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Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children

Concerned about the high rates of childhood obesity in the U.S., policymakers in Congress, the Federal Trade Commission, and agencies such as the Institute of Medicine have explored a variety of potential contributing factors, including the marketing and advertising of food products to children. One area where policymakers have expressed interest, but have also noted a lack of publicly available data, is in the realm of online food marketing to children. In order to help fill this gap, the Kaiser Family Foundation today, ("News Release – First Analysis of Online Food Advertising Targeting Children," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 19th July 2006), released the first comprehensive analysis of the nature and scope of online food advertising to children, to help inform the decision making process for policymakers, advocates, and industry.

Methods

The study was designed by staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation in collaboration with Elizabeth Moore, Ph.D., associate professor of marketing at the University of Notre Dame. Professor Moore and her colleagues collected and analyzed the data, and she authored the report to the Foundation on the findings. All websites were accessed and content was coded during the period from June through November 2005.

Using data from Competitive Media Reports, researchers identified the top food brands advertised to children on TV, and then searched for corporate or brand websites for those food products. Any child-oriented brand that was in the top 80% of television advertising spending in its product category was included in the study. A total of 96 brands were identified through this process.

Websites for these brands were included in the study if they had content for children age 12 and under. In most cases, these were sites whose primary audience was children; in some cases, the primary audience appeared to be either teens or all ages, with

content or separate sections likely to appeal to children. Only websites sponsored by a food manufacturer and dealing with the branded products identified through the process described above were included; food ads on sites such as nick.com or neopets.com were not included.

A total of 77 unique websites were identified through this process. Every page of these websites was reviewed and coded by two trained coders (more than 4,000 unique web pages in total), and more than 400 advergaming were played. Screenshots were captured for all pages on each website. A webcast of the session is available.

TV advertising and branded websites

The report, 'It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children,'¹ found that more than eight out of ten (85%) of the top food brands that target children through TV advertising also use branded websites to market to children online.

Unlike traditional TV advertising, these corporate-sponsored websites offer extensive opportunities for visitors to spend an unlimited amount of time interacting with specific food brands in more personal and detailed ways. For instance, the study documents the broad use of "advergaming" (online games in which a company's product or brand characters are featured, found on 73% of the websites) and viral marketing (encouraging children to contact their peers about a specific product or brand, found on 64% of sites).

In addition, a variety of other advertising and marketing tactics are employed on these sites, including sweepstakes and promotions (65%), memberships (25%), on-demand access to TV ads (53%), and incentives for product purchase (38%).

"Online advertising's reach isn't as broad as that of television, but it's much deeper," said Vicky Rideout, vice president and director of Kaiser's Program for the Study of Entertainment Media and Health,

who oversaw the research. "Without good information about what this new world of advertising really looks like, there can't be effective oversight or policymaking, whether by the industry or by government," she noted. The advertising industry has announced that it is developing more detailed voluntary guidelines for online marketing to children, expected to be released shortly.

The study included detailed analysis of 77 websites, including more than 4,000 unique web pages. Based on data from Nielsen NetRatings, these sites received more than 12.2 million visits from children ages 2-11 in the 2nd quarter of 2005.

Advergaming

About three-quarters (73%) of the websites in the study included advergaming, ranging from one to more than 60 games per site. In total, the sites in the study contained 546 games featuring one or more food brands, such as the Chips Ahoy Soccer Shootout, Chuck E. Cheese's Tic Tac Toe, the M&M's Trivia Game, and the Pop-Tart Slalom. For example, on Kellogg's FunKtown children can "race against time while collecting delicious Kellogg's cereal," and at the Lucky Charms site they can play Lucky's Magic Adventure and "learn the powers of all eight charms" found in Lucky Charms cereal. To encourage additional time spent at the website, many of the games promote repeat playing (71%), offer multiple levels of play (45%), or suggest other games the visitor might enjoy (22%).

Viral marketing

Almost two-thirds (64%) of sites in the study use viral marketing, in which children are encouraged to send emails to their friends about a product, or invite them to visit the company's website. For example, at juicyfruit.com users were encouraged to "Send a friend this fruitylicious site!" and told that if they "send this site to 5 friends" they would get a code that could then be used to access additional features on the site. Other sites encourage young users to invite friends to help them "redecorate" their online "rooms," challenge them to play an

advergame on the site, or send them an "e-card" featuring the company's brand or spokescharacters. For example, on Keebler's Hollow Tree website, children are invited to send a friend some "Elfin Magic" in a birthday or seasonal greeting.

Television Advertising Online

Half (53%) of all sites in the study have television commercials available for viewing. On Kellogg's FunKtown site, children can earn stamps by viewing commercials in the "theater." On the Lucky Charms and Frootloops sites, serialized "webisodes" unveil animated stories featuring brand characters and products. On Skittles.com, users are told they can watch the ads "over and over right now" instead of having to wait for them to appear on TV.

Nutrition Information

Half of sites (51%) included nutritional information such as that found on a product label, and 44% included some type of nutritional claim, such as "good source of vitamins and minerals."

Twenty-seven percent of all sites have information about eating a healthy diet, such as the number of servings of fruits and vegetables that should be eaten daily. For example, the Kellogg's site nutritioncamp.com included such features as "nuts about nutrition" and "decipher the secrets of the Food Pyramid."

Incentive for Product Purchases

Almost four in ten sites (38%) have incentives for the user to purchase food so they can collect brand points or stamps that they can then exchange for premiums (such as gaining access to new games or purchasing brand-related clothing). For

example, children are encouraged to purchase specially-marked packages of Bubble Tape gum and then enter the codes online to get free Nintendo game tips.

Memberships, Registration, and Marketing Research

One in four (25%) sites offer a "membership" opportunity for children age 12 or younger. Children who sign up on websites may be proactively informed about new brands, exclusive offers, and new television commercials available for viewing. Thirteen percent require parental permission, while 12% do not.

Thirteen percent of sites include polls or quizzes, some of which were used to ask visitors their opinions on products or brand-related items. For example, on cuatmcdonalds.com, visitors are asked to vote for "the dollar menu item you crave the most" and for "your favorite McDonald's IM icon character."

Extending the Online Experience Offline

Three out of four (76%) websites studied offered at least one "extra" brand-related option for children, such as screensavers or wallpaper for a child's computer, printable coloring pages, branded CD covers, or brand logos or characters that can "live" on the child's computer desktop.

Educational Information

Thirty-five percent of sites offer some type of educational content, ranging from historical facts about dinosaurs to astronomy, sports or geography.

A third (33%) of sites include what the study has dubbed "advercation," a combination of advertising and education, such as using a brand character to present educational topics, or covering topics such as

the history of how chocolate is made on hersheys.com.

Website Protections For Children

Almost all (97%) of the sites in the study provided some information explicitly labeled for parents, such as what type of information is to be collected from children on the site (93%), legal disclaimers (88%), a "contact us" link (87%), statements about the use of "cookies" (81%), and statements of compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) (74%), or adherence to Children's Advertising Review Unit's (CARU) guidelines (46%).

On all websites where personal data was requested (beyond a first name, screen name or email address for one-time use), mechanisms were in place to ensure that children age 12 and under did not submit any information without parental permission.

Although CARU's guidelines state that "advertising content should be clearly identified as such" on product-driven websites, only 18% of the websites studied included any kind of "ad break" or other notice to children that the content on the site included advertising.

Sweepstakes & Promotions

Two-thirds (65%) of all brands in the study have promotions in which children may participate in some way. They include sweepstakes (such as the chance to win a Nintendo Game Cube system on bubbletape.com or a trip to Nickelodeon studios on pfgoldfish.com), or the chance to get free merchandise related to the food product.

1 The report, 'It's Child's Play: Adver gaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children', is a 2 Mb pdf file from: www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/7536.pdf

UK perspective from Sonia Livingstone

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Twenty years ago, when such a major piece of research was published in the USA, British researchers sought to replicate it in the UK, keen to determine whether similar or different findings would obtain. In today's globalised media and communications environment, US-based research will, in many ways, suffice for the UK context. For the online content that UK children engage overlaps considerably with that available to US children and, indeed, to children worldwide. But national differences still matter in drawing out the implications of these findings. British cultures of childhood and parenting differ from the US, and so do the regulatory bodies - statutory, self-regulatory and voluntary - that manage conditions of children's access to content. Herein lies an intriguing problem, for the Kaiser report's calls for regulatory responses are not merely based on American research but also reflect US norms regarding parental responsibility, consumer socialisation and children's media literacy. And they are targeted towards the US

legislative and regulatory regime.

Here in the UK, I suggest we can accept the Kaiser report's findings as an adequate account of UK children's exposure to online advertising. Not a perfect account, for UK children are exposed to a somewhat different online environment - more public sector-provided sites, for instance, or commercial sites linked to different television programmes. Commissioning a parallel study to estimate the nature and scope of online advertising encountered by UK children would thus be valuable.

But what we really need, and urgently, is new research on the significance of online advertising for UK children (1, 2). Children understand, by and large, and depending on their age, what is advertising on television, or in magazines, or on the radio, and what is not. And parents know how to respond, though they may not do so in practice. Online, distinguishing advertising or sponsorship from other content is a new challenge. We simply do not know if or how well UK children do this.

Nor whether their parents or teachers are able to advise them. Nor, most important, whether children are influenced by the burgeoning array of techniques being developed.

Such evidence as exists suggests that UK children receive little guidance in internet literacy and so lack the skills to evaluate online content. If this report had revealed only a minority of television adverts were clearly marked off from programmes, or that fewer than half of television adverts complied with the self-regulatory body's guidelines, there would be an outcry, and the situation would be judged unfair to children (and parents). I suggest the same response would be appropriate for online advertising.

References

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