

# Industry self-regulation of food advertising doesn't work, worldwide study shows

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Associate Professor Bridget Kelly from the University of Wollongong's and School of Health and Society. Credit: Paul Jones, University of Wollongong

Children in countries with industry self-regulation are exposed to more unhealthy food and drink advertising on television than children in countries with no regulation at all, a global study led by a University of

Wollongong (UOW) researcher has found.

The study, published in the journal *Obesity Reviews*, captured television advertising data from 22 countries spanning the Asia Pacific, Africa, Europe, and North, Central and South America. Twenty-three research groups contributed to the study, collecting 11,191 hours of television broadcast data between 2008 and 2017.

The researchers coded the advertisements using the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations on which [food](#) and drink products should be permitted or not-permitted to be advertised to children.

Products WHO recommends not to be marketed to children include chocolate and confectionery, cakes and sweet biscuits, juices, and energy drinks. It also recommends that products high in total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, total sugar, added sugar, non-sugar sweeteners, salt, and/or energy not be advertised to children.

The researchers found that, globally, there were on average four times as many advertisements for unhealthy products as there were for healthy products, and that the frequency of those advertisements was 35 per cent higher during children's peak viewing times.

They also found that during peak viewing times, the volume of advertisements for unhealthy products was higher in countries with industry codes of practice for responsible advertising compared with countries with no policies.

Lead author Associate Professor Bridget Kelly, from UOW's Early Start Research and School of Health and Society, said the study showed the need for governments worldwide to enact regulation to protect children from television advertising of products that undermine their health.

"Food industry self-regulatory codes to limit children's exposure to [food marketing](#) have been ineffective globally – countries with these codes have worse rates of junk food advertising on TV than countries with no regulations," Professor Kelly said.

"There is a large body of evidence that shows the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children has a negative influence on children's food knowledge, preferences, consumption, diet quality, and health.

"Industry self-regulation has been shown to be ineffective. It is time for governments around the world to step in and regulate the advertising of unhealthy foods to children."

Restricting this sort of marketing is a global priority for obesity and diet-related noncommunicable disease (NCD) prevention.

In 2010, 193 World Health Organisation Member States endorsed a resolution to restrict the marketing of food and drink products high in saturated fat, trans fat, free sugars, and/or sodium to children and adolescents. To date this has mostly been addressed by industry self-regulatory programs.

Globally, almost one in five people aged 5 to 19 years were overweight or obese in 2016, and the prevalence of obesity in [young people](#) has increased 10-fold in the last 40 years.

The globalised nature of the processed foods and beverages industry and the dominance of a small number of large transnational corporations present an obstacle to more effective regulation.

In the study sample, one-third of all food and beverage advertisements originated from just 10 companies with a combined [market value](#) of more than \$1,400 billion.

"Companies that contribute most to [unhealthy food](#) marketing on TV do so across all markets – these are huge, powerful multinational companies with substantial political pull, which impacts on the ability and willingness of governments to regulate to protect children," Professor Kelly said.

'Global benchmarking of [children's](#) exposure to television [advertising](#) of unhealthy foods and beverages across 22 countries' by Kelly B, Vandevijvere S, Ng S, et al. is published in *Obesity Reviews*.

**More information:** Bridget Kelly et al. Global benchmarking of children's exposure to television advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages across 22 countries, *Obesity Reviews* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/obr.12840](#)

Provided by University of Wollongong

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