Food advertising targeted to Hispanic youth: Contributing to health disparities

August 2015

Hispanic youth receive a “double dose” of food marketing for nutritionally poor products: They see more food advertising in the media and more marketing messages in their communities. Exposure to unhealthy food marketing contributes to poor diet, including greater fast food and sugary drink consumption, and higher rates of obesity and related diseases. Experts also raise concerns that some companies may target advertising for nutritionally poor foods disproportionately more to Hispanic youth.

The research

This research was designed to better understand targeted TV advertising by the largest food advertisers in the United States and help identify opportunities to encourage companies to reduce disparities in food marketing aimed at Hispanic youth.

Researchers compiled companies’ public statements about their targeted marketing practices and analyzed 2013 syndicated market research data to identify targeted TV advertising by company and brand. The 26 restaurant, food, and beverage companies spending at least $100 million in total advertising in 2013 and/or participating in the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) as of December 31, 2014, were examined. The 267 most highly advertised brands from these companies were also analyzed.

Findings

The majority of companies in the analysis advertised one or more brands on Spanish-language TV networks in 2013—totaling $675 million.

- Three companies spent more than $65 million in Spanish-language TV advertising: McDonald’s, Mars, and General Mills. Yum! Brands, Kellogg, Kraft Foods, and Hershey each spent $46 to $49 million.
- Mars ranked second in Spanish-language advertising spending ($71 million) and invested almost one quarter of its TV advertising budget to the medium.
- Six additional companies allocated a relatively high 10% or more of their TV advertising budgets to Spanish-language TV (compared with 8.5% on average): Dr Pepper Snapple Group, Post Foods, Kraft Foods, Wendy’s, Kellogg, and Burger King.

One-third of the 267 brands analyzed spent more than $100,000 in advertising on Spanish-language TV. Nearly all of these brands consist of nutritionally poor products that contribute to poor diet and related diseases.

- Fast-food and other restaurant brands spent $244 million to advertise on Spanish-language TV, one out of every three food-related advertisements on these networks.
- Candy brands represented 16% of all food-related advertising on Spanish-language TV, and three-quarters of candy brands targeted their advertising to Hispanic consumers. M&M’s, Snickers, Hershey’s candy bar, and Twix each spent approximately $13 to $17 million in Spanish-language advertising.
• Sugary drinks and snacks each contributed another 9% of food-related advertising spending on Spanish-language TV. Coca-Cola Classic spent almost $16 million in Spanish-language TV advertising, and 7Up did not advertise at all on English-language TV.

In contrast, brands in healthier categories – including yogurt, other dairy, and 100% juice – were significantly less likely to advertise on Spanish-language TV and represented just 6% of advertising spending on these channels. Not one brand of plain water or fruits and vegetables advertised on Spanish-language TV.

Hispanic children and teens also viewed disproportionately more Spanish-language TV ads for products in nutritionally poor categories.

• Hispanic children (2-11 years old) viewed 835 food-related ads on Spanish-language TV in 2013 – in addition to ads viewed on other TV programming. Hispanic children viewed 25% more of these ads than did Hispanic teens (ages 12-17).

• Two-thirds of food-related Spanish-language ads viewed by Hispanic children and teens promoted fast-food and other restaurants, candy, sugary drinks, and snacks. Just 3% promoted yogurt, other dairy, or 100% juice.

Recommendations

Targeted marketing designed to appeal to Hispanic consumers is not problematic in and of itself. However, Spanish-language advertising primarily promotes nutritionally poor foods and likely contributes to health disparities affecting Hispanic communities.

Dramatic changes in marketing of foods, beverages, and restaurants targeting Hispanic consumers are required:

• Industry commitments to increase sales and marketing of healthier products – such as the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, Partnership for a Healthier America, and the National Restaurant Association’s Kids LiveWell Program – should also address advertising in Spanish-language media and in Hispanic communities.

• Fast-food restaurants and sugary drink, candy, and nutritionally poor snack food brands should stop targeting their advertising to all youth under 18, including multicultural youth.

• Spanish-language media properties should set nutritional standards for advertised foods and provide incentives for advertising healthy products.

Public health advocacy campaigns should also highlight marketing practices of companies that disproportionately advertise unhealthy products to Hispanic youth. If parents and others who care about the health of these youth demand that companies improve the quality of foods marketed to their children and in their communities, companies will have to improve their marketing practices.

The full report, *Food advertising targeted to Hispanic and Black youth: Contributing to health disparities*, Harris JL, Shehan C, Gross R, Kumanyika S, Lassiter V, Ramirez A, & Gallion K, is available at UConnRuddCenter.org/targeted-marketing.