

Online games new marketing tool for unhealthy foods

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UC Davis public health researchers have found that children, who are already saturated with television messages about unhealthy food choices, are the targets of a new medium used to sell high-fat, high-sugar foods: advergames.

Advergames are an entertaining blend of interactive animation, video content and advertising, exposing children for extended periods of time to online messages that primarily promote corporate branding and products.

The analysis, published in the May issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, leads its authors to recommend increased regulation of [food](#) companies that target youth.

"We knew based on our previous research that [food advertising](#) on television programming for children is dominated by high-fat quick-service restaurant options and high-sugar cereals and candy," said Diana Cassady, senior author of the study and an associate professor of public health sciences at UC Davis. "At the same time, we noticed a lot of that TV advertising included corporate websites, and we wanted to find out how these sites were being used to communicate about food to kids."

For their current study, Cassady and Jennifer Culp, lead author and training coordinator with the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program at UC Davis, conducted a detailed content analysis of all restaurant, beverage and food websites advertised on the Cartoon Network and

Nickelodeon between August 2006 and March 2007. These networks were selected because of their high volume of website promotion with traditional ads. The researchers' analysis focused on the broadcast timeframes most watched by children: weekday after-school hours and Saturday mornings.

Each site and the pages within those sites were evaluated for strategies used to prolong visits, types and frequency of branding features, and the number and prominence of nutrition and physical activity messages. After assessing 19 websites, 290 web pages and 247 advergames, they found:

- Close to one-third of the advertising that included websites was for food.
- The most frequently used strategy to encourage ongoing and return website visits was advergames -- 84 percent of the websites assessed included online games.
- Every advergame included at least one brand identifier, with logos being the most frequent and direct product representation being the second-most frequent.
- On average, only one nutrition or physical activity message appeared for every 45 brand identifiers.

"I was astounded by how often logos or actual food products were integrated into the games," said Culp. "For example, some games used candy or cereal as game pieces. In others, a special code that was only available by purchasing a particular cereal was necessary to advance to higher game levels."

Culp also was disappointed that the sites often did not include information to promote health, including nutrition facts about the product or prominent placement of links to the food guide pyramid, daily physical activity recommendations or similar resources.

"There was little messaging about healthier options or even the nutritional content -- like fat and sugar values -- of the product being advertised. If it was included, it was often buried in the site," she said. "Advergaming is clearly a means of casting food with few health benefits in a positive way and potentially priming kids for a lifetime of unhealthy food preferences."

As the result of their current Internet study and prior outcomes related to television advertising, Culp and Cassady hope food companies will develop and adhere to uniform guidelines for advertising their products to children. Currently, however, there is no agreed-upon framework for this goal. The research team appreciates the standards in first lady Michelle Obama's "Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation" report. In the absence of voluntary marketing restrictions, the researchers recommend increased external regulation.

"Without effective self-regulation, the federal government should definitely step in and set requirements for food companies that target children. We can't risk having another generation of youngsters at high risk for the long-term chronic diseases linked to unhealthy eating," Cassady said.

Provided by University of California - Davis - Health System

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