



Food advertising towards children and young people in Norway



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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that no studies have been carried out to map the amount of unhealthy food advertising aimed at Norwegian children and adolescents, it is still widely held belief that this type of advertising is disproportionately common. As a consequence, one of the issues high on the agenda in Norway in the 2000s was the possibility of imposing restrictions on advertising for unhealthy foods to children. The purpose of this study is to contribute with a research-based foundation for implementing this health initiative by mapping food marketing in media channels widely used by children and adolescents. In sum, the study shows that the food industry spends a lot of resources to influence young consumers' eating and drinking habits. Compared with studies from USA, UK and Australia, however, there are, strong indications that there is significantly less unhealthy food advertising in Scandinavian countries. Similar to a previous Swedish study, this study shows that Norwegian children and young people were exposed to little advertising for unhealthy food products through media channels such as TV, the Internet, magazines, comics and cinemas. The study also supports critical remarks from some researchers that the extensive use of the international discourse as a political argument and recommendation for Norwegian conditions is not accurate. For the future it may be beneficial to look more closely at the relationship between advertising and health policy, and how this relationship can be further developed to improve children and young people's diet.

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1. Introduction

Children and young people are interesting consumers for food and beverage manufacturers. A large proportion of their advertising budgets are spent on reaching this audience through everything from television, radio, the Internet and magazines to product placement, packaging and sponsorship of idols and heroes (e.g. Hastings et al., 2003; Hastings, McDermott, Angus, Stead, & Thomson, 2006; Gram, 2004; Wietcha et al., 2006; Kelly, Smith, King, Flood, & Bauman, 2007; Nord, 2008; Cairns, Angus, Hastings, & Caraher, 2013; Han, Powell, & Kim, 2013). It is an indisputable fact that this type of marketing also influences children's choices (e.g. Mehta et al., 2010; Mink, Evans, Moore, Calderon, & Deger, 2010; Blades, Oates, & Shiyong, 2013; Cairns et al., 2013; Halford & Boyland, 2013). A Norwegian study showed for instance that three out of ten 8- to 19-year-olds agreed that they often asked or nagged their parents to buy things they had seen advertised. The study also showed that many in this age group spent their pocket money on unhealthy food and beverage products

such as candy, soda and fast food (Storm-Mathisen, Kjørstad, & Bugge, 2015).

Given the many international studies that have shown that children and adolescents are exposed to large amounts of unhealthy food advertising (Hastings et al., 2003, 2006), it is not surprising that Norwegian health politicians and policy makers are concerned. As a consequence, one of the issues high on the agenda in the 2000s in Norway was the possibility of imposing restrictions on advertising of unhealthy foods to children (Norwegian Ministries, 2007). An Internet search for the words "barn" (children), "mat" (food) and "reklame" (advertising) (08.09.14) revealed that the most prominent theme among the hits was precisely regulations and bans. Indeed, in 2013 the Norwegian Minister of Health and the Minister of Child Affairs wrote to selected enterprise federations, employer organizations and NGOs to say that they were working on this issue (Government Stoltenberg II, 2013).

However, researchers (Buckingham, 2009 a, b; Tingstad, 2009) have argued that the Norwegian debate has too much built on conclusions from international studies on this issue (Hastings et al., 2006; British Ofcom report 2007). More than half of the studies reviewed in these reports were American, and, furthermore, there were no references to studies that had mapped the amount of

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unhealthy food ads aimed at children and young people in Norway or other Scandinavian countries. Based on such findings, it has been questioned whether politicians and health officials had too uncritically accepted international findings as valid also in Norway (Buckingham, 2009a, b). In her study, Tingstad (2009) discussed how Norwegian children's media consumption differs in significant ways from those of American children. For example, there are stricter regulations and legislation on marketing to children and young people in Norway than in the United States. Moreover, until the late 1980s Norway had a television monopoly, and institutions such as the *Ombudsman for Children* and the *Ministry of Children* work both as purveyors of knowledge and as "watchdogs" for children and young people's wellbeing.

Despite the fact that no studies have been carried out to map the amount of unhealthy food advertising aimed at Norwegian children and adolescents, it is still a widely held belief that this type of advertising is disproportionately common. However, The Nordic Council of Ministers conducted two studies in Sweden in 2005 and 2007. The results of these studies indicate that children in Scandinavian countries are less exposed to unhealthy food advertising in media channels such as television, the Internet, magazines, comics and cinemas than children in other Western countries (Nord, 2008). Of a total of 2275 commercials shown on TV channels widely used by children, such as Cartoon Network, TV3, TV4 and Kanal 5, only 213 (9 percent) referred to food and drink. The most advertised products on these channels were toys (718) and home electronics (577). These product groups accounted for 32 percent and 24 percent of all shown commercials, respectively. The researchers also examined materials from 88 Internet sites. The sites were divided into a) food-related websites and b) websites that children often visit. Most sites (90 percent) contained neither editorials on food nor food ads. The review of comics and magazines showed the same pattern. There were few examples of food ads or editorial material about food in the magazines that had children as their primary audience.

The aim of this article is to present a systematic survey study that maps the actual amount of advertising of food and drink products high in sugar, fat and salt in media channels widely used by children in Norway. The results will also be compared with international studies. Furthermore, the relationship between research and policy making, as well as between health politicians/policy makers and food companies will be discussed.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Media selection

The selection of media channels for the study were based on results from research that identified the most popular TV channels, Internet sites and reading matters among children and youth in Norway (Mediebarn, 2013).

Figures from Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2012) showed that children and young people spend five to 6 h daily on screen activities. TV was the most time-consuming activity, followed by the Internet and computer activities. Nine out of ten children and young people (9–24 years) watch TV every day, but they do not watch as much TV as the adult population. On average they spend 1.6 h daily watching television. Girls spend more time on television than boys in the same age group. According to Statistics Norway's figures, eight out of ten children and young people spend time on the Internet on an average day. The 13- to 19-year-olds were the most frequent users. Here the figure was 91 percent. On an average day 21 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds and 28 percent of 9- to 12-year-olds read "something" that is not schoolwork, e.g. books, comics, magazines. By comparison, 78 percent and 84 percent in these two

age groups, respectively, watched television on an average day. The figures also show that a vast majority of children and young people regularly go to the cinema. 91 per cent of 9- to 15-year-olds had been to the movies during one year. The average was 3.3 visits per year.

2.2. Samples

The most watched TV channel in the youngest age group (3–11 years) is the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's (NRK) children's channel (NRK Super). This channel is funded through license fees. 63 percent of the youngest children watched this channel daily. By comparison, daily viewing of TV2 and TVNorge among the youngest was 34 percent and 13 percent, respectively (TNS Mediebarn, 2012). The two commercial TV channels with the largest daily coverage in the youngest age group were Cartoon Network Norge (25 percent) and Disney Junior Norge (24 percent).

Data were collected by recording all broadcasted television, from 06.00 until 24.00, on the most watched television channels among children and youth (Table 1). With the exception of Disney Channel all the recordings were made in November and December 2012. The recordings of Disney Channel were made in March 2013. The recordings included 23 days divided into 9 weekdays and 14 weekend days. This amounted to a total of 432 h. During these hours 9043 commercials were shown. All commercials were registered, logged and classified. If no food or drink commercials were shown on a channel during one or two days of recording, the review was closed for that particular channel.

The Internet range is based on knowledge of children's and young people's Internet activities (TNS Gallup 2012). It was taken eight print screens from each of the 23 most visited sites at two randomly selected days in March 2013 (Norske Mediebarn 2012). The sample consists of a total of 196 print screens (Table 4).

Given that Facebook is among the most visited websites among Norwegian adolescents, two accounts, "Julia" and "Jonas" (November 2012), were created. Both profiles pressed "like" on about 30 commercial actors each. In March 2013 the researchers recorded the updates, recommendations and banner commercials that the two fictitious 13-year-olds had received in the period November 2012 to March 2013. The researchers also recorded the number of likes of manufacturers and products that were promoted on TV and other media channels during the investigation period. Facebook's own statistics also made it possible for us to gain knowledge about which groups (gender, age, residence) the manufacturers and products appealed to.

YouTube is also a popular site for Norwegian children and adolescents. The way this site works makes it impossible to conduct a systematic survey of the amount of food commercials that are aimed at children and youth. We did, however, search on selected commercials and ads that had been shown on the various media channels during the investigation period, as well as selected

Table 1
Overview of the television recordings.

Commercial TV channels	Days	Weekdays	Weekend (days)	Hours
TV2	5	2	3	90
TVNorge	4	1	3	72
TV3	4	2	2	72
Disney Channel	1	0	1	12
Cartoon Network	2	1	1	30
Viasat4	2	1	1	36
MAX	2	1	1	54
FEM	2	0	2	54
MTV	1	1	0	12
Total	23	9	14	432

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