

# THE IMPACT OF THE 21ST CENTURY FOOD MARKETING ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

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*This paper aims to raise a question mark regarding children's food habits in the last decades in Romania, and how globalization, marketing and advertising influenced and changed our old romanian food preferences. We will highlight that children spent a lot of time watching TV, choosing a cartoon character, or an advertising star on the same age as him/her as a model, and then copying their behaviour, and acting like them. So, they have the idea that they will gain their parents' love and their colleagues appreciation.*

*The rise of obesity is one of today's biggest societal challenges. Thus, to halt obesity has become a goal in several political sustainability strategies. The focus is on children since their health behaviour is expected to have a strong impact on consumers in adulthood. To fight childhood obesity, the challenge is to develop the 'right' policy toolbox. One complicating aspect amongst others is the numerosness of actors involved. To find a policy mix and assess its consequences for all actors, it is essential to understand the underlying mechanisms – the impact of external and internal factors on children's health behaviour. Tools such as regulation, information and education appear to be insufficient to curb this unsustainable consumption behaviour.*

*Keywords: food marketing, advertising, children, gatekeepers, ethic code*

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## 1. Introduction

Marketing and advertising to children has been growing exponentially in Romania during the last two decades, and corporations spend billions each year trying to influence children's brand and product preferences. After the *Ethic Code for Advertising Adressed to Children Refering to Food Products* signed in 2008, marketers have aggressively targeted children although the code is not in favour of using children for promotional purposes.

World Health Organization (WHO) figures show that worldwide, over 1 billion adults are overweight and around 300 million are obese (Obesity is assessed using body mass index (BMI) above 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> and represents the upper tail of the population distribution of BMI). Over the past 30 years, the frequency of overweight children has tripled (Miller, J., Rosenbloom, A. & Silverstein, J., 2004). While governments' influence on changing individual consumption behaviour is limited and needs a long-term commitment, a more promising approach is to actively design the consumption contexts people live in: the food and drinks offered, the marketing and advertisements contents broadcasted, the walkability and bikeability of cities and so forth. Urbanized consumption environments today have been coined as being 'obesogenic', i.e. containing stimuli that encourage obesity (Lobstein, T., Baur, L. & Uauy, R., 2004).

The present paper treats aspects related to the ethical food marketing to children and the social responsibility of food marketers. Based on research, the responsibility of the childhood obesity can be placed on children, parents, schools and food marketers, who all contribute to this problem in some way. Children are consumers today and will be the buyers of tomorrow. Companies are following the idea:

„sell these children on your brand name and they will insist that their parents buy no other”. This is the generation whose children are sicker than their parents. Why? One reason is the excessive consumption of sweets, fast food and lack of exercise.

Advertising and marketing to children is not legal, according to the *Ethic Code for Advertising* and RAC (Romanian Advertising Council) (<http://www.rac.ro/cod>), so the question that arises in this case, food marketing in particular, is: is it ethical? And if it is ethical, are marketers responsible for misleading messages in adverts and what are the responsible ways of selling food products to children? What are the responsible ways of promoting products for adults without influencing the child through television?

Advertising on TV aims to stimulate demand compliance strategy, namely pull strategy. Pull strategy (to attract) involves marketing activities, especially advertising and promotional marketing, targeted end-user (in our case, the student aged 8 to 12 years) and intended to make it apply to products at intermediaries (parents, grandparents), thereby causing the latter to demand services from providers (the company who paid for a TV spot and that is advertising). Attraction strategy is demand-driven, aiming to create or increase them. The goal is to provide enough information to attract consumers.

Having a picture of the current landscape with regard to food advertising to children is essential as the country moves forward in the effort to combat childhood obesity. If we overestimate the presence of food marketing in children's lives, or its role in their diets, we may place too much faith in marketing-oriented policy solutions; if we underestimate it, we may neglect important policy options.

Government agencies and advisory bodies have faced frustrating obstacles in getting the data they seek to help inform their deliberations; it is the purpose of this paper to help fill at least some of the gaps in their knowledge, and to provide a benchmark from which to measure future changes in the food marketing arena.

The study answers a series of fundamental questions: How many food ads do children see on TV today?, What types of foods do they see advertised most frequently?, What is the nature of the appeals used to market food to children?, What proportion of food ads model promote physical activity?, How often do food ads include a “push” to company websites?, What proportion of food ads use health benefits as a primary appeal, or offer specific health claims?

## **2. Background / existing international action**

Children today watch television more than ever and are therefore they are more bombarded with advertisements. Research has shown that children are capable of storing and remembering many of the ads you see on TV, whether they are for toys, food and cars. Advertising agencies spend billions annually for advertising aimed at children, but in what sense? Studies show that children only need a view of a commercial ad to develop a preference for a particular product and that this preference is reinforced by repeated exposure. It is not just the goods that address their children are remembered, but also products for parents. One study found that children bombarded with junk food ads eat up almost double unhealthy snacks and sweets compared to the amount consumed by a child who has not seen those ads. Those who are already overweight or obese are most sensitive to food advertising. Nutritional choices made by parents and children depend on many factors. Studies show that one of these factors may be advertising to children. These studies reveal that advertising can attract children's attention, can influence their choices and can encourage them to determine, in turn, their parents to buy certain products. Over the last few years, major international food and drink companies have introduced a number of new policies and pledges covering the marketing of their products to children. This research aimed to look beyond the headlines to see what the companies have actually committed themselves to.

Analysing food and drink company policies on the marketing of food to children is a complicated and, at times, confusing undertaking. Is often what is not said, rather than what is said, that is significant. Brands like Unilever (*Left Wanting More, Food Company Policies on Marketing to Children Report*, part of *Junk Food Generation*, downloaded from [www.junkfoodgeneration.org](http://www.junkfoodgeneration.org) on 6th Aprilie 2011) do not have a global policy and rarely a regional policy, however some of them have signed a commitment (*Ethic Code for Advertising in Romania*) which gives them credibility in front of the parents and teachers that they would not target their products and beverages to children. However, these companies and other just like them use indirect form of advertising to children, teases as "come to KFC", "I'm loving it" etc, use children in their advertisements and create the idea in the mind of a child between 8 to 12 that the product is nutritional for apparently peculiar reasons.

The European Commission (2007) notes that parents having the main responsibility for their children should be able to make informed choices and transfer their knowledge to their offspring. Obesity prevention actions are undertaken by the Romanian Government Programme "Cornul and milk" and in June 2009 the Romanian Advertising Council (RAC) is the depositary of the Ethic Code for Advertising to children on food. Thus reports of problems treated by this code fall under the RAC and are considered by it. Code of Advertising Practice (hereinafter "the Code") was prepared by the RAC in order to use advertising to inform public opinion in Romania fairly, honestly and decently, respecting both national laws and principles of advertising practice internationally recognized both in form and content made by the International Chamber of Commerce (<http://www.rac.ro/cod-produse-alimentare3>). Companies that signed the code dedicated themselves to responsible advertising of food and non-alcoholic beverages to support parents' efforts to promote healthy lifestyles. As such, the companies agreed not to advertise food to children under 12 years old, except for products that meet specific nutrition criteria based on accepted scientific evidence and / or national and international nutritional guidelines. The purpose of this initiative, "Advertising to children under 12 years old" means advertising in a program with an audience of at least 50% of children aged up to 12 years. Companies also undertook not to carry out communications relating to products in primary schools, unless they are specifically required in setting the school administration or educational purposes.

### **3. Influencing factors: empirical evidence of determinants of obesity**

Children tend to copy the behaviour of somebody they like or somebody they see often. Since they watch TV a lot, as the results of the questionnaire sustain, their role models are chosen from what the TV is offering them to watch. If another child is used in an advertisement on the television for no matter what product, food, toys, beverages and even banking, the child who watches the advertisement will begin to consider the child in the advertisement "cool" because he appears on TV and is enjoying the love of the other characters in the ad or has a desired toy or sings a nice song while advertising a product.

So, marketers are betting on a quick transfer of sympathy, respect and reputation of the company star, unlike the version that these perceptions were done by the power of communication of ideas. The public is emotionally attached to a star / celebrity and credited with credibility. This way to attract audiences by celebrities is successful and subconsciously the child wants to be like them, have more in common with them, have the family in the advert etc. Another aspect for which children tend to remember the advertisements, to desire the product, to ask their parents for it, is related to what the celebrity or the mascot in the ad represents for him. If the children see advertising that promotes a highly criticized product, unhealthy appreciated by parents, teachers, other children and child itself, being recognised for its sports performance, healthy lifestyle and so on, children will desire believing the product gives him / she the features, skills, reputation of

the celebrity. We have identified four influencing factors determining obesity between children of 8 to 12 years old:

#### ***Parents as gatekeepers***

As far as children are concerned, the major responsibility for obesity lies with their parents and families as well as with secondary socialization agents such as caretakers and teachers; all mentioned act as gatekeepers. Parents are working long hours, spend less and less time with their children, try to involve them in as many activities as possible and therefore nutritional aspects often left aside. The child feels distant or alienated in front of his parent and the parents give them whatever they want to gain the child back.

"Parents say they feel in conflict. They want to say no, but they don't want to have their child upset with them" (Zoll, M.H., 2000).

#### ***Spending allowance***

Children today experience an increased spending autonomy. Children are free to buy from the school's shop, for example, whatever they want. Our research reveals that children in the third and fourth grade, who already know how to calculate, receive money from parents to buy themselves sweets, sodas, chips, candy and so on. Even though, school shop are not supposed to sell unhealthy foods and beverages, such errors occur, so 55,55% prepare their school food at home and 44,44% buy something from the schools shop. However, children in the first grade choose to prepare their own school meals at home in proportion of 73%, the rest of 27% buy chips, soda and candy. The preferred acquisitions are chips, gum, popcorn with cheese, candy. Non-structured interviews with parents reveal that most of the children receive every day between 3 and 10 Ron.

#### ***A modernized food environment***

The food industry, retailers and restaurants are considered as important actors in the matter of childhood obesity. They shape the context in which food choice takes place. For many years, it has been debated whether consumers actually use the nutritional information provided on the package at all and if yes, which of the competing systems is the best. For instance, information about included fat seems to make consumers choose lower fat alternatives. Latest research has shown that consumers do indeed use provided health-related on-pack product information – such as General Daily Allowances – but only if it is easy to understand and eye-catching.

#### ***Modernized food marketing***

The food industry has increased the number of channels used to advertise their products to children. While television is still an attractive medium for the small children and advertisements are a successful strategy for brand building, online marketing such as 'advergames', in-school marketing and sponsoring, as well as toys and games produced in association with food producers are increasingly used (Wansink, B., 2005). To increase consumption, marketers create positive attitudes for their products and try to channel social norms of parents and children – i.e. for instance shared beliefs about health behaviour – by strengthening already existing behavioural patterns and convincing consumers of the product's benefits. Experiments suggest that food branding changes children's preferences in favour of the branded food (Branca F., Nikogosian H., Lobstein T., 2007). This is problematic since the majority of advertised foods are snacks, soft drinks and sweets that are high in fat, sugar or salt.

#### **4. Objectives and Methodology / research**

According to the study The Impact of Advertising on Parents and Children conducted by the IMAS and the Center for Media Studies and New Communication Technologies (CSMNTC)

(published in Jurnalul.ro on 29 June 2010) commercials are viewed by 75% of the 6 years old children. The proportion of those who watch advertisements decreases, however significantly with age (<http://zibo.ro/planeta-blog/alimentatie-sanatoasa-10/Influenta-reclamelor-TV-aupralimentatiei-copiiilor-55>). It is estimated that the percentage of children viewing TV commercials aged between 8 and 12 years is around 50%. According to CI (*Left Wanting More, Food Company Policies on Marketing to Children Report*, part of *Junk Food Generation*, p. 10, downloaded from [www.junkfoodgeneration.org](http://www.junkfoodgeneration.org) on 6th Aprilie 2011), several companies define a child audience as comprising more than 50% of under 12, meaning that large numbers of children may still be exposed to their marketing.

As their participation in consumer markets has grown, children have become increasingly attractive targets for advertisers. This is partly driven by their high media use. All questionned children watch television and 90% of them don not miss the prime time hours, exposing themselves to a variety of advertising.

We have chosen to focus on what we feel is the most influential culprit of the four factors, food marketers, since we believe food marketing campaigns are harming the lives of children by presenting misleading messages. Within two days we analized advertising clips for food and beverages for children aired during prime time. After personal observation we concluded that high in fat and sugar products (dairy, cereals and sweets) are pursued in 30% of the advertisements. While foods such as full grain, fruits, vegetables, vegetable oils, nuts conspicuously missing from the commercials (between 1% and 5%). Therefore, commercials encourage the opposite diet recommended by doctors.

<b>Tabel no. 1. Children's exposure to food advertising on the TV, on average</b>			
Age	Number of Food Ads Seen per Day*	Number of Food Ads Seen per Year	Hr: Min of Food Ads Seen per Year
8–12	90	32850	30 h

\*between 07:00-22:00

On average children are viewing 90 advertisement regarding food and beverages in a single day (an advertisement is seem more than once), therefore a child watches 32850 commercials per year taking into consideration an adverstiment lasts around 01:09 minutes. Given the amount of time they spend watching TV each day and the mix in programming and networks that they view, children ages 8-12 see an average of 98:10 minutes of advertising a day for all products (toys, food, media, and so on).

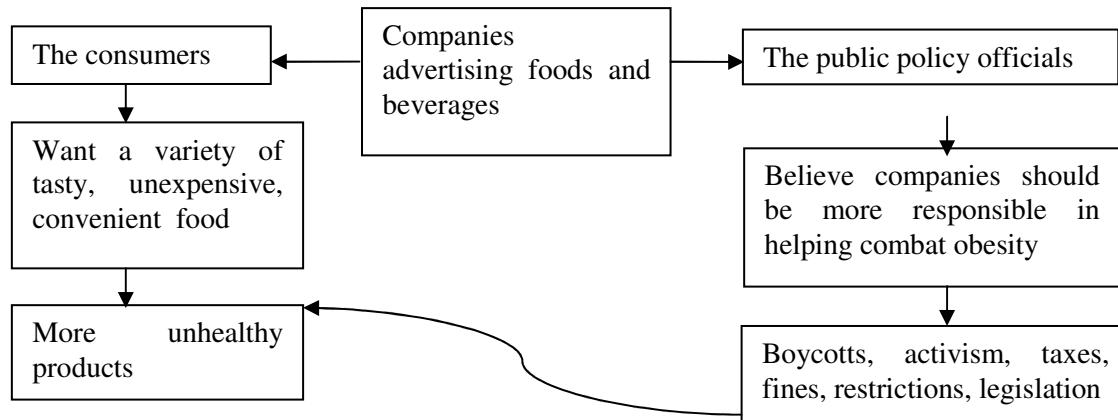
#### **Appeals used in food ads targeting children or teens**

Among all food ads targeting children and teens, the most common primary appeal is taste (34% of all ads), followed by fun (18%), the inclusion of premiums or contests (16%), and the fact that a product is unique or new (10%). Two percent of all food ads targeting children or teens use claims about health or nutrition as a primary or secondary appeal in the ad, while 5% use energy as a primary or secondary appeal.

<b>Tabel no. 2. Other attributes of food advertising to children 8 to 12 years old</b>
22% include a disclaimer (e.g., “part of a balanced diet”)
20% promote a website
19% offer a premium
15% portray an active lifestyle
13% include at least one specific health claim
11% use a children’s TV or movie character
7% feature a contest or sweepstakes

Children of all ages are exposed to a substantial amount of advertising for food and beverages, but their exposure varies significantly by age. Because children 8–12 watch so much television, and therefore see so many food ads, they may be the group most affected by food marketing. This is also likely to be an especially important age for the development of children's food habits, since they are likely to have more time away from their parents, have their own money, and have more opportunity to make their own food choices. Therefore, policymakers and industry leaders may want to pay special attention to advertising seen by tweens.

### 1. Limits of the research



**Figure 1. The Vicious Circle of Demarketing Obesity**

Although companies say they cater to children's biological interests, companies have recently been accused of contributing to the growing problem of obesity. The child's desire for fast-food and other non-nutritious foods, desire induced by the company selling the unhealthy product, leads to the production of more unhealthy products on the market and therefore more promotional actions for unhealthy food, more actions from the public policy officials leading to more taxes, fines, restrictions and so on and so forth, altogether creating a vicious circle.

This study does not address the issue of whether food advertising to children on TV is going up or down, nor does it address the issue of whether such advertising influences what children eat, or should be in any way restricted, either through voluntary industry efforts or through regulatory policy. What it does indicate, however, is that food marketing is a predominant part of the television advertising landscape for children and that young people's exposure to such messages is substantial, while their exposure to countervailing health messages on TV is minimal.

### 5. Conclusions

The factors presented above are valuable starting points to change young consumers' behaviour into a healthier direction. While the goal to reduce obesity is broadly accepted, the motives, strategies, possibilities and dependencies of the various actors in the food system and in food and health politics differ. In the following we argue that policy actions are necessary, but that they can only be effective if all stakeholders support these policies with the means in their reach.

Solutions – developing profile clusters of ideal consumers and by discovering why people like the foods they like, effective dietitian can find similarly predisposed people and help them develop the same mental map for that food.

Although it is easier to target tastes than to change them, there is some opportunity to help consumers learn to like new tastes. People can be fairly suggestible when it comes to food moves. If the name sounds bad, it will bias taste. As long as a food is of at least moderate quality, the

better the description, the better the taste. In general, however, when trying to encourage change in habits, it is easier to encourage small, infrequent substitutions when introducing new foods. It is easier also to target opinion leaders and nutritional gatekeepers, than to target everyone. Good cooks, for example, have a tremendous influence over the eating behaviours of the family.

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