

Researchers warn of controversial food advertising for children on YouTube

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Credit: Asociacion RUVID

Researchers Araceli Castelló-Martínez and Victoria Tur-Viñes, from the Department of Communication and Social Psychology at the University of Alicante (UA), warn about the advertising of ultra-processed food for children by the most followed YouTubers in the form of challenges, sweepstakes or pastimes.

One YouTuber goes to a fast food establishment and asks one of his followers to buy one of his products if he guesses the price. Another challenges the audience to eat food of the same color for 24 hours. These are just two examples of messages that our country's most 'influential' children spread through their YouTube channels and that their peers receive without applying the regulation that governs advertising in traditional media.

This is what the two experts from the University of Alicante Department of Communication and Social Psychology warn in the journal *Gaceta Sanitaria* after analyzing more than 47 hours of content from 13 channels of food brands and 15 channels of children on YouTube.

The most frequent content in the 304 videos analyzed were challenges, which accounted for 53.3% of the total sample. These challenges are presented to their followers in an entertainment format based on storytelling and are more frequently seen in the channels of underaged YouTubers (59% of the total) than in the channels of food brands (37.8%).

Ultra-processed products appear in 85.2% of [challenge](#) videos, with brands visible in 117 videos. There are 377 food brands featured in these videos (230 visually, 12 inclusions in the title of the videos and 135 verbal mentions). Also, 82.4% of these challenge videos show parents consuming, participating in the challenges or talking to the protagonist. In the case of food [brand](#) challenge videos, the presence of reference groups is reduced to 25.8%, with the most frequent scenes taking place in the kitchen or while having fun with friends.

Children are shown consuming food in 66% of the challenge videos and older people in 41.4%. Despite the large presence of brands, only 68 out of 162 challenge videos (41.9%) include a warning about commercial content. When talking about food brands, while the challenge videos of

food brands combine rational and emotional argumentation, in the challenge videos of smaller 'youtubers," emotional argumentation predominates. The strategy of The Phoskiters by Phoskitos [channel](#) stands out, with 31 challenge videos by [food](#) brands, with a hybrid format (Phoskitos seeks Youtuber) based on a prize draw, encouraging the public to post their own videos showing the proposed challenge.

The association of advertising and ultra-processed foods, using the challenge format as a communication strategy, poses a high risk with its practices aimed at children, which are increasingly frequent on YouTube, as the researchers warned in their study. The challenges involve testing human limits or challenging the authorities or the recommended healthy diet, clearly putting the health of children at risk and alarmingly increasing obesogenic habits.

Obesity is a global pandemic, and it is critical to increase the control of this type of content in the legal, self-regulatory and deontological field of digital media. Creativity, fun or mere entertainment are not sufficient arguments to persuasively promote behaviors that put [children's](#) physical health at risk, as the researchers explained.

More information: Araceli Castelló-Martínez et al, Una combinación de alto riesgo: obesidad, marcas de alimentación, menores y retos en YouTube, *Gaceta Sanitaria* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.gaceta.2020.06.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gaceta.2020.06.018)

Provided by Asociacion RUVID

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