



## Research report

The impact of marketing practices and its regulation policies on childhood obesity. Opinions of stakeholders in Spain<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 3 October 2012

Received in revised form 9 November 2012

Accepted 30 November 2012

Available online 8 December 2012

## Keywords:

Obesity

Child

Public policy

Marketing

Advertising

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify Spanish stakeholders' views on the relationship between childhood obesity and the marketing and advertising of food and beverages aimed at children in Spain, as well as on the corresponding regulations. We performed a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with Stakeholders/Key Informants (KI) from 13 organisations: experts (2), consumer advocates (1), public health advocates (2), food manufacturers (2), advertising advocates (1), government representatives (1), child/family/school advocates (2) and media (1). The variables studied were *Prevalence of childhood obesity and its relationship to marketing/advertising and Regulation of marketing*. In order to identify the most relevant arguments (pearls) in the discourses, a blind independent analysis by four members of the research team was performed. We found that the prevalence of childhood obesity was perceived to be higher than the European average. Self-regulation was identified as the main form of marketing control. Only food manufacturers and advertising agencies considered voluntary action and supervisory procedures to be effective. The other stakeholders advocated state control through legislation and non-state actions such as external assessment and sanctions. Despite the divergence of opinion between stakeholders, there was agreement on the need to improve supervision and to ensure compliance with current self-regulatory codes in Spain.

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## Introduction

The adoption of regulations to reduce the extent and impact of commercial promotion of energy-dense foods and beverages aimed at children is one of the principles suggested by the World Health

Organisation (WHO) to guide the actions intended to counteract the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity as a public health problem in Europe (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2006).

Systematic reviews and reports (Guran & Bereket, 2011; Hastings et al., 2003; Hingle & Kunkel, 2012; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2005), as well as more recent experimental studies (Andreyeva, Kelly, & Harris, 2011; Cox et al., 2012; Halford, Boyland, Hughes, Oliveira, & Dovey, 2007; Lobstein & Dobb, 2005; Veerman, Van Beeck, Barendregt, & Mackenbach, 2009) have shown that food marketing has an influence on children's food preferences and consumption patterns, and that exposure to energy-dense food and beverage advertising, especially on TV, contributes to the creation of an obesogenic environment. As a result of studies conducted under the aegis of the European PorGrow Project (Policy Options for Responding to the Growing Challenge of Obesity Research Project) (González-Zapata, Ortiz-Moncada, & Álvarez-Dardet, 2007; González-Zapata, Álvarez-Dardet, Clemente, Dávó, & Ortiz-Moncada, 2008; Millstone & Lobstein, 2007), one of the policy options which has been suggested in order to reverse

<sup>☆</sup> Acknowledgements: We wish to thank Dr. Concha Colomer Revuelta (+2011) and Dr. Lluís Serra Majen who, in their role as experts in Public Health and Nutrition in Spain, contributed to the selection of Key Informants. We are also grateful to Dr. Dolores Fernández for reading and commenting on the manuscript and Naima Benaicha for translating various drafts. We thank all key informants who participated for their contribution to the study and the group of researchers, collaborators and scholarship holders involved in the Polmark-Spain project. This document is the sole responsibility of the authors. The Executive Agency for Health and Consumers is not responsible for any use made of the information contained therein. Funding: Polmark has been partially funded by the EU Public Health Programme (Executive Agency for Health and Consumers) 2008–2010, Contract No. 200732, and the University of Alicante. Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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the upward trend in obesity rates in the European Union has been the regulatory control of advertising and marketing of these products.

The European Commission's 2007 White Paper *A Strategy on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues* also acknowledged this issue and urged the industry to take voluntary action (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). Although the specific measures adopted in European countries have varied, the majority of governments have opted for various forms of self-regulation (International Association for the Study of Obesity [IASO], 2010). Moreover, public health and consumer groups have advocated the establishment of an International Code of Practice to limit children's exposure to unhealthy foods (IASO, 2008; Lobstein & Dobb, 2005).

The aim of the Polmark project (Policies on Marketing of food and beverages to children) was to describe the measures taken for controlling food and beverage marketing targeted at children in 11 European countries and to identify other proposals for control through consultation with Stakeholders/Key Informants (IASO, 2010). Spain is one of the participants in the Polmark project, together with Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. There has been an upward trend in the prevalence of obesity in Spain for the last two decades. According to recent studies, it has been estimated that obesity prevalence is 10.3% and overweight prevalence is 18.8%. Obesity has been reported to be more prevalent in children from 4 to 5 years of age (18.3%) whilst overweight was more prevalent in the 8–9 year age range (25.5%) (Valdés-Pizarro & Royo-Bordonada, 2012). Advertising of high calorie foods, together with the lack of physical activity associated with watching TV, has been linked to obesity in Spanish children (Serra-Majem, Aranceta, Pérez-Rodrigo, Ribas-Barba, & Delgado-Rubio, 2006). 90% of children watch TV every day and 20% of them spend at least 2 h in front of the television (Menéndez García & Franco Díez, 2009).

Marketing and advertising is currently regulated by the PAOS Self-Regulation Code on Food Advertising aimed at Children, for health and prevention of obesity (Ministry of Health, Consumer Affairs and Social Policy, 2005), which was instigated by the Spanish Association of Food and Beverage Industries (FIAB) and is endorsed by the Ministry of Health, Consumer Affairs and Social Policy. The code has been signed by 36 food companies who account for more than 75% of advertising spending in the sector (Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition [AESAN], 2012). In addition to the observance of the ethical principles of legality and loyalty, PAOS Code regulates the way in which products are presented in advertising and the use of promotions, draws, contests and children's clubs as advertising techniques. PAOS code also establishes the commitment to avoid false advertising about the features and benefits of the product, and the use of images that exploit child's innocence and vulnerability or stimulate unhealthy lifestyles. Signatory companies also agree to observe a system of control monitored by a supervisory committee, whose members represent consumers, the public authorities (AESAN, 2012) and the industry (Spanish Federation of Food and Drink Industries). The committee evaluates the reports prepared by the Spanish Association for Self-Regulation of Commercial Communication (AUTOCONTROL) and the fines imposed in the case of non-compliance, which can reach up to 180,000 Euro. Infringements and sanctions are made public through the AESAN website. However, there is public concern that the PAOS code may not be adequate, since it is voluntary and therefore some companies have not signed the agreement and also because the penalties for non-compliance are weak, administered by the industry and applied after a code-breaking advertising campaign has already ended (Menéndez García & Franco Díez, 2009; Romero-Fernández, Royo-Bordonada, & Rodríguez-Artalejo, 2010).

Within the context of the Polmark project, the aim of this study was to identify Spanish stakeholders' views on the relationship between childhood obesity and the marketing and advertising of food and beverages, as well as their opinions on controlling the regulation of food and beverage marketing and advertising aimed at children in Spain after the introduction of the PAOS Code. Knowledge of the views of those involved in the marketing and consumption of food and drinks aimed at children is essential to ensure that the policies and measures regulating this sector are appropriately formulated, and to achieve acceptance and compliance. Understanding their opinions on current regulations and compliance is a necessary first step in this direction.

## Materials/subjects and methods

### *Design and participants*

This was a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive study, based on semi-structured interviews with Stakeholders/Key Informants (KI) from organisations concerned with and influential in policies related to food and beverage marketing and advertising aimed at children in Spain.

Selection of specific stakeholder organisations and specific interviewees was based on the approach used in the PorGrow project (Millstone & Lobstein, 2007), which identified and interviewed senior representatives from at least 20 organisations concerned with obesity policies. Subsequently, research teams from the 11 partner countries classified the participating institutions into eight categories: (1) Experts, academics, government advisors and scientific food and nutrition societies, (2) Consumer advocates and/or consumer associations, (3) Public Health professionals and health advocates, (4) Food manufacturers, distributors and retailers, (5) Advertisers and advertising advocates, (6) Government officials and regulators, (7) Child, family and school advocates, and (8) Media organisations: the federation of broadcasters and the association of newspapers.

Stakeholders were identified through Google. The keywords used were the categories proposed by the coordinating research team for the organisations, institutions, agencies and professionals involved. In order to narrow the search and select the most relevant stakeholders for the study, public health and nutrition experts in Spain were consulted by telephone and email. Lastly, to supplement or replace those stakeholders who could not participate, the snowball technique was employed. Between December 2008 and February 2009, we interviewed 14 key informants from 13 organisations related to the eight defined categories (Table 1). Participation was voluntary. No financial or material incentives were involved and participants were guaranteed anonymity.

### *Measures and procedures*

Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 25 open-ended questions. Led by the coordinating research group, all of the participating research teams were involved in designing the questionnaire in English between the summer and autumn of 2008. It was then translated and adapted to the Spanish context, and a pilot feasibility study was conducted with two experts, one in advertising and communication and the other in public health. In box 1, the variables used in the questionnaire are listed, grouped into thematic blocks. Of these, we selected five variables grouped into two categories for study: (a) Prevalence of childhood obesity and its relationship to marketing and advertising, and (b) Control of marketing and advertising (Table 2).

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