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Influence of Spanish TV commercials on child obesity

C. Ramos^a, J. Navas^{b,*}^a Barcelona, Spain^b Department of Food Technology and Nutrition, Catholic University of Murcia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine the strategies used in food advertising campaigns on Spanish television and their breach of the Self-Regulation Code on Food Advertising aimed at Preventing Obesity and Promoting Healthy Habits in Children, as such breach advocates the consumption of products that fail to meet the nutritional requirements.

Study design: Observational descriptive study.

Methods: Viewing and content analysis of 52 food commercials on the children's television channels 'Disney Channel' and 'Boing' on Saturday and Sunday (9:00–12:00) and general channels 'Telecinco' and 'Antena 3' on Monday to Friday (8:00–9:00 and 17:00–20:00), from March to May 2013; subsequent analysis of the nutrition labelling of the advertised products.

Results: There are different ways of bypassing the advertising agreement. Strategies are used which hide or distort the facts about the product in favour of the advertiser. 18 advertisements refer to website or Facebook pages, thus facilitating feedback, and 11 advertisements refer to the Plan for Promoting Healthy Lifestyles in the Spanish Population.

With regard to nutritional quality, the composition of the products analysed is high in sugars and saturated fats with average levels of fat and salt. A comparison of the broadcast time of the commercials shows that the figures for fat and saturated fat are similar in food advertised in the morning and in the afternoon, but products that are high in sugar and salt are advertised more in the morning. If the overall figures are compared, they are higher in foods advertised in the morning.

Discussion: The Self-Regulation Code is insufficient. There is an obvious risk of trivialising the messages of the health promotion plan.

The regulation of advertising is complex and if the nutritional composition of the foods advertised is likely to lead to child obesity, it is essential to reflect on the consequences deriving from the advertising of these products.

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* Corresponding author. Department of Food Technology and Nutrition, Catholic University of Murcia, Campus Los Jerónimos s/n, 30107 Murcia, Spain. Tel.: +34 968278622; fax: +34 968278620.

E-mail address: jnavas@ucam.edu (J. Navas).

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Introduction

The prevalence of obesity in Spain is 14.5%,¹ reaching 13.9% among children and youths, which is considered a public health problem.^{2,3} The development and maintenance of child obesity is influenced by family background and lifestyle, especially differences in physical activity, nutritional habits and sedentary behaviour, reflected in excessive television viewing.⁴

In response to the guidelines issued in 2004 by the Global⁵ Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, in 2005 the Spanish Ministry of Health, the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition (AESAN) and the Spanish Federation of Food and Drinks Industries (IFLA), within the NAOS⁶ Strategy (Strategy for Nutrition, Physical Activity and Prevention of Obesity), signed the Self-Regulation Code on Food Advertising aimed at Children, for the Prevention of Obesity and Promotion of Health (PAOS Code)^{7,8} which established the rules governing the development, implementation and broadcasting of food advertisements aimed at children under the age of 12.

This code is a set of 25 rules of Code of Ethics aimed at preventing child obesity. Its target is food advertising. In 2012, the PAOS Code was extended to the area of Internet advertising directed at children under the age of 15. It entered into force on 1 January 2013.

Also, on 31 January 2013, AESAN and the 'Alimentum' Foundation (a private non-profit organization formed by IFLA companies) signed a cooperation agreement promoted by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality and initiated the HAVISA Plan⁹ (for promoting healthy lifestyles in the Spanish population). This communication campaign consists of the issuing of messages in the form of subtitles to be included in food advertisements for a minimum length of time which would be half the duration of the advertisement. These messages promote healthy eating habits and encourage physical exercise. The communication plan is distributed according to a schedule (for example, May: 'Walk 30 min a day' or June: 'Eat more fruit and vegetables' ...). These messages are included in the advertisements of food companies that belong to the Alimentum Foundation (25 companies, e.g.: Coca-Cola, Kellogg's or Nestlé).

One in five advertising impacts on Spanish television corresponds to a company from the Alimentum Foundation, owing to which a minimum of six impacts on average per person per day is guaranteed. Advertising by these companies represents 16% of that shown on television and 8% of total advertising in Spain.

Similarly, the Self-Regulation Code on Television and Childhood¹⁰ is an agreement signed on 9 December 2004 between the Government of Spain and major television channels: TVE, Antena 3, Cuatro, Telecinco, la Sexta and the FORTA (Federation of Regional Radio and Television Networks). Its intention is to protect children from harmful content on television. The document establishes time slots where violent, sexual, drug or occult related content is prohibited. The buffer zone covers from 6.00 to 22.00, and there are spots known as 'enhanced protection', namely: Monday to Friday from 8.00 to 9.00 and from 17.00 to 19.00 and Saturdays and Sundays from 9.00 to 12.00.

The United Kingdom's Food Standards Agency (FSA) has set up the Front of Pack Traffic Light signpost labelling¹¹ system that allows an improvement in the nutritional information provided to consumers through colour labels. It is a system that classifies nutrients in foods by colours, following a similar approach to traffic lights. The amounts of sugar, fat, saturated fat and salt considered to be within safe levels are given a green colour, those amounts likely to be at hazardous levels are given an amber colour while those that are hazardous are given a red colour.

The aim of this study was to analyse whether the strategies used in the advertising campaigns on television by food or drink companies breach or bypass the PAOS code standards and what repercussions this may have. Specifically, the objectives were to analyse the messages of television commercials related to food or drinks aimed at children; to analyse other strategies aimed at encouraging the acquisition of these products; and to identify, via the traffic light label, the characteristics of the advertised products and whether, during the time slots of children's enhanced protection, foods with nutritional content susceptible to lead to child obesity are being advertised, comparing the case of children's programmes with more general programming.

Methods

This is a descriptive observational study.

The selection criteria for the sample were the 2012 TV channel ranking,¹² the time slots described in the Self-Regulation Code on Television Content and Childhood and the information extracted from the study of child/youth audience of the media in Spain (2007–2008),¹³ issued by the Association for Media Research (AIMC).

Since State television channels do not broadcast any commercials, the authors decided to view the advertisements on the commercial channels that had a higher percentage share: 'Disney Channel' and 'Boing' for programmes exclusively for children and Telecinco and Antena 3 in time slots for children's programmes. The time slots Monday to Friday (8:00–9:00 and 17:00–20:00), Saturday and Sunday (9:00–12:00) were covered. The March to May 2013 period was viewed. A total of 52 commercials were analysed.

The analysis could have been restricted to the review of the advertisements shown on Saturday and Sunday on the exclusively children's channels 'Disney Channel' and 'Boing' but the channels that are not exclusively children's channels were included in order to take into consideration the fact that many children do watch adult programmes during other time slots with the adults with whom they live.

Several viewings per commercial were performed. In the first place the commercial was viewed on television, recording the date and time when the commercial was broadcasted, and multiple replays of the video clips were then watched on the Internet. Given the short time of the advertising spots, the content analysis was only possible in this way. The message, the visual language, the claim and the characteristics were analysed. Alongside this, the nutritional information on the food packaging or on the website

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