

A Quali-Quantitative Analysis of Food Advertising in Italian Children's National TV Programming: Implications for School-Based Nutrition Educational Programs

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Abstract: Globally it has been estimated that 10% of children and teens aged 6 to 18 are overweight or obese. Media and advertising agencies are considered social organizations capable to playing a central role in both promoting and challenging childhood obesity. To have a better understanding of this problem, it was investigated the quantity and the typology of advertising on air during children's television broadcastings in Italy over a period of three months, analyzing all the TV programming targeting children aired in the six main TV national channels. This paper focuses on the main results which were obtained and suggests to integrate traditional nutritional educational programs targeting children with components taken from the field of media education.

Keywords: Childhood obesity, conditioned hyperphagia, media, advertisings, educational programs.

INTRODUCTION

Severe overweight, or obesity, is one of the major risk factor for many chronic diseases including, heart and respiratory diseases, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, some cancers and even prematurely death. Many researchers agree about the effects that watching television has on children's health.

Television seems to promote childhood obesity [1] by generating a imbalance between calories intake and expenditure of energy, both through physical inactivity [2] and through so called "snacking" [3,4], the habit of eating while watching television. As well as the persuasiveness of advertising must be considered. Over the last twenty years, many studies [3-14] have been conducted in order to determinate how the exposure to food and beverage ads influences the eating habits of children and adolescents.

In the meantime, eating disorders have become increasingly a matter of public interest. David Kessler analyzed recently the so called conditioned hyperphagia [15] by combining observations from the world of neuroscience, pedagogy, marketing and nutritional sciences. At the base of this process is what experts define attentional prejudice. That is, when a pleasant stimulus is present in our living environment, it concentrates first the whole attention of the subject and then the subject's desire, the release of dopamine will increase and motivate the subject to move towards and

consume the object that is so desirable. If the object is food, the person will eat it not because of a real need. This problem leads to eating because of the altered action of dopamine and opioids released in some hypothalamic areas of our brain. This release does not originate from internal stimuli but from external ones which lead to eat more food at all times, regardless of the actual need from the organic point of view.

Commercial mass media are inhabiting our social space with persuasive messages of consumption, becoming moderators of our reality.

Moreover to marketers kids represent an important target. Their purchasing power is increasingly high, they influence parents' buying decisions and above all they represent the adult consumers of the future.

In light of the evidence about the consequences of eating behavior on children's health, and considered the influence of marketing messages, it is necessary to investigate the typology of advertisings on air during children's television programmes and how these ads may influence the nutritional habits of minors. For this reason a quali- quantitative study has been conducted in order to assess and analyze the advertising during children's television programmes.

METHOD

Considering how eating habits affect the health of children and taking into account the influence of advertising messages, the research study has been designed to investigate the typology of advertising on air during children's television programmes and the

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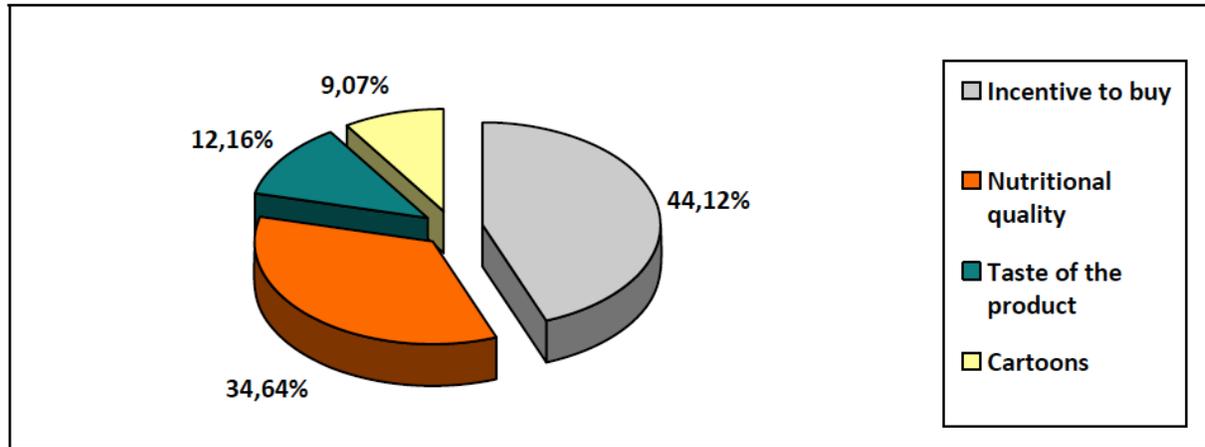


Figure 1: Typology of advertising messages used to promote food products to children.

marketing strategies used to tailor them so to induce children's food consumptions related with exposure to this kind of messages.

The television programmes under examination are programming strand of the main Italian broadcasting networks (RAI and Mediaset) which have cartoons as the only or main kind of broadcast offered to children inside their schedules. Movies and serials have been excluded even if addressed to youth. Advertising before and after the analyzed programmes have not been considered.

The research has been conducted during January to March 2008, for a three month period. During this study period it was decided to record all children's television programmes, based on the airing of cartoons, during the third week of each month.

A quail- quantitative analysis has been conducted in order to define the typology of foods advertised and the major marketing strategies adopted to fascinate children and youth.

This analysis has been conducted to underline the need of new educational strategies in order to fight against the decision-makers working at marketing departments of big companies constantly looking for teens all over the world to be hooked into compulsive behaviors, allowing their companies to make big profits.

RESULTS

The research, conducted over a period of 3 months, allowed to record a total of 179 hours, 27 minutes, and 18 seconds of children's television programs and analyzes a total number of 3495 adverts (for a total of 19 hours, 15 minutes and 55 seconds), of which 485,

equivalent to 13,88%, commercializing food products. Looking at the duration of food ads compared to the total duration of commercials, food commercials account for 17,69%, corresponding to 3 hours, 24 minutes and 20 seconds.

The adverts' messages used to persuade little viewers to buy food products (Figure 1) are mainly: the product taste, the animation, the nutritional quality and the incentive to buy. The latter is by far the most represented, appearing in 214 food commercials out of a total of 485 (44.12%), followed by the taste of the product (34.64%), nutritional quality (12.16%) and animation (9.07%).

With regard to the actors used in commercials (Figure 2), it can be noticed how the choice has often been the representation of both adults and children, often represented as a happy family unit (37.11%). The use of children only is limited to 21.65% of the adverts examined, while animation and the presence of adults only are found in 19.8% of cases.

Due to the absence of any kind of legislation that protects the youngest from being encouraged to consume poor nutritional food, it is obvious that among the primary consequences there is a massive presence of adverts for confectionery products (304 out of 485, equivalent to 62,68%) included in children's television programmes. In the group of carbohydrate-rich foods for breakfast, (36 adverts out of 65, 55.38%), the Cheerios cereals (in doubt whether they are to be considered among the carbohydrates or desserts), which alone account for 22 adverts out of 36, have a strong influence, similarly to Kellogg's Rice Krispies (14 out of 36), which are much healthier than the first. In the protein group, which include meat, fish, eggs,

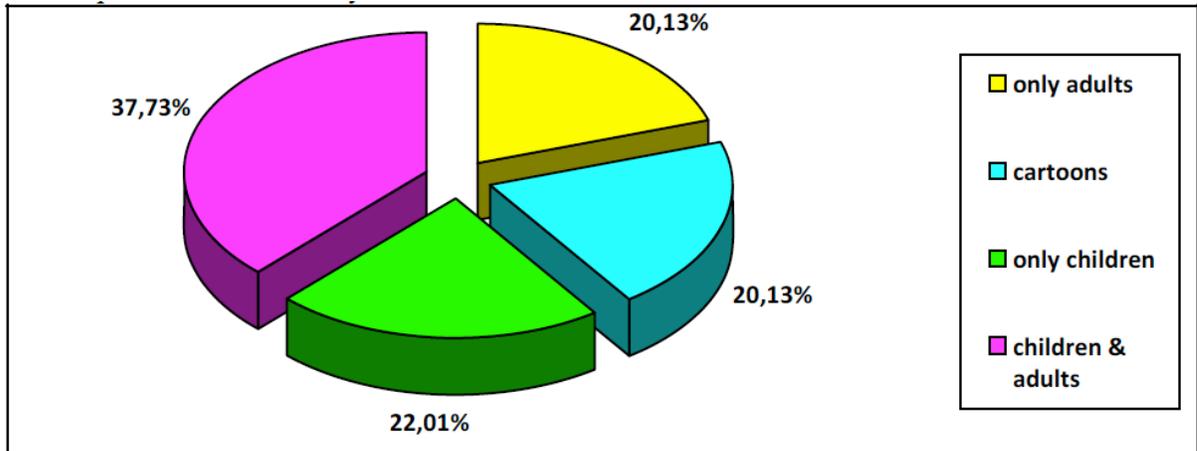


Figure 2: Typology of actors used in food commercials in children's television programs.

beans and salami, the picture becomes dramatic when we consider that as many as 79.07% of the adverts broadcast for this food category are McDonald's commercials. Moreover a child watching a television program dedicated to him, must watch commercials that advertise food products in 42.45% of cases, 58.59% belonging to the sweets category.

In conclusion, it was investigated the typology of foods advertised in the examined commercials (Figure 3).

DISCUSSION

The analysis showed that the marketing strategies used to promote food consumption not motivated by hunger or need, further the "eatertainment" approach, by transforming food in a product that must "entertain, amuse, reward" [16]. The food showed in the ads

moreover nutritionally, rich in sugar, fats, preservatives and food coloring to make them super-attractive fueling the vicious cycle that characterizes the conditioned hyperphagia described by Kessler. Quite rare, if not totally absent, ads promoting natural products such as fruits and vegetables.

Implications for Children's Protection

This result suggests the absolute need to protect children from aggressive marketing and advertising of foodstuffs through educational programmes. This aspect is of basic importance, considering that youth spend a relevant fraction of their waking time (up to 33-50%) interacting with some form of media [17], and mass media have surpassed schools as a dominant agent of socialization [18]. According to many theories media affect attitudes and behaviors in different ways,

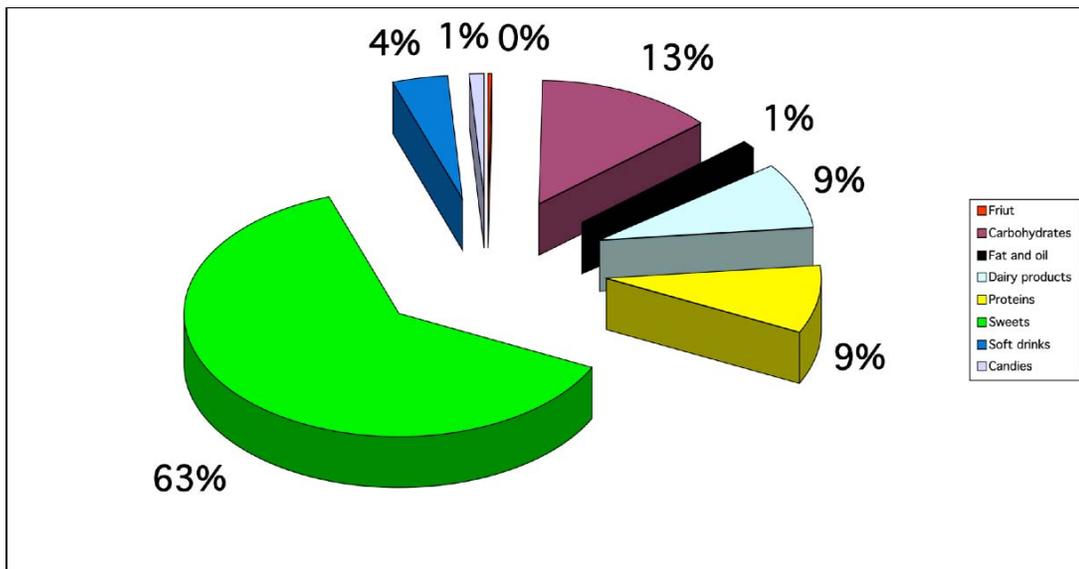


Figure 3: Typology of foods advertised in the examined commercials.

for example children learn by observing and imitating what they see (social learning theory) or they consider media like a superpeer capable to transform risky behaviors in normative ones. The vast majority of young people has unprecedented access to new media: 93% of young people aged 12 to 17 are on-line, and 71% have a cell phone, Internet users report watching videos (57%), visiting social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook (65%) and 97% of adolescents report that they play video games on the computer, Web, handheld device, or console [19].

By the side, well-paid researchers and psychologists, help advertisers obtaining in-depth knowledge about children's developmental, emotional and social needs at different ages enabling companies to develop sophisticated marketing strategies involving many different marketing techniques to fascinate young people. The marketers' final goal is to plant the seeds of brand recognition and compulsive buying in children in order to create a lifetime relationship with their products.

We have to help the children to understand how media can facilitate the adoption of many risk behaviours enabling young children to realize how TV viewing and media using impact their nutritional choices and habits and how marketers shapes their eating habits and behaviors.

Implications for Educational Interventions

This is why media education goals aiming at helping individuals of all ages "develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today's world" [20] more and more overlaps with health education ones aiming at improving people health and quality of life through educational strategies, improvement of health-related individual decision making and fighting common misconceptions that affect health-related beliefs. This explains the growth of new approaches focusing on media literacy and media education that have integrated and contaminated traditional health education programs and curricula and have been recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Office of National Drug Control Policy to recommend this [21-23].

Considering the role played by education efforts, W.H.O. has stated that Life Skills are the keys allowing succeeding in protecting and reinforcing individual

health and wellbeing. Life skills are defined as the "abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life". They represent the psycho-social abilities and include reflective skills, personal skills and interpersonal skills. Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE) is the educational application of the concept of life skills and is aimed at empowering young people in challenging situations.

Children and adolescents, need to be particularly empowered with skills that will allow them to have more control over the influence of the media, and to use information to obtain healthy life. Media literacy represents an effective way to apply critical thinking skills to a wide range of issues.

Media literacy skills can help youth and adults to:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Understand how media messages shape our culture and society
- Identify target marketing strategies
- Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
- Name the techniques of persuasion used
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
- Discover the parts of the story that are not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, skills, beliefs, and values
- Create and distribute our own media messages
- Advocate for a changed media system

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research underline how marketing strategies targeting children may affect their health, particularly in the area of nutrition, promoting unhealthy food products. Moreover the marketing strategies adopted, as incentive to buy and happy family representations, are particularly charming for children. These results highlight the need to encourage a more critical approach to advertising in children by improving, beside the nutritional education programmes, media education programmes.

As parents, educators, public health professionals we should really hope that media education integrated in health education programs becomes a definitive new trend for prevention reasons. Actually, this approach is growing more and more in popularity and practice in many countries and is highly sustained by the public health field to reduce the epidemics related with at-risk behaviors among teen agers. More and more, health education programs are helping students to understand how media messages are promoting, glamourizing or normalizing behaviors that very often have an influence on one's well-being and are enhancing healthy ways to incorporate media use into personal lifestyle, making them become an opportunity and not a threat for individual health.

Considering that we all have a role to play in helping our children to be happy and healthy while growing up educators, parents, decision makers and also advertiser and business professional must be involved in promoting and upholding responsible advertising practices and telecommunications self- and statutory regulation.

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