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A Content Analysis of Food Advertisements During Children's Television Programming

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Objective: To determine the nutritional quality of foods and the marketing techniques and messages used in food advertisements during children's television programming.

Design, Setting and Participants: Programming was recorded on 4 networks (PBS, Disney, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network) for 36 total hours (9 hours each).

Outcome Measures and Analysis: The criteria for determining the nutritional quality of the advertised foods were adapted from the "Guidelines for Responsible Food Marketing to Children," initiated by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Possible marketing techniques included movie/cartoon tie-ins, premiums or giveaways, kids' club promotions, licensed or branded characters, animation, or mention of advertisers' Web sites. Advertisements were assessed on whether they contained marketing messages relating to health/nutrition, physical activity/game playing, fun appeal, taste, convenience, and growth. All data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, specifically percentages and frequencies.

Results: One third of advertisements shown were for food, of which 84% was high in fat, saturated fat, and added sugar and sodium or low in vitamins, minerals, fruits, vegetables, and fiber. Animation was the marketing technique most used (44% of food advertisements), and taste was the most commonly used marketing message, occurring in 58% of food advertisements.

Conclusions and Implications: Marketers are using animation and familiar characters to build brand recognition and loyalty among young viewers. Foods advertised, although low nutrient dense, were portrayed as fun, cool, and great tasting. Nutrition gatekeepers must remain vigilant in their efforts in promoting healthy, nutritious foods to children.

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