

Research shows 'advergames' promote unhealthy foods for kids

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MSU faculty members Lorraine Weatherspoon (l) and Elizabeth Taylor Quilliam found that so-called advergames – online video games that contain ads for food and other products – often promote less-than-healthy foods for children. Their research was published in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*. Credit: Photo courtesy of the MSU College of Communication Arts and Sciences.

Not only do some online video games promote a less-than-active lifestyle for children, the content of some of these games also may be contributing to unhealthy diets.

A team of Michigan State University researchers took a closer look at what are called advergames and found they have a tendency to promote foods that are chock full of fat, sugar and sodium.

An advergame is defined as an online video [game](#) that promotes a particular product, service or company by integrating it into the game, and is typically offered for free.

The researchers located hundreds of advergames actively played by children on [food](#) marketer websites. For the study, they focused on 145 different websites and found 439 food brands being promoted through advergames on those sites.

What they found was that many of the games centered around high-fat, high-sugar and high-sodium products.

"One of the things we were concerned about was that the majority of foods that received the most interest were those that tended to be energy dense – high in calories – and not high in nutrients," said Lorraine Weatherspoon, a co-director of the project and an associate professor of food science and human nutrition. "These foods typically included high-sugar snacks and cereals as well as instant or canned soups, sugar-sweetened beverages and several types of candy products."

The games are quick and easy to play. They use brand names, logos, pictures of the product and even a spokescharacter as a part of the game.

"Compared to a typical TV commercial that would last maybe 30 seconds, these games are fun and engaging and children can play them for much longer periods of time," said Elizabeth Taylor Quilliam, project co-director and assistant professor of advertising and public relations.

The researchers noted there are no consistent standards for what can or cannot be marketed to [children](#) and how the marketing should be done.

"We firmly believe that some kind of federally mandated policy needs to be addressed, so that there is better control on the type and amount of marketing as well as the kinds of foods that are promoted," Weatherspoon said.

The researchers would ultimately like to see [healthy eating](#) promoted through advergames.

"We hope that we can translate the use of engaging entertaining online tactics like this to teach healthy eating and other healthy lifestyle behaviors to kids," Quilliam said.

The article, "Consistency of Nutrition Recommendations for Foods Marketed to Children in the United States," was published in a recent issue of the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*, along with a podcast interview with the authors.

Provided by Michigan State University

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