

# FOOD MARKETING EXPOSURE AND POWER AND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS WITH FOOD-RELATED ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND BEHAVIOURS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW



World Health  
Organization



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# Contents

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Acknowledgements	iv
Executive summary	v
1. Background	1
2. Rationale and objectives of the review	2
3. Methodology	3
3.1 Data sources	3
3.2 Data synthesis	4
3.3 Definition of foods that contribute to unhealthy diets	4
4. Results	5
4.1 Content analysis research	5
4.1.1 Exposure to food marketing	5
4.1.2 Power of food marketing	8
4.2 Consumer research	10
4.2.1 Effects of food marketing: associative studies	10
4.2.2 Effects of food marketing: qualitative studies	13
5. Discussion	16
6 Conclusion	18
References	19
Annexes	33
Annex 1: Content analysis research	33
Annex 2: Consumer research: Associative effects	92
Annex 3: Consumer research: Qualitative effects	101

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# Executive summary

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Healthy dietary practices are initiated early in life and form the foundation for good nutrition and healthy development. Our food environment, which includes the nature and extent of food marketing, influences food values and impacts dietary practices. Food marketing has long been recognized to impact on food preferences and consumption patterns, but despite numerous calls to action to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing by reducing the power of and exposure to marketing, children continue to be exposed to it. The development of an evidence-informed policy guideline through the WHO guideline development process will help more countries to put in place effective actions to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing.

As part of the guideline development process, WHO commissioned two systematic reviews, one on the effectiveness of policies to restrict food marketing and another on the impact of food marketing on children. Alongside these, the WHO Nutrition Guidance Expert Advisory Group (NUGAG) Subgroup on Policy Actions requested an update of an earlier descriptive review on the extent and nature of food marketing, and on the associative and qualitative effects of food marketing on eating-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviours from 2009. This publication synthesizes the evidence from that update, and also informs the WHO guideline on policies to restrict food marketing. The update uses a structured narrative review approach, and is based on articles published between 2009 and 2020 which were retrieved by the searches for the two above-mentioned systematic reviews but were not considered eligible for inclusion in either of those reviews (typically because of reasons related to study design or absence of appropriate comparator groups).

Included studies comprised both content analysis research (i.e. research that considers where food marketing occurs, how much there is, for which brands/products and what creative content and marketing techniques are used) and consumer research (i.e. research that explores individuals' beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and behavioural responses to food marketing) from high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). A total of 143 content analysis studies (of which 43 related to exposure, 25 to power and 75 to both exposure and power) and 36 consumer research studies (of which 16 were associative and 20 were qualitative) were included in the update.

This review provides evidence that food marketing continues to be prevalent everywhere and predominantly promotes foods that contribute to unhealthy diets. When reported, the proportion of food marketing promoting such foods was generally greater than 50%, and in some studies over 90%. The most frequently marketed food categories included fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, chocolate and confectionery, salty/savoury snacks, sweet bakery items and snacks, breakfast cereals, dairy products and desserts. There was good evidence to suggest that food marketing promoting less healthy foods was prevalent in settings where children gather (e.g. schools, sports clubs) and, in the context of food marketing through the medium of TV, more frequent during children's typical viewing times, during school holidays, on children's channels or around children's programming relative to other time periods, channels or programming genres. Some evidence indicated social inequality in exposure to food marketing.

Studies related to the power of food marketing reported use of a wide range of creative strategies likely to appeal to, and resonate with, young audiences. These included the use of celebrity/sports endorsements; promotional characters; promotions, gifts/incentives and tie-ins; competitions; games; colour, visual imagery and novel designs; animation, dynamic elements and special effects; branding; persuasive appeals; health/nutrition claims and disclaimers; and various other engagement techniques. Some studies suggested that use of such strategies was more frequent or extensive in food marketing directed towards children than in marketing aimed at adults. Strategies likely to appeal to children were also used more frequently to promote foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet (compared with healthier products), and during school holidays (compared with other days).

Studies which examined the impact of food marketing on diet-related outcomes focused on commercial TV viewing or TV advertisements, often in conjunction with other mediums such as video games, billboards and social media platforms. Among the findings related to beliefs and attitudes was that, among adolescents, exposure to marketing of foods that contribute to unhealthy diets was positively associated with descriptive norms about consumption of such foods. The findings related to the relationship between attitudes and behaviour included that the entertaining dimension of advertising and the level of emotional arousal (e.g. positive feelings of happiness and satisfaction) children experienced after exposure influenced frequency of consumption of foods that contribute to unhealthy diets, and that as adolescents' positive perceptions towards food advertising increased, daily frequency of consumption of foods that contribute to unhealthy diets also increased. In terms of the findings related to behavioural and health impacts, studies reported significant positive associations between frequency of food advertising for particular products or level of exposure to food marketing and habitual consumption of advertised foods or less healthy foods. Some studies indicated that engagement with marketing (e.g. actively watching YouTube brand videos or "liking", "sharing" or "commenting on" posts online) was associated with greater impacts on consumption than exposure alone.

Qualitative studies that reported on food attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and norms, found that most children had good knowledge of food brands and were able to recognize advertised food products in the supermarket. A number of explicit marketing techniques were identified that appeal to and engage young people with marketing. The deceptive nature of food marketing, in relation to the techniques used was considered a concern. The findings related to awareness of, attitudes to, and perspectives on food marketing exposure and its regulation included reports of platforms and media via which children and adolescents were exposed to food marketing, concern about the volume of exposure, and support for greater regulation. Finally, among the findings related to the impact of food marketing were reports

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