

Are overweight children less able to handle advertising?

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Weight, body shape perception, self-esteem and dietary habits all contribute to how children handle food advertising. A new study suggests that overweight children, in particular, could benefit from special training, in order to increase their media skills in relation to the exposure to advertising.

"Advertising literacy", which refers to the ability to recognise, evaluate and understand [advertising](#), is one of the most important skills in the development of [children](#) into informed and competent consumers. Several international studies have already looked closely at the development of this ability. "Over the last 40 years, the age of a child has commonly been seen as the most critical factor in this regard", the author of the study, Ralf Terlutter, explains. However, significant differences frequently persisted within one age group. Terlutter describes the specific approach: "For this study, we used the influence of body weight and body shape perception, as well as the impact of [dietary habits](#) as criteria."

There can be no question of the relevance of this study: The number of overweight or even [obese children](#) is increasing. In 2012, the WHO estimated the number at around 170 million [overweight children](#) worldwide. Most of these children consume advertising, particularly through the medium of television. Approximately 40 per cent of advertising focuses on food. Frequently, the advertised food is unhealthy, due to its high fat, salt or sugar content.

In the context of the study, Julia Spielvogel and Ralf Terlutter carried out a total of 249 interviews at three Austrian primary schools. The children were between 7 and 11 years old. The results of the study lend support to eight of the ten hypotheses contained within the research model.

"One of the central insights gained is that the self-esteem of children, which is determined – amongst other things – by the [body mass index](#) and the body shape perception, also affects 'advertising literacy', Terlutter reveals. At the same time, a critical attitude towards food also emerged as an additional factor. Terlutter goes on to explain: "In order to prevent cognitive dissonance, children who tend to prefer unhealthy food are at risk of developing a less sceptical attitude towards the food they see advertised."

The study authors believe that these children could benefit from special or additional training, to increase their media competence in relation to the consumption of advertising. This is especially true of the important field of nutrition. Parents also have a crucial part to play: The study showed that the parents' attitude towards advertised [food](#) had a considerable impact on the children's own attitude. Of course, parents act as role models not only in relation to nutrition, but also for "advertising literacy", the development of which they can guide to a significant extent.

More information: Spielvogel J. & Terlutter R. (2013). Development of TV advertising literacy in children. Do physical appearance and eating habits matter? In: *International Journal of Advertising* (32/3), 343-368.

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