and adolescents are overweight or obese (Booth et al., 2001), with authorities estimating that about six per cent of Australian children and adolescents now classified as clinically obese (O’Dea, 2005). A child’s eating behaviours are established during childhood and may follow them into adulthood (Story and French, 2004).

Children’s food choices are clearly influenced by a range of factors, including the beliefs and behaviours of their family, as well as schools, health professionals, government and industry (Flodmark et al., 2004); however, one increasingly influential force is the media. Today’s children live in a media-saturated environment, and are constantly bombarded by messages via numerous media channels including television, movies, music, radio, video games, the internet and print material (Muto, 2004).

Online media is playing a progressively greater role in the lives of children. Australian children are increasingly accessing, and having unsupervised access to, different forms of online media including the Internet (Muto, 2004). Children are now able to access the media in a multitude of settings, including their homes, schools, libraries and Internet cafes. Recent population data shows that 47% of Australian children between the ages of five and 14 accessed the Internet during the 12 months to April 2000, increasing from 22% of five to eight year olds to 72% of 12-14 year olds, with no differences between genders or between rural and metropolitan households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Another survey of more than 1,360 Australian children, conducted by *Disney Adventures*, a children’s publication, recorded 65% of those surveyed accessing the internet at least once a week with a majority of these children (69%) having access to the Internet at home (Plaskitt, 2003).

Food advertising is a contentious issue in regards to childhood obesity and has increasing importance on the public policy agenda both in Australia and overseas. However, the focus has primarily been on television advertising – largely ignoring media, such as magazines and the Internet.

The World Health Organisation examined Internet regulations in 73 countries around the world and noted that, of the surveyed countries with existing e-commerce laws and self-regulatory codes covering the Internet, only 13 contain clauses on marketing to children (Hawkes, 2004). Of these 13 countries, including Australia, which have children-specific Internet marketing regulations or codes, none have clauses specific to food. Further, in Australia – as in the United States – these general guidelines on Internet marketing to children, as well as specific guidelines on data collection and links to other sites, are currently self-regulated (Hawkes 2004).

Numerous studies have investigated young children's perceptions and understanding of advertising. Research from the 1970s and 1980s found that younger children were less able to distinguish advertisements from program/editorial content (Donohue et al., 1983) or to understand the persuasive intent of advertising (Meyer et al., 1978). Numerous studies since that time have concurred that young children have little understanding of the underlying intent of advertising. Story and French (2004) note that:

- prior to age seven or eight years, children tend to view advertising as fun, entertaining, and unbiased information;
- while children aged seven to eight years usually develop an understanding of advertising intent, children less than eight years of age are viewed by many child development researchers as a population vulnerable to misleading advertising;
- preteens, from ages eight to 10 years, possess the cognitive ability to process advertisements but do not necessarily do so; and
- from early adolescence (11-12 years), children's thinking becomes more multidimensional, involving abstract as well as concrete thought, yet adolescents still can be persuaded by the emotive messages of advertising, which play into their developmental concerns related to appearance, self-identity, belonging, and sexuality.

Marketers of food advertisements are interested in young children and adolescents as consumers because they spend millions of their own dollars annually, influence how billions more are spent through household food purchases, and are expected to become the future Australian adult consumers. A survey of more than 1,360 Australian children, conducted by *Disney Adventures* found that girls aged six to 13 received an average of \$8.88 per week in pocket money, and boys an average of \$6.90. The survey also found that 14% of the children spent their money on sweets and ice cream (Plaskitt, 2003).

Following a 12 month study monitoring the seven top-selling children magazines for all food advertising and promotions (reported elsewhere), we commenced a preliminary investigation into the websites associated with these magazines during the month of December 2005.

The purpose of the study was to examine the nature and extent of food advertising/promotions on child-targeted websites for high-circulation Australian children's magazines, in order to provide some preliminary data on the messages conveyed to young children about food products via this media.

Method

Three popular children websites were chosen: *Total Girl*, *K-Zone* and *D-Mag*. All three websites were based on their corresponding magazines, which are targeted to children eight to 12 years of age, yet which are fully accessible by all age groups. The websites were monitored on a daily basis (1-28 December 2005), for competitions, games, puzzles, recipes or other items which promoted food products.

Results

All of these websites were supported by different forms of advertising including food, computer games and movie promotions. A total of eight food products were advertised or promoted over the monitoring period. All three websites advertised and or promoted food products to varying degrees, ranging from a low of one food product (*D-Mag*) to a high of six (*K-Zone*). The websites did not show any significant increase or decrease in food promotions over the 4 weeks they were monitored.

- *Kellogg's* LCMs: This competition was promoted on two websites (*Total Girl* and *K-Zone*). To enter, children were asked to write what they thought 'LCM' stands for. The best entry wins a major prize of an iPod mini. There was also a chance for children to win weekly prizes. The page also encourages children to "Try all six yummy flavours".
- *Uncle Toby's* Roll-ups: Two websites (*Total Girl* and *K-Zone*) provided links on the front page to the Uncle Toby's Roll-ups Supapark Game. Children who accessed the websites could access this game and enter a competition to win various prizes. The month of December offered children a chance to win a Nintendo game console. January's major prize was an Apple iBook.
- *Aeroplane Jelly*: This competition was promoted on two of the websites (*Total Girl* and *K-Zone*). A link was provided on the front page for children to access a game or quiz, allowing them a chance to enter a draw where they could win one of five Gameboy Micros. This link also offered *Aeroplane Jelly* recipe ideas; an introduction to the *Aeroplane Jelly* characters: 'Alice', 'Berlie', 'Carrie', 'Chloe' and 'Cindy'; and the history of *Aeroplane Jelly* and facts about aeroplanes in general. The page also offered children a link to the *Aeroplane Jelly* website where they could be updated on the latest *Aeroplane Jelly* recipes, competitions and news.
- *Kellogg's* Coco Pops: This game was promoted on one website (*D-Mag*). Children were asked to "Join Coco and the gang in Coco land as they search for Cocotopia" (chocolate utopia). Upon conclusion of the promotion, the website displayed a survey link on the front page asking children "How many times a week do you eat breakfast?"
- *Dairy Whip* Whipped Cream: This competition was promoted on one website (*K-Zone*). Children were asked to "tell us in 25 words or less what holiday treat you would "whip up" using *Dairy Whip* if you would like the chance to win Nintendogs" (a computer game for the Nintendo console).
- *Chupa Chub* Lollipops: One magazine's website (*Total Girl*) promoted the new 'I love Me' fragrance range produced by Chupa Chups; introduced the 'Chupette Girls' and their fragrance personalities: 'Pop Vinyl', 'Night Fever', 'Miss Soul Shine' and 'Urban Groove'. It also offered links to the 'I love me' fragrance site where girls could play games, read horoscopes and "define" their personalities. The site also included the Chupa Chup Competition, in which children were asked to "tell us in 25 words or less who your favourite 'Chupette girl' is and why" to win a major prize of iPod Nano and the Chupa Chup fragrance range, with 20 runners-up receiving a selection of Chupa Chup fragrances.
- *McDonalds*: This link which contains 'Happy Meal' promotions and information on McDonalds was found on two of the websites (*Total Girl* and *K-Zone*). It also had a link which took children to the McDonalds website, as well as a very small link to the McDonald 'nutrition calendar' (via the McDonalds website).
- *Yoplait Go-Gurts*: One magazine's website (*K-Zone*) promoted Yoplait Go-Gurts as "Yoghurt with attitude ... the coolest way to eat your yogurt this summer". The site described the different ways children could eat the product: Cool Tubes allow children to "rip their heads off

and such their guts out”; Frozen Tubes allow children an “icy cold and ready to be sucked” snack; Twister Tubs allow children to “get tongue twisted and mix up a Go-Gurt storm in their pot”. The link also provides children with a competition to enter which consists of playing a game called “Chill out with Yoplait Go-Gurts” to win a Play Station Portable and ‘Go-Gurt’ mini fridge.

Discussion

It is evident that food product promotions targeting children via popular children’s magazine websites are commonplace, with heavily promoted food products appearing in many of the website links. Furthermore, much of this food product promotion on websites is indirect and subtle, with the majority of products being associated with a game or competitions, and attached to opportunities for the child to win prizes.

It is concerning that many of the messages are designed to encourage increased consumption of these unhealthy foods (e.g., recipe ideas in the Aeroplane Jelly advertisement, asking children to think of holiday treats in the Dairy Whip advertisement, and suggesting different “ways to eat” the product in the Go-Gurt advertisement).

Concerns over the effects of advertising to children have raised issues about the need for tighter controls on food advertising to them. While Australia’s current codes and regulations regarding advertising and children have banned food advertisements during television programming for preschoolers, no restrictions have been developed regarding food advertising on the web (Hawkes, 2004), which currently appears to be virtually unrestricted. In the US, more than two thirds of Internet sites designed for children and adolescents use advertising as their primary revenue stream; and Internet sites in Australia targeting young children are increasingly supported by food advertising (Thompson, 2005). Arnott’s (a leading biscuit and snack food manufacturer) recently announced that it will cease advertising to children via ‘children’s television programs (i.e., those classified ‘C’ or ‘P’) and children’s magazines, receiving accolades from lobby groups, but said that it ‘may develop promotional websites aimed at children under 12 years of age’ (Nguyen, 2005).

There is clear evidence that marketers work hard to develop brand relationships with young consumers, beginning with younger toddlers and preschool children, recognizing that ‘brand preference’ is influenced by a child’s positive experiences with the brand. Utilising popular children’s websites to offer games, activities and opportunities to win prizes is an obvious way of building such relationships and thus generating brand preference. Further, competitions that involve children with the marketing of the brand (such as the competition for children to send in suggestions for what LCM stands for and the Chupa Chups’ “which Chupette are you?”) are clearly designed to increase children’s identification with the brand.

Although there is no clear data linking viewing of electronic media, such as websites, with the development of obesity, they are likely to be associated (Batch and Baur, 2005) and further research in this area would be beneficial. It is recommended that such websites be further observed on a monthly basis to document the food products advertised or promoted, with any future increase or decrease or apparent increase in fluidity of content prompting researchers to revisit the value of daily monitoring. Future research may also involve a more comprehensive investigation into the background and sponsorship of each website.

Potential strategies and policy recommendations on food advertising and marketing aimed at children may involve the government establishing regulations which provide guidelines for food advertisements/promotions on children’s websites that are consistent with those for other media.

Future research is also needed to investigate the usage of these websites among children, and the effects of exposure to Internet-based advertising/promotions on children's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to food choices, including an examination of any cumulative or interactive effects of marketing campaigns which utilise both children's magazines and their associated web sites.

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