



Original research

Food industry self-regulation scheme “EU Pledge” cannot prevent the marketing of unhealthy foods to children



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A B S T R A C T

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Aims: The food industry's responsibility for the global rise in overweight, obesity and other chronic illnesses, like type 2 diabetes, has been a subject of intense debate for several years. Criticism has been particularly acute with respect to child-directed marketing for food products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). In the so-called EU Pledge programme, several of the world's leading food and beverage companies have committed to marketing their products more responsibly. This study investigated whether the companies who have signed this voluntary self-regulation are in fact refraining from marketing HFSS products to children.

Methods: To this end, the researchers identified 281 child-marketed products from EU Pledge signatory companies. These products were evaluated on the basis of the nutrient profile model published by the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Results: Only 29 of the 281 evaluated products meet the WHO's nutritional criteria for the use of child-directed food marketing. In other words, based on the WHO criteria, 90 per cent of the products should not be marketed to children.

Conclusions: These findings clearly show that the voluntary commitments of the food industry through the EU Pledge programme do not prevent the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. An effective regulatory framework is urgently needed.

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1. Introduction

Overweight, obesity and food-related chronic diseases represent a growing social problem. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are already describing the situation as a “global obesity epidemic” (Sassi, 2010; WHO, 2003). In Germany 15 per cent (1.9 million) of children and adolescents between 3 and 17 years of age are overweight, and 6.3 per cent qualify as obese (Robert Koch Institute, 2008). The proportion of overweight adolescents has increased by 50 per cent since the 1990s. The number of new cases of type 2 diabetes among youth has increased five-fold over the past ten years. According to the “Deutsche Diabetes-Hilfe”, some 6 million people in Germany have diabetes. This means that, since 1998, the age-adjusted prevalence of diabetes has increased by 24 per cent (DiabetesDE, 2015). Type 2 diabetes accounts for more than 90 per cent of all diabetes cases. Unhealthy eating habits

represent one of the main causes of this “obesity epidemic” and rise in chronic diseases (World Cancer Research Fund, 2014). The eating behaviours learned during childhood often persist throughout a person's lifetime (Birch and Doub, 2014; Cooke, 2007; Deckelbaum and Williams, 2001). Numerous national and international health organisations have identified the food industry as playing a significant role in the development of unhealthy eating habits. Criticism has been particularly acute with respect to child-targeted marketing for food products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) (Cairns et al., 2013). Accordingly, public health experts in Germany, Europe and worldwide are calling for marketing restrictions on HFSS products (e.g. BMA, 2015; DANK, 2014; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2015; WHO, 2010). The EU has yet to introduce legislation that would regulate food marketing targeted at children. Instead, governments are relying on the industry to self-regulate. The effectiveness of voluntary commitments in the prevention of obesity has often been the subject of research (e.g. Jensen and Ronit, 2015; King et al., 2013; Ronit and Jensen, 2014). In this study conducted by the consumer organisation foodwatch, researchers investigated whether the voluntary commitments of the

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food companies in the EU Pledge programme are effectively preventing the marketing of HFSS foods to children ([foodwatch e.V., 2015](#)).

1.1. The EU Pledge programme – self-regulation of the food industry

In 2007 several of the world's leading food and beverage companies signed the so-called EU Pledge to adopt a more responsible approach in their marketing of food products to children. Their overarching promise: “We will change our food advertising to children” ([www.eu-pledge.eu](#)).

In concrete terms, the signatories have made the following “commitments”:

- No advertising of products to children under 12 years, except for products which fulfil the specific nutrition criteria of the EU Pledge, which are specified in the “EU Pledge Nutrition Criteria White Paper” ([EU Pledge, 2015](#)). For the purpose of the programme, “advertising to children under 12 years” means advertising to media audiences with a minimum of 35% of children under 12 years of age.
- No communication related to products in primary schools, except where specifically requested by, or agreed with, the school administration for educational purposes.

The commitments currently apply to the following marketing channels: commercial communications on TV, print, third-party Internet and company-owned websites. From 31 December 2016, the commitment will be extended to radio, cinema, DVD/CD-ROM, direct marketing, product placement, interactive games, mobile and SMS marketing.

However, the commitment *does not* apply to package design, marketing activities at the point of sale (POS marketing) or sponsoring. Furthermore, under the self-imposed restrictions described above, companies are still allowed to use their own cartoon characters created as mascots for advertising purposes (“equity-brand characters”).

The EU Pledge was one of the measures that arose from the “European Union Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health”. This forum was established in 2005 by the then Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, Markos Kyprianou, to bring together initiatives for the promotion of healthy lifestyles and the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases ([EU Platform, 2015](#)). Its members include the food industry and its trade associations, along with consumer and health NGOs and advertising associations.

Since 2007 the Platform has been a policy tool in the “Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity Related Health Issues” adopted by the European Commission ([European Commission, 2010](#)). The Platform focuses exclusively on voluntary initiatives.

1.2. The nutrient profile model of the World Health Organisation

In early 2015 the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) published its recommendations for restrictions on the marketing of foods to children ([WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2015](#)). Like the EU Pledge programme, this “nutrient profile model” categorises foods on the basis of their nutritional composition for the purpose of determining whether or not they should be marketed to children. According to the recommendations of WHO/Europe, child-directed marketing should only be approved for food products that qualify as “healthy” based on this model.

A comparison of the two food-classification models – the EU Pledge “Nutrition Criteria White Paper” and the WHO/Europe nutrient profile model – shows that the requirements placed on the nutritional composition of food by the EU Pledge criteria are significantly less stringent (see [Table 1](#)).

2. Materials and methods

From April to mid-August 2015, researchers visited supermarkets in Berlin, Potsdam and Stuttgart, as well as manufacturers' websites, to identify 281 products whose marketing specifically targets children.¹ Based on the definition of “children's foods” by the German Research Institute of Child Nutrition (FKE) ([Düren and Kersting, 2003](#)), child-directed food marketing includes the following practices:

- “eye-catching” package designs (for example, the package design includes (cartoon) characters, brand mascots, games and/or other activities for children)
- the food itself is pictured in the marketing/advertising or on the packaging using illustrations that appeal to children (for example, chocolate buttons with faces, arms and legs)
- the food has a special shape that appeals to children (for example, animal-shaped crackers)
- the product is marketed using campaigns that are attractive to children (e.g. opportunities to win toys, free tickets to amusement parks) or the food is sold with free gifts (e.g. free apps, stickers, collector cards or toy figures)
 - the advertising and/or manufacturer's website targets children (e.g. by offering online games, instructions for arts and crafts projects and/or online clubs)

In addition to products meeting these criteria from the FKE, the study also included foods which stand out owing to strong sensory characteristics (for example, multicolour products, foods that crackle when eaten) and therefore also appeal to children's natural curiosity and need for fun and adventure (see [Effertz, 2008](#)).

Unlike this study, the EU Pledge does not include marketing methods like package design and food shapes in its definition of child-directed marketing.

Foodwatch's market research did not include “children's foods” that are not marketed directly to children but instead exclusively to their parents (for example with slogans like “for all ages”; but without cartoon characters, collector promotions or child-directed advertising). Television ad placement (e.g. in children's programmes) was also not taken into consideration.

The study identified an additional 37 products that could not be clearly classified based on the chosen definition of child-directed marketing. These “borderline cases” were analysed but not included in the results of the evaluation.

The nutritional content of all 281 identified products was analysed on the basis of the WHO/Europe nutrient profile model to determine whether they meet the WHO criteria for child-directed marketing practices.

¹ The following companies have signed the EU Pledge: Burger King, Coca-Cola, Danone, Amica Chips, ICA Foods, Intersnack (incl. Estrella Maarud), KiMs, Lorenz Snack-World, Unichips – San Carlo, Zweifel Pomy-Chips, Ferrero, General Mills, Kellogg's, Mars, McDonalds Europe, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Quick Group, Royal FrieslandCampina and Unilever. The researchers were unable to identify any products marketed in Germany from the following companies: Amica Chips, ICA Foods, KiMs, Unichips – San Carlo, Zweifel Pomy-Chips, General Mills, Quick Group. General Mills is Nestlé's “Cereal Partner”. Considering this joint venture, several of Nestlé's breakfast cereals can also be attributed to General Mills.

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