

MARKETING JUNK FOOD TO CHILDREN

Research Project - Summary Report
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The food processing industry has long understood the importance of marketing its products to children. As they respond positively to marketing aimed at them, the food consumption habits of children are directly conditioned by advertising. Moreover, this impact on their diets lasts into adulthood. At a very young age, children develop a taste for the food products vaunted by advertising—food products that are often of little nutritional value, too salty or too sweet and high in calories.

In the United States, the agri-food industry spends more on marketing than any other product category, with the exceptions of the automobile industry and major retail outlets. The food industry's spent 26 billion dollars on product promotion in 2000, 50% more than in 1990. Worldwide, the agri-food industry's spending on product promotion totalled 40 billion dollars in 2001.

Notwithstanding certain laws that restrict advertising aimed at children, the food industry has developed methods to specifically target this particular clientele. In May 2004, the World Health Organisation (WHO) adopted a *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*, which called on member states to fight against chronic diseases linked to poor nutrition and physical inactivity. In this fight against poor dietary practices, children must be a priority.

The purpose of this research project is to review the marketing practices aimed at children in Canada, the United States and Europe, as well as the regulatory framework and industry self-regulation in relation to these practices. This study also identifies the WHO's principal conclusions and recommendations on the fight against junk food, and on healthy diets for children. Finally, it identifies a certain number of initiatives in the industrialized countries, especially the UK, designed to fulfil the WHO's objectives around this issue.

Our study seeks to draw an accurate picture of the situation regarding junk food marketing aimed at children. Our method was to review the texts and studies on the subject, as well as to inventory the legislative, regulatory or self-regulatory frameworks that could serve as guidelines for food products advertising targeting children or adolescents.

We completed this project with a comparative study of certain food products from the vantage points of nutrition and marketing.

Conclusion

As several studies have shown, poor dietary practices lead to many chronic health problems and are largely responsible for the worldwide increase in obesity. Advertising is not unrelated to this phenomenon. Moreover, experts recognise that when children are exposed to advertising for foods rich in fats, salt or sugar, this may result in physical, emotional or moral prejudice to children, as advertising exploits their credulity and lack of experience.

In its *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*, the WHO—which, incidentally, recognises that the advertising targeting children to sell unhealthy foods represents a probable cause of the increased prevalence of corpulence and obesity—calls on its member states to adopt healthy nutrition policies, particularly in schools. Such policies would limit the supply of products high in salt, sugar and fat, as well as elaborate appropriate multisectoral approaches to combat the impact of messages encouraging dietary practices that may be harmful to health. Several countries have adopted strategies to promote healthy nutrition, physical activity and

healthy lifestyles. However, few have specifically addressed the issue of junk food advertising intended for children.

The WHO's strategy also calls on civil society and the private sector to contribute to the fulfilment of its objectives. Numerous civil society and non-governmental organizations are lobbying governments to respect the WHO objectives and adopt restrictions on junk food advertising aimed at children. The existing regulatory frameworks on marketing practices targeting children are rather lax and, in many countries, do not go beyond self-regulation. Several reports have demonstrated that such measures are insufficient to properly protect children from junk food marketing.

In light of the above findings, as well as health arguments and economic factors, it is becoming crucial for all levels of government to take regulatory action—particularly given the failure of the agri-food sector to voluntarily adopt responsible practices in their junk food advertising aimed at children. The consequences of poor nutrition among our society's future citizens could prove devastating and irreversible. It is past time to take deliberate and firm action.

Recommendations

- Based on the conclusions of our study, we put forward certain recommendations on a possible legislative or regulatory framework based on the WHO recommendations. In addition, we suggest certain approaches/ideas re regulatory actions and public education measures to protect young consumers against junk food, as well as help Canada attain the WHO's objectives in favour of healthier nutrition. In particular, L'Union des consommateurs recommends the development of a national food classification system that would define, notably, categories of non-recommended foods. This classification system would then serve as the basis for the regulation of food products advertising and labelling.

The complete report is available on our web site: <http://consommateur.qc.ca/union>