

Industry self-regulation permits junk food ads in programming popular with children

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Medical Xpress)—Loopholes in industry self-regulation allow food companies to continue to reach large numbers of children with advertising for unhealthy products—such as fast food, candy, and cookies—during "tween" programs and popular children's holiday specials. The study by the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

is published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Prominent organizations like the Institute of Medicine and the World Health Organization have warned that food and beverage advertising contributes to childhood obesity. To address these concerns, the Better Business Bureau created the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), through which participating companies pledge to advertise only healthier dietary choices during "child-directed television programs."

The Yale study found problems, however, stemming from the definition of "child-directed programming." Most CFBAI companies define this as programs with an audience of 35% or more children under 12. Under CFBAI guidelines, only food advertising that airs during these programs must meet criteria for healthier dietary choices.

Using data obtained from Nielsen, a media research company, the Yale team found that more than half of the food and beverage advertisements viewed by children are not subject to CFBAI guidelines because the programs on which they appear do not qualify as "child-directed" under these guidelines.

The authors calculated that if the definition of "child-directed" was expanded to include advertising during programs with an audience of 20% or more children under 12 and/or 500,000 or more child viewers, 70-71% of food advertising seen by children would be covered by industry self-regulation, compared to just one-third of ads seen by adults.

"This study shows that companies' definition of child-directed programming is quite narrow," said Jennifer Harris, lead author and director of Rudd Center marketing initiatives. "It allows them to continue to advertise their least nutritious products during programs that

do not qualify as child-directed according to their criteria but that clearly appeal to children—programs like 'Hannah Montana' and 'Shrek the Halls' holiday special."

To protect children from exposure to unhealthy [food](#) marketing, the authors write, participating CFBAI companies should increase the number of programs covered by their self-regulatory pledges. In addition, they encourage companies to expand their pledges to advertise only healthier dietary choices to older children (i.e., 12- to 14-year-olds) and to consider the number of children viewing the advertisements, the time of day the advertisements air, and the use of child-orientated messages when determining media plans for their least nutritious products.

Provided by Yale University

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