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Sweet promises: Candy advertising to children and implications for industry self-regulation

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ABSTRACT

Candy advertising illustrates limitations of the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) self-regulatory program to improve food marketing to children. Participating companies pledge to not advertise candy in child-directed media. Yet independent analyses show that children viewed 65% more candy ads on U.S. television in 2011 than in 2007, before CFBAI implementation. The present research corroborates these findings, characterizes the increase, and examines how CFBAI-participating and non-participating companies use child-targeted techniques and media placement to advertise candy on U.S. television. Content analysis identified child-targeted messages and techniques in 2011 television candy ads, and Nielsen data (2008–2011) quantified candy advertising viewed on children's and other types of television programming. Differences between brands according to CFBAI status and use of child-targeted techniques in ads are evaluated. Data were obtained and analyzed in 2013. CFBAI-company non-approved brands represented 65% of candy ads viewed by children in 2011, up from 45% in 2008, and 77% of these ads contained child-targeted techniques. Although CFBAI companies only placed ads for approved brands on children's networks, 31% of ads viewed by children for CFBAI non-approved brands appeared on networks with higher-than-average youth audiences. CFBAI non-participating companies placed child-targeted candy ads primarily on children's networks. Despite CFBAI pledges, companies continue to advertise candy during programming with large youth audiences utilizing techniques that appeal to children. Both increased CFBAI participation *and* a more effective definition of "child-directed advertising" are required to reduce children's exposure to targeted advertising for foods that can harm their health.

1. Introduction

Food marketing to children contributes to poor diet and childhood obesity (IOM, 2006; WHO, 2010). In response to public health concerns, food companies have promised to advertise only "healthier dietary choices" in "child-directed" media through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) (Kolish, Hernandez & Blanchard, 2011). This voluntary program was implemented in 2007, and 17 food and beverage companies in the United States now participate. In their pledges, some companies establish nutrition standards and specify products approved to advertise to children (e.g., General Mills, Kraft Foods), while others pledge to not advertise any products in child-directed media (e.g., Coca-Cola, Hershey) (CFBAI, 2013).

Despite these pledges, independent evaluations of television advertising pre- and post-CFBAI implementation have found little improvement in the amount and types of foods advertised to children (Kraak, Story, Wartella, & Ginter, 2011; Powell, Harris, & Fox, 2013). Children viewed 5% *more* food-related television ads in 2011 versus 2007, the year before full CFBAI implementation (Dembek, Harris & Schwartz, 2012). While advertising for products high in fat, sugar, or sodium declined from 2003 to 2009, these unhealthy products continued to represent 86% of all food ads seen by children (Powell, Schermbeck, Szczypka, Chaloupka, & Braunschweig, 2011). Similarly, in 2008 73% of food ads during children's programming promoted "whoa" foods that children should consume only occasionally (Kunkel, McKinley & Wright, 2009). Therefore, public health experts conclude that CFBAI-company pledges must improve significantly to adequately protect children from exposure to marketing for calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods (Powell et al., 2013, 2011; Interagency

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Working Group, 2011).

The objective of this research is to present a case study of potential limitations in food industry self-regulation by examining candy advertising to children on television in the United States. This research focuses on television advertising because it represents almost half of food companies' youth-targeted marketing budgets (FTC, 2008). Companies participating in the CFBAI acknowledge that their candy products should not be advertised to children (CFBAI, 2013), yet it appears that children continue to view large numbers of candy ads on television. Therefore, these findings will help identify opportunities to increase the efficacy of food industry self-regulation and may be used by key stakeholders in their efforts to reduce marketing of unhealthy products to children.

2. Background

Candy advertising to children appears to contradict CFBAI-company pledges to promote only healthier dietary choices in child-directed media. Unlike many food categories, industry and public health experts agree that most candy is not a healthier dietary choice for children. Children's exposure to candy advertising on TV is positively associated with purchases of candy by households with children (Huang & Yang, 2013), and children's sugar consumption far exceeds dietary guidelines (Reedy & Krebs-Smith, 2010). Therefore, reduced exposure to candy advertising would benefit children's health. Four large candy manufacturers (Mars, Hershey, Kraft, and Nestle) belong to the CFBAI and have pledged that they will not advertise any candy products in child-directed television (CFBAI, 2012). Yet children's exposure to candy advertising on TV has increased substantially since CFBAI implementation. In 2011, children (ages 2–11) viewed on average 1.2 candy ads-per-day, 65% more than they viewed in 2007 (Dembek et al., 2012). Furthermore, these numbers do not include children's exposure to advertising for fruit snacks. Although nutrition experts consider fruit snacks to be a form of candy (CSPI, 2014) as they typically consist entirely of added sugars and provide no nutritional value (USDA, 2013), food companies have designated some fruit snacks to be "healthier dietary choices" that may be advertised to children (CFBAI, 2013).

This increase in children's exposure to candy advertising clearly illustrates a limitation in industry self-regulation. However, a more thorough understanding of contributors to this increase will help identify improvements in the CFBAI with the greatest potential impact on program efficacy. For example, CFBAI participation is voluntary and several candy manufacturers do not belong, including companies with traditionally child-targeted products such as Airheads (Perfette van Melle) and Topps' Ring Pops and Baby Bottle Pops (Tornante Joe MDP Holdings). If children are seeing more ads from these companies, then increased company participation in the CFBAI would be an important objective.

Alternatively, CFBAI companies could have increased candy advertising during programming with a large child audience that does not qualify as child-directed according to their pledges. Participating companies typically define "child-directed" advertising as advertising placed in media with an audience of 35% or more children under 12 (CFBAI, 2012). However, more than half of all food ads that children see appear during programming not meeting this definition (Harris, Sarda, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2013), and there is substantial overlap between programming watched by 9- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 14-year-olds (Dembek, Harris & Schwartz, 2013). Therefore, food companies may have expanded advertising to children 12 years and older, which also reaches many children under 12 (Harris et al., 2013; FTC, 2008). One study examined candy advertising from 2006 to 2008 by companies that pledged to not advertise in child-directed media (Huang & Yang, 2013). One company (Cadbury Adams) eliminated all advertising for a product that had aired on children's television, resulting in significantly fewer purchases by households with children. However, two companies (Hershey and Mars) had not advertised on children's television before implementing their pledges, although children viewed substantial amounts of their advertising on other television programming. Therefore, these companies were able to continue advertising to children without directly violating their CFBAI pledges, and household purchases of their products did not decline. These findings suggest that an expanded definition of advertising to children also may be required to improve CFBAI efficacy.

2.1. Defining candy advertising targeted to children

The CFBAI does not use the term "targeted" advertising. Rather, companies pledge to not advertise candy in "child-directed" media (CFBAI, 2012), which covers typical children's programming, such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network (Dembek et al., 2013). However, advertising in media viewed primarily by children is not the only way to target advertising to children. Consumer behavior researchers define targeted marketing as "activities… designed and executed to be more appealing to the target market than to people in other segments" (Ringold, 1995). Marketers employ numerous strategies to appeal to a specific audience, including product design, retail promotions, and targeted creative techniques and messages in advertising placed in media with a broader reach (Grier & Kumanyika, 2010).

It is more difficult to determine whether candy companies target children beyond advertising in child-directed media. Companies rarely disclose their marketing strategies, so researchers must use publicly available information to identify marketing that is likely targeted to a specific group. Research methods include identifying differences in the concentration of ad placements across different types of media and viewers, content analysis to measure customized advertising content, and laboratory studies to provide evidence-based differential effects of advertising (Ringold, 1995).

In food advertising and other domains, such research has demonstrated that companies target children with advertising for products they publicly state are not intended for their use (Grier & Kumanyika, 2010), including alcohol (Jernigan, Ostroff & Ross, 2005), M-rated video games (FTC, 2007), and sugar-sweetened soda (Harris, Schwartz, Brownell, Javadizadeh & Weinberg, 2011). Research has also identified food advertising messages and techniques with special appeal to children that could indicate child targeting, including third-party licensed characters and child-friendly cross-promotions (Harris, Schwartz, Brownell, Sarda & Ustjanauskus, 2010); "fun" and "cool" messages (Folta, Goldberg, Economos, Bell, & Meltzer, 2006; Elliott, 2008; Schor & Ford, 2007; LoDolce, Harris, & Schwartz, 2013), and animation and depictions of products as more than food (e.g., anthropomorphized cereal pieces) (LoDolce et al., 2013). Further, child-friendly techniques, such as brand characters, are highly effective in making adult products appeal to children, including cigarettes (e.g., "Joe Camel") (DiFranza et al., 1991; Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, & Rojas, 1991) and beer (e.g., "Spuds McKenzie") (Wallack, Cassady & Grube, 1990).

2.2. The present research

This paper aims to corroborate previous research that has demonstrated increased candy advertising to children since CFBAI implementation, further characterize this increase, and identify potential child targeting by candy brands, as indicated by their use of child-targeted advertising techniques and media placement.