

## **A Survey on the Effects of Advertising of Unhealthy Food on the Decision of Students**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of the research was to assess the effects of advertising of unhealthy food products on student's decision and eating behavior. In the present research participated 272 students aged between 18-29 years from the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Nicolae Testemitanu" from the Republic of Moldova. Unfortunately, the findings showed that promotional policy of companies in the food sector have escalated and can influence food product purchase behavior among students.*

*Keywords:* advertising, unhealthy food, student, decision

### **1.Introduction**

"All marketing decisions are based on assumptions and knowledge of consumer behavior."

Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2007

In recent years, the marketing strategies of companies in the food sector have escalated. Promotional policy of these companies rely on attracting new customers, keeping existing consumers, forming an overview of positive attitude and strengthen product quality and safety. As a result, population, especially youth is now the target of intense and specialized food marketing and advertising efforts. This is a major concern worldwide as the majority of these products are for foods that are high in calories, fat, sugar and/or sodium such as carbonated soft drinks, sugary breakfast cereals, salty snacks and baked goods, etc. [1-6]

Multiple techniques and channels are used to reach youth, beginning when they are toddlers, to foster brand-building and influence food product purchase behavior. Food marketing is changing very quickly due to the growth of digital technology. The media is a major source of information and misinformation on eating habits and nutritional sources. According to Fetting, population is regularly bombarded by messages about unhealthy food products in all forms of media such as television, radio, newspapers, etc. [7] While television is still the primary format for food advertising, today the food industry also markets aggressively via the Internet, through cell phones and text messages, in video and computer games and even in schools. Many of the

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messages revolve around food manufacturers marketing their products in the hope that the public will buy them. The manufacturers use very clever techniques such as claims and jingles about food's special properties. The researches in the field support the existence of links between exposure to advertisements for foods high in fat, salt and sugar and subsequent eating choices that can generate the appearance and development of non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, etc.).

Advertisement plays an important role. It has been argued that for the fast moving consumer goods, advertisement plays an important role as it helps to develop the brand and a positive consumer perception. According to Jefkins advertising is a practical affair which differs from marketing as marketing drives products and services to the customers while advertising drives customers to the product or services. Advertising is a type of promotion of goods or services for public and its goal is drawing attention of people and showing favourable light to them. Moreover, in this competitive era, brand influences the sales as well it helps a company to develop its marketing strategy by continuously evolving in brands. It also allows marketers to make insights in own brand as compare to rivals. Therefore it needs to be accessed by implementing brand as well as investing in brand besides product development. Practicing brand awareness is not only limited to maximizing sales by volumes but it involves a company to uphold its mission statement. The pressure of advertisement is growing every day. A significant amount of money is spent on advertising campaigns bringing to the companies multi-billion profits. According to data presented in the report of Federal Trade Commission in 2012, food companies spent a lot of money for advertising unhealthy food products among youth sector. The findings of the present research reveal that the companies producing unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages use different types of sources of information and promotion to attract more consumers, especially youth. So, in 2009, about 48 food industry companies have spent 1.79 billion dollars on marketing to the youth sector. About \$ 1 billion was spent on children aged 2-11 years old and about \$ 1 billion was spent for teenagers aged between 12-17 years old. For advertising of unhealthy food among adult sector were spent 9.65 billion. Therefore, the expenditures directed to those between the ages of 2 and 17 represented 18.5% of all consumer-directed marketing expenditures for those products. [1, 4, 8]

Studies in the field have shown that messages conveyed by food advertisements are rarely consistent with healthy eating messages. Content analysis of food advertisements conducted in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Turkey has consistently shown that children are exposed to large quantities of food products which are high in salt, fat and sugar. The studies have found that fast food and sweetened breakfast cereals were the most heavily advertised products. Advertisements for healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables were either absent or rare. When food advertisements were compared with healthy eating guidelines from their respective countries, it was found that these advertisements contradicted healthy eating messages and consequently gave children an inaccurate impression of what foods were 'good' to eat. In Asia, the level of food advertising varied from 25 to 75% of total food advertisements screened during children's programmes. The level of food advertising was lowest in South Korea (25%) and highest in Pakistan and Philippines (50–75%). [9-16] International data suggested that health authorities believe that the accumulation of unhealthy messages communicated to children through food advertising is a leading cause of unhealthy consumption. [17] According to Federal Commission, every day,

children view, on average, 15 television food advertisements and an overwhelming 98% of these ads promote food items that are high in fat, sugar and salt. [18] So, Harrison and Marske revealed that snacking at non-meal times occurred in 58% of food ads during children's programming as the most common product advantages included fun, happiness and being "cool". [19] The literature review highlighted that food advertising leads to greater preferences and purchase of the food products advertised. The messages presented in television food advertising have the power to act as real-world primes and lead to corresponding eating behaviors. [20] Some international results of a study discovered that advertisements shown during peak viewing hours of children and adult differ heavily, in terms of food advertisements; it is more in case of children as compared to adults. On the other hand, the amount and type of food provided by parents and even older siblings to young children has been shown to be the most significant influence on the development of food preferences and eating patterns in early childhood. So, if parents usually purchase and consume so-called snack foods and junk foods, then such foods will be readily available to children in their homes. Messages contained in advertising content might reinforce young children preferences to consume foods that already are available in their home. The repeated exposure of the commercials may create a strong desire for the advertised products, as compared to competitive products. [21-24] Ferguson, Munoz and Medrano found that exposure to commercials for unhealthy products increased desire for those products relative to commercials for healthier products, even from the same company. [26] Another study also found similar results, with effects particularly pronounced among children who were higher habitual TV viewers. The results of the research done by Halford, Gillespie, Brown, Pontin, and Dovey in 2004 found that obese children may be particularly attuned to food cues in commercials and susceptible to their effects. Advertisers may also deliberately use manipulative strategies to influence the behavior of children such as using cartoon characters. So, data of a study have indicated that the use of popular cartoon characters can increase demand for food products, although this can work for both healthy and unhealthy food items. [27]

It is important to make a correct decision about the choice of medium by which advertisement can be done. Mass media, social network and public experiences are important things while selecting advertising strategy. Companies need not only to produce good quality products, but also to inform consumers about their benefits, as well as to achieve clear positioning of their products in the minds of the consumers. According to international studies, advertisement of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages is an imperative in a modern business world, the strategy to keep the company profitable and to make maximum consumers. The views are different and vary according to ages, the level of education, the level of income of consumers, etc. For example, people from United Kingdom are more connected with books and magazines while in Pakistan, people are more connected with television. Although food marketers spent 19.5% less on youth-directed television in 2009, television remained the predominant medium to reach youth, accounting for 35% of total youth-directed marketing expenditures. Marketers spent \$375 million to reach children via television and \$364 million to reach teens. Quick service restaurants and breakfast cereals accounted for 68% of the child television expenditures. Quick service restaurants accounted for nearly 36% or \$130 million of the teen television expenditures. The results showed that food marketers spent \$695 million on traditional measured media

(television, radio, and print) directed to youth. Also, the food companies spent 50% more to reach youth using new media (online, mobile, etc.). All these data show that advertisement is a "product of the first necessity" for any enterprise aimed at a commercial success. [8]

## Methods

The present research was carried out from february – march 2016 among medical students from the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Nicolae Testemitanu” from the Republic of Moldova. The sample was chosen on the basis of convenience or availability of students at the time of the semester. In the present research participated 272 students (145 females and 127 males). The inclusion criteria were comprised of being aged between 18-29 years old, being a student from the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Nicolae Testemitanu” and consent to participate in the study. The only exclusion criterion was lack of desire to continue cooperation with the study. All the participants gave written informed consent for participation. The research efforts included a participant questionnaire survey that has been used in this study as a tool to assess the influence of the advertising messages for promotion of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages on consumer's decision among the students. It was applied the "Questionnaire on the impact of the levels of physical activity and nutrition on the development of obesity in the population" registered at AGEPI, OS series nr.5267 from 25.01.2016. The questionnaire consists from 2 parts. The 1st part included general information (sex, age, marital status, etc.) and the 2nd part consisted from 6 statements related to determine the role of advertising messages for unhealthy food on students decision. In order to achieve the goal and objectives in the present research were used such methods as: sociological, descriptive, analytical and mathematical.

## Results:

The obtained results showed that 39.31 % of women and 35.43 % of men prefer to get information about the food products with high amount of salt, sugar and fat and also about sugar sweetened beverages from family members and friends. According the data, 35.17 % of women and 33.07% of men stay informed from the advertising messages posted through mass-media sources and social network (TV, radio, internet, etc.). The other respondents (25.51% of women and 31.49% of men) prefer to get information from commercial channels by reading the product label or discussing with a consultant (Table 1).

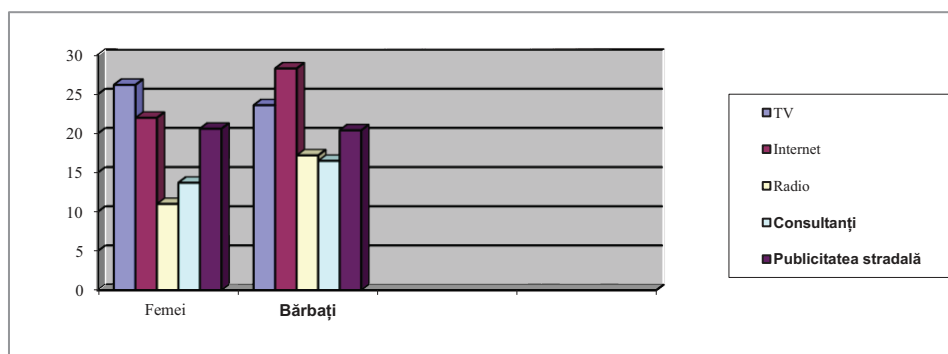
**Table 1. Top of preferred sources of information about unhealthy food among students**

No.	Sources of information
1	Own sources (family members, friends)
2	Mass-media sources and social network (Tv, radio, internet)
3	Commercial sources (nutritional labels, consultants, etc.)

*Source:* Designed by the authors

The majority of women (26.2%) think that unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages are mostly promoted on TV channels in comparison with 23.62 % of men. About 22.06 % of women think that on the 2nd place of promotion is situated the Internet while 28.3 of men think that Internet is on the 1st place. About 20.6% of women and 20.4 % of men declared that an important source for promotion of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages used by companies is the outdoor advertising (billboard, light box, etc.). Also, 11.03% of men and 17.24 % of women think that one of the most important channels for promotion of unhealthy food is radio. It is important to mention that only 13.79 % of women and 16.53% of men stated that unhealthy food is promoted by consultants from the market using different strategies such as: contests, gifts, discounts, etc. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Overview of the sources for promotion of unhealthy food among the students**



*Source:* Designed by the authors

Also, the findings showed that the companies producing unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages use other channels for promotion of their products. So, 31.03 % of women and 39.37 % of men stated that they received advertising messages on their phone, email or by post. The research discovered that the advertising message contains information that is important for the students. Firstly, it is important to mention that the majority of the students (36.5 % of women and 44.8% of men) are interested in information about the unhealthy product (the name, brand, country of origin, etc.). Also, 24.13% of women and 31.49 % of men, pay attention to advertising about exhibitions where they can taste the food. The students stated to be interested in the discounts offered by the companies producing or selling the food with high amount of sugar, salt and fat. According their responses, 21.25% of men and 22.75 % of women are interested in the information about the discounts. Also, 15.17 % of women and 16.53 % of men are curious about the gifts, contests, etc. (Table 2).

**Table 2. Top of the most interesting information coming from advertising messages about unhealthy food**

No.	Information
1	About the food product (name, brand, country of origin, etc.)
2	About the food exhibitions
3	About the discounts
4	About the contests, gifts offered by food company

*Source:* Designed by the authors

The results of the research showed that there are different reactions to advertising of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages. The majority of the students: 36.55% of women and 48.03 % of men are indifferent to advertising of food with high amount of sugar, salt and fats. About 31.03 % of women and 37 % of men are interested and curious about the unhealthy products that are promoted. The most interesting fact is that 32.42 % of women and 14.96% of men declared that the advertising message creates cravings and increases their appetite.

The advertising message about unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages can influence the decision of consumption among the students. About 54.48% of women and 59.05% of men stated that they didn't buy any unhealthy food or sugar sweetened beverages after watching or hearing the advertising message while 45.51 % of women and 40.94% of men declared that they have bought and consumed these food products.

## Discussions

The aim of this study was to assess the influence of the advertising messages about unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages on student's decision.

As observed in table 1, the majority of students prefer to get information about unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages from their family members or friends. This fact shows that both genders get the most information from the sources they trust. Also, it was established that students are trusting advertisers of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages as about 1/3 of respondents prefer to get information from mass-media and commercial sources.

According the results of the present research, the most popular ways for promotion of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages are TV and Internet. The less popular sources for promotion are considered to be the radio among men and market consultants among women.

It is important to mention that 1/3 of students declared that the companies use and other methods for promotion of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages such as advertising messages on their phone, email or post.

The findings showed that the majority of students are interested, first of all, in advertising messages that give information about unhealthy food such as name, brand, country of origin, etc. Also, some of the students (about 1/4 of men and 1/3 of women) pay attention to advertising about exhibitions where they can taste unhealthy food or sugar sweetened beverages. About 1/5 of respondents are interested about the discounts

they can get from buying the products. Some of the students prefer to get information about the gifts offered by food companies. All these facts show that food companies use different marketing strategies to attract more consumers.

The majority of the students feel indifferent while watching or hearing advertising messages for unhealthy food or sugar sweetened beverages but it is interesting to find out that about 1/3 of women want to eat unhealthy foods that are advertised as their appetite increases.

The results of the study showed that almost ½ of students have bought and consumed unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages after watching or hearing advertising messages about them. These data show that marketing strategies influence student's decision about buying and consuming unhealthy food or sugar sweetened beverages. Also, it demonstrates that advertising messages can influence the food choices and even eating behavior among students.

### **Conclusions**

1. International studies revealed a relationship between advertising of unhealthy food and appearance of non-communicable diseases related to nutrition among children and youth as the consequence of their irrational decision.
2. The results of the study showed that the most of companies prefer to reach youth by the advertisement on TV and Internet and using other channels for promotion of unhealthy food products such as mobile, email or post.
3. Some of the respondents declared to be interested in consuming unhealthy food products because of the discounts, prizes and other marketing strategies used by companies.
4. 1/3 of women stated that the advertising messages of unhealthy food products and sugar-sweetened beverages increase their appetite for these.
5. Almost one half of youth declared that they have bought and consumed the products after watching or hearing the advertising messages.

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