

Catchy cartoons, wayward websites and mobile marketing - food marketing to children in a global world

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***Abstract:** Childhood obesity and diet-related disease in the UK is rising dramatically. Which?, the UK's largest consumer organisation, has carried out extensive research into the promotion of less healthy foods to children including a recent analysis of the practices of leading UK food companies. In this article, **Clare Corbett and Colin Walker** identify the range of promotions used to promote less healthy foods to children, evaluate Government and industry action to date and discuss the need for action on a UK, European and global level.*

Why robust food promotion restrictions are needed

The dramatic rise in levels of childhood obesity and diet-related disease in the UK has been well-documented in recent years, with some alarming statistics demonstrating the need for action. Over 30 per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls are already obese or overweight (Craig and Mindell,

2008), and forecasts suggest this will rise dramatically. By 2050 70 per cent of girls and 55 per cent of boys will be overweight or obese, while the overall annual cost of this crisis to our economy will exceed £45 billion (McPherson *et al*, 2007). The incidence of diet-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes will continue to rise dramatically.

A range of initiatives are required to address these problems but with the evidence clearly demonstrating (see Hastings *et al*, 2003 and Ofcom, 2006) that marketing influences children's food preferences and choices, the mismatch between the food currently promoted to children and the diet recommended by Government and health experts must be tackled. A more responsible approach to food marketing, which shifts the balance from less healthy to healthier promotions, is essential and without it other efforts, such as better quality school meals and clear nutrition labelling, will be undermined. In a globalised world, this requires action from national governments, the European Union and global organisations, such as the World Health Organisation.

Where are we now?

There has been a lot of debate about food marketing controls over the past five years but there is currently very little regulation of the advertising and promotion of food to children in the UK, and nothing at an EU or global level.

In the UK

Ofcom, the government communications regulator, has introduced rules for TV advertisements but Which? research has repeatedly shown that they are too limited. Other forms of marketing have either been ignored or are poorly covered by patchy self regulation and company policies.

Since January 2008, advertising of "less healthy" foods to children during programmes "of particular appeal to under 16s" has been restricted on terrestrial TV channels. Digital children's channels will have to implement the new rules by 1 January 2009. The new rules are a positive first step. They only apply to those foods defined as "less healthy" by the Food Standards Agency's Nutrient Profiling Model, which incentivises the food industry to reformulate its products and to use its creative marketing energies to promote healthier products to children.

However, the rules are ineffective in limiting the advertising of less healthy foods when most children are watching TV because they are determined not by the total number of children watching a programme, but by the proportion. This means that if the proportion of children under 16 watching a programme is at least 20 per cent higher than the proportion of children in the general UK population, the restrictions apply. Even if a

huge number of children are watching a show, the restrictions do not apply if there's also a large number of adults watching (common for family programmes and soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway*). If the Government is serious about using restrictions on the promotion of unhealthy foods to children as a tool with which to help tackle the rise in childhood obesity and diet-related disease, then surely these restrictions must apply to the times when children are watching TV in the greatest numbers.

The majority of non-broadcast promotions, such as press and billboard ads, online advertising and promotional offers, fall under the self-regulatory control of the Advertising Standards Authority. Relevant codes were strengthened in 2007 but are still limited in scope. They do not cover

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companies' own cartoon characters, such as Kellogg's Tony the Tiger and Nestle's Quicky the Nesquick bunny, do not use the Food Standard Agency's nutrient profiling model to distinguish between healthier and less healthy foods, and fail to cover promotions on food packaging. The

specific guidelines only cover children of pre-school and primary age while the more general requirements are vague and open to interpretation. The use of cartoon characters in television adverts is judged against the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) code, which has the same inadequacies as the CAP code.

Action by the UK and devolved governments to address the irresponsible promotion of less healthy foods outside of TV advertising has been extremely limited. In England, the Government set up the Food and Drink Advertising and Promotion Forum to tackle non-broadcast food marketing following the publication of the *Choosing Health* White Paper in 2004 (Department of Health, 2004) and the subsequent *Food and Nutrition Action Plan for England* (Department of Health, 2005). However, this forum had made little progress and there have not been any initiatives from the devolved governments. In January 2008 the *Obesity Strategy for England* (Department of Health, 2008) was published, reiterating the actions required. The new strategy announced that a *Healthy Code of Good Practice* would be developed with the food and drink industry. The aim of the code would be to challenge the whole industry to reduce the consumption of saturated fat, sugar and salt. Companies will be encouraged to take a voluntary approach, but the Government states that it will "continue to examine the case for a mandatory approach where this might produce greater benefits, particularly for children's health".

In Europe

The issue of the marketing of unhealthy foods to children is one of growing concern to MEPs. The European Commission recently introduced a White Paper on *Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues* (Commission of the European Communities, 2007) which calls for restrictions to be placed on food sponsorship schemes in schools, and on unhealthy food promotions specifically targeted at children.

The paper recognises the substantial role that industry self-regulation can play in tackling the rise in obesity and diet-related disease. It specifically refers to the commitments made as part of the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health to reduce the advertising of unhealthy foods to children. The platform was established in 2005 to bring together a range of organisations, from members of the food industry to consumer groups, to come up with voluntary commitments to help tackle these problems, and is held up by the Commission as the kind of initiative that needs to be built upon.

However, the White Paper also states that the Commission will come forward with stricter measures to control these types of promotions if the 2011 review of the audiovisual media services directive finds that the self-regulatory approach taken by industry has failed. This is particularly important given the inadequacy of the measures that the industry has introduced thus far. For example, 13 major food companies, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Mars, signed an “EU pledge” in December 2007, in which they declare their commitment to change the nature of food advertising to children in the EU. While we welcome this recognition by the industry that it has a role to play in tackling the rise in childhood obesity and diet-related disease being seen across Europe, the commitments made fall well short of what is required. They only apply to children under the age of 12 rather than 16, and only to those media audiences in which children represent the majority. With Which? research in the UK finding that those programmes watched by children in the greatest numbers have predominantly adult audiences, this pledge would do little to reduce children’s exposure to adverts for foods that conflict with the recommended diet.

At a global level

At the 60th World Health Assembly in 2007 agreement was reached by Member States for the World Health Organisation (WHO) to “develop a set of recommendations on marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children” (WHO, 2006) as part of the implementation of the Global Strategy on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). In response, Consumers’ International, the global consumers’ alliance of consumers organisations, which includes Which?, and the

International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) launched their own recommendations for an international code on marketing of foods to children (International Association for the Study of Obesity and Consumers International, 2008). This formed part of an ongoing global campaign for the WHO to agree international standards on marketing of less healthy foods to children to be implemented by national governments and food companies.

Latest Which? research

From January to June this year Which? reviewed the marketing tactics used by some of the leading global food companies to target children in the UK with food high in fat, sugar and/or salt. This follows a similar piece of research published in November 2006. We looked at company websites, packaging, advertising and other promotions and, for two weeks spanning March and April 2008, we analysed TV viewing data to assess which foods were being advertised by which companies when most children were watching the main commercial TV channels. We used the Food Standards Agency's nutrient profiling model to assess the healthiness of the products promoted by the companies. We also analysed the companies' marketing policies.

Our research highlighted that food companies are still using tried and tested tactics to promote less healthy foods to children and uncovered new trends in the way that companies, advertisers and marketing managers promote less healthy products to children. Research from Consumers' International has demonstrated how global food companies use these same techniques across the world to promote their less healthy products to children.

Traditional techniques

Our research showed that traditional marketing techniques like cartoon characters and TV advertising are still widely used by food companies to promote less healthy foods to children:

■ **Catchy characters**

Licensed characters (such as Kung Fu Panda, SpongeBob SquarePants and Scooby-Doo!) were still being used on food packaging to promote predominantly less healthy foods to children. Company-owned characters continue to be used to promote less healthy foods to children, such as Kellogg's Tony the Tiger, who promotes Frosties which have over a third sugar per 100 grams and Nesquik's Quicky the Bunny who features on all of Nesquik's less healthy products.

■ **TV tactics**

During the two week period we examined we found that 16 of the top 20 commercial programmes watched by the highest numbers of

children were not covered by the Ofcom restrictions. In previous analysis periods we have found that as many as 19 of top 20 programmes watched by children were not covered by the restrictions and that children were exposed to adverts for a wide range of less healthy foods.

■ **Celebrity sell**

A number of food companies link their brands with celebrities who appeal to young people. For example, we found popular footballer Wayne Rooney promoting Coca Cola and Pepsi, the latter as part of its six “Pepsi Football Stars” (including David Beckham) to promote the brand, including the original Pepsi, which contains over 13 spoons of sugar per 500ml. The ongoing use of such promotional tactics comes despite a previous Which? survey finding that 77 per cent of parents think celebrities should take more responsibility for the food they promote to children.

■ **Gimmicky giveaways**

We found Coca Cola’s Dr. Pepper giving away free ringtones (“20 to collect”) if the code from the pack was texted in or entered online. Kellogg’s high sugar cereal packets featured various promotional offers, some combined with competitions including vouchers for free entry to a zoo. We found tie-ins linked to cinema and DVD releases continuing at Burger King and McDonald’s with free toy promotions in children’s meals.

■ **Games**

Puzzles, pictures and cut-out games are marketing devices that still regularly appear on sugary children’s breakfast cereals and other food products.

Emerging trends

Our research revealed how food companies are using new techniques, usually in tandem with traditional methods, to target children to buy less healthy foods:

■ **Wayward websites**

The internet is increasingly seen by advertisers as a key means of promoting less healthy foods to children. We found a reduction in some company-sponsored website content aimed at young people but several companies, such as Mars and PepsiCo, had developed more sophisticated brand sites. These were often tied in with wider promotions and linked up with popular sites such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Bebo. A recent Ofcom report found that nearly half (49 per cent) of children have a profile on a social networking site.

■ **Mobile marketing**

Marketers have increasingly sought to use text marketing as a means of

reaching young people directly, in a format and language they relate to. We found mobile phones being used for promotions, especially by soft drink manufacturers. A code taken from a pack is texted to collect points or to enter a competition. Some companies also encourage texting to receive a free ring tone (such as Kellogg's zookeeper competition used on high sugar cereals) and Dr Pepper's "What's the worst that could happen?" promotion.

■ **Targeting teens**

In response to public concern and consumer campaigning, marketing of less healthy foods to very young children is starting to be seen as unacceptable among some members of the food industry. But we have found that this has merely prompted many of these companies to shift their promotional focus towards the teen market by, for example, using social networking sites.

Making the healthy choice the easy choice requires action at a UK, European and Global level

Which? wants to see the healthy choice become the easy choice for UK consumers. As Lyndsay from Nuneaton told Which?, "Why can't companies selling healthy food use the same type of marketing techniques as those selling crisps?". Our research shows that, despite bold declarations of social responsibility, many companies are still concentrating their efforts on heavily promoting less healthy products, whether through cartoon characters aimed directly at children or health claims and confusing labelling aimed at reassuring or bamboozling their parents.

We want to see food companies use their marketing creativity responsibly to help, rather than hinder, parents get their children to eat healthier diets. We're not against treats and we're not against marketing, but we are against irresponsible company practices and hollow company commitments.

Along with a range of other consumer, parenting, health charities and unions, Which? is calling for the Government to extent its TV advertising restrictions to cover those programmes that children watch in the greatest numbers. We also want the Government to work with the food industry to develop a robust code to cover all types of non-broadcast promotions.

In Europe, we want to see those companies that have signed the "EU pledge" to truly demonstrate that they are committed to playing a responsible role in tackling the rise in childhood obesity and diet-related disease. This can be done by tightening the pledge to restrict the promotion of unhealthy foods to all children under the age of 16 across all media that children access in the greatest numbers. We also want to see the European Commission play a lead role in ensuring that children are offered the protection they require. Waiting for the 2011 review of the audiovisual

directive would allow the issue to go unaddressed for too long; decisive intervention is required now if the health crisis facing our children is to be averted.

National governments also need support and guidance from the World Health Organisation in responding to what is now widely recognised as an urgent health issue. An international WHO code will also provide a clear benchmark by which to judge companies' marketing practices. The recommendations for an international code prepared by CI and IOTF provide a model framework on how this can work to provide protection from advertising of products high in fat, sugar and/or salt for children up to 16 years old. The WHO also need to report and monitor compliance with their code.

Success stories

Recent Which? research has identified some companies that deserve praise for their efforts in developing and marketing healthier products. Weetabix fared best among the large breakfast cereal manufacturers. Its brand leader – Weetabix – is a healthier product and while its child-targeted cereals are high in sugar, they come out as a healthier option overall. Among the fast food chains, we were encouraged to see that KFC have removed free toys from their kids' meals. We would like to see these companies take further steps to help consumers make healthy choices by providing complete nutritional information (KFC) and further reducing the sugar in their cereals aimed at children (Weetabix). Since the report was launched, Nickelodeon has announced that they will only allow use of their licensed characters on food packaging and in restaurant promotions on products that are defined as healthy according to the FSA criteria.

The crisis facing our children's diet and health demands a robust response. With many in the industry falling to demonstrate the degree of responsibility that consumers are demanding of them, the Government must act to ensure that robust restrictions on the irresponsible promotion of unhealthy foods are introduced as one of the key weapons in the battle to protect our children's health.

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