Food advertising and eating behavior in children
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Systematic research reviews have repeatedly shown that food advertising affects children’s eating behavior. Given that most food advertising promotes unhealthy, palatable, and rewarding food products, it is considered to be a significant contributor to the current obesity epidemic. This review describes recent studies that have tested the effect of contemporary food advertisements on children’s eating behavior, including newly emerging data showing marketing effects on subconscious cognitive processes and studies illuminating the mechanistic underpinnings of these effects. In addition, this review presents an integration of empirical findings in a new theoretical framework that increases the understanding of the effects of food advertising on eating behavior and might be used for future research in this area.

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Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2016, 9:26–31
This review comes from a themed issue on Diet, behavior and brain function
Edited by Dana M Small and Susanne E La Fleur

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2015.11.016
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Introduction
Food companies spend copious amounts of resources on marketing to increase sales and market share [1], with advertising as one of the most important marketing instruments. Food brands are advertised in such a way as to: build positive brand associations by using engaging themes and linking with appealing nonbrand content; and seek to induce craving for the advertised foods by persuasive messages. Children have many years of consumer behavior ahead of them, and bombarding them with attention-grabbing and persuasive food advertisements early on might guarantee brand loyalty for a lifetime [2].

In the USA, a stunning 98% of advertised food products are considered unhealthy by nutritionists [3], typically being energy-dense and high in added sugar, salt, and fat. These foods are intrinsically rewarding [4,5], potentially driving children to eat much more than they actually need [4,5,6,7,8,9]. Despite the introduction of governmental regulations and industry codes of practice for responsible advertising, recent content analyses have shown that the food advertising that children are exposed to still predominantly promotes unhealthy food products [6*,10–16].

The ubiquitous advertising for these unhealthy foods stimulates the intake of energy-dense foods and undermines international and national recommendations for healthy eating behaviors and guidelines for disease prevention. This review article describes recent findings on the effects of food advertising on children’s eating behavior and aims to integrate empirical findings in a new theoretical framework that might be used for future research in this area.

Food advertising to children
Food advertising refers to any form of communication that is designed to increase the recognition, appeal, and/or consumption of particular food products, brands, and services [6*]. Although television remains the most important platform for food advertising, it is gradually being complemented by an increasingly multifaceted mix of marketing communications — including websites, advertisements, and product placements [6*,17]. Systematic research reviews conclude that advertising has an effect on unhealthy eating behaviors in children [5,6*,17].

Both observational [18,19] and experimental data [20,21*,22,23*,24**,25**,26] consistently show that exposure to food cues in advertising is related to increased choice and actual intake of foods among children, particularly for snack foods. More specifically, modification of behavior as a result of food advertising that occurs at the food category level rather than at the specific brand level, is an important determinant of problematic eating behavior [17]. For example, when children encounter an advertisement that promotes candy-brand X, they will not necessarily consume that specific candy brand as a consequence. Rather, available candy from any brand within the same food category (i.e., candy) will suffice to fulfill their advertising-induced craving. Understanding the impact of children’s exposure to food advertising on the obesity epidemic relies on exploring the influence of industry-developed food cues on eating behavior [4].
Such food cues are the visual, mental, or auditory signals in advertising that may prompt affective and behavioral responses towards eating.

In a society characterized by the continuous presence of food cues, people are frequently triggered to consume food [27]. Cue reactivity theory [28] states that food cues in advertisements can trigger a series of physiological (e.g., increased heart rate, gastric activity and salivation) [29–31] and psychological responses (e.g., increased thoughts about food) [28,30,32], that subsequently induce eating behavior. This has been identified as the advertising effect process (Figure 1). Food cues become reinforcing through classical conditioning. Specifically, such conditioned stimuli (the advertisements) become associated with the unconditioned stimuli in the form of palatable foods, which are in turn natural reinforcers due to their rewarding effect [33,34]. Thus, conditioned stimuli activate a central appetitive state, resulting in eating behavior responses [27,35], and, in the long run, weight gain for certain individuals [36–39,40]. Reactivity to food cues becomes a stronger predictor of subsequent food intake, and an increased food intake in turn reinforces the reactivity to food cues, resulting in a reciprocal relation between food cue reactivity and food intake, identified as the incentive-sensitization process [33,41].

Processing of food cues in advertising

Currently, there is no theoretical model specifically explaining how food cues in advertising influence children’s eating behavior. In this section two communication processing models will be discussed that may help to explain how food cues affect eating behavior, and that can provide a foundation for an integrated food cue reactivity model. First, the Processing of Commercialized Media Content (PCMC) model [42] states that the level at which children process persuasive messages influences the extent to which food advertising impacts on their eating behavior. The model predicts that when children use less cognitive elaboration to process the food cues embedded in the advertisement, it will have a stronger effect than when children use more cognitive elaboration. Most new forms of advertising, such as Internet ‘advergames’ (branded games), integrate the commercial food cues within media entertainment content. Children automatically process these cues, with a minimal level of cognitive elaboration [42,43,44*], making it more difficult to initiate consumer defenses such as persuasion knowledge and...
skepticism [45]. In these cases, children are unaware that they are targeted by food advertisements.

Second, the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model [44*] predicts that not all children process and react to food cues in advertising to the same extent. Individual differences in impulsivity and attentional bias may modify the direction and strength of advertising’s effect on eating behavior [24**,25**]. Folkvord et al. [24**] showed that impulsive children were more susceptible to an advergame promoting energy-dense snacks, and that attentional bias for food cues in an advergame led to an increased intake of energy-dense snacks [25**]. Yokum et al. [39] have shown that neurological responses to food advertisements predicted future weight gain, thereby supporting the notion of individual differences in neural susceptibility to food advertisements. In addition, studies have found that overweight children showed higher immediate responsiveness to food advertising than children with normal weight [26]. Individual dispositional factors underpin variability in the processing of food cues in advertisements, and therefore are integral components of the new theoretical model being proposed in this paper.

An integrated model for processing food cues in advertising

Organizing, integrating, and extending theoretical and empirical insights will improve understanding of food advertising effects on eating behavior and may serve as a guiding framework for future research. To come to an integrated model, this section provides a synthesis of state-of-the-art media and advertising processing models and empirical evidence assessing children’s responses to food marketing. The model is visualized in Figure 1 and is termed the Reactivity to Embedded Food Cues in Advertising Model (REFCAM).

The REFCAM is based on three foundational assumptions, based on the literature described above. First, it assumes a two-step process, where (1) food cues induce physiological and psychological reactivity to food (advertising effect process), which (2) leads to a reciprocal relationship with eating behavior (incentive-sensitization process). Second, message factors, such as the level of integration of food cues, influence their effect, because the message and its media context influence the level of elaboration. Third, individual dispositional factors determine susceptibility to food cues in advertisements.

Although no studies have systematically compared the effects of advertising across different media, research findings indicate that television food advertisements, which involve relatively high awareness and elaboration, have a smaller effect on food intake [17,20] than adver-games where food cues are more integrated [23*,24**,25**,45]. The PCMC-model [42] suggests that in low elaboration scenarios there is not enough cognitive capacity available to activate skepticism regarding the intention of the commercial message. This is particularly relevant for children who are more susceptible to food cues, such as impulsive [24**] and overweight children [26,40*], or children with increased attention for the food or snack [25**,32]. According to the incentive-sensitization theory [33,40*], in the long run, eating these energy-dense foods may thus result in neurological adaptations and sensitization of these foods.

Some evidence for this reciprocal relation between cue reactivity and food intake (i.e., incentive-sensitization process) was found by Bruce et al. [46] and Yokum et al. [39]. Bruce et al. [46] showed that food brand logos hyper-activated neural regions related to self-regulation areas (i.e., bilateral middle/inferior prefrontal cortex) among obese children, but not in lean children. Yokum et al. [39] showed that increased activation in the striatum in response to food commercials was positively associated with BMI one year later. These findings support the assumption raised by scholars that some children have a greater tendency than others to consume unhealthy and rewarding snacks after exposure to food advertisements. The intake of these foods in turn leads to neuroadaptations that reinforce the value of energy-dense snacks over repeated presentations [47]. This makes children even more susceptible to cues that are related to the intake of these foods. Importantly, not all children process and react to these cues to the same extent, as has been suggested by the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model [44*].

REFCAM is not only relevant for researchers, but also for parents, teachers, health professionals, and policy makers, for whom the model can identify at-risk children and inform food advertising policy. In addition, it seems essential to gain more insight into the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of underlying individual susceptibility factors (e.g., impulsivity and attentional bias) moderating the effect of food cues on food intake. Such insights may make it possible to develop effective intervention strategies that can reach these at-risk groups and be nuanced to address the determinants of these individual susceptibility factors. In addition to addressing the general question of how integrated food cues in advertisements affect eating behavior in more fine-grained detail, future research should seek to test the model proposed here.

Guideline for future research

The REFCAM can serve as a guiding framework for future research questions. First, it appears that newer forms of food marketing typically embed commercial messages within the media content more extensively than traditional advertisements [42]. Research should investigate whether these immersive forms of food advertising have a stronger effect on children’s eating behavior than more traditional food advertisements. Such a study may include an examination of the exact role of
cognitive processing levels of the food cues in advertisements on the basis of cue-reactivity and subsequent food intake [48], as suggested by the PCMC-model [42].

Second, until now the exact mechanisms underlying the effects of food cues in advertisements on eating behavior have not been addressed adequately and need future study. It may be interesting, for example, to investigate if food advertisements influence craving by studying physiological responses that prepare children for future intake, such as salivary or hormonal responses (e.g., insulin, ghrelin), when they are exposed to food advertisements [33]. Moreover, research has shown that obese adults have increased salivary responses and craving after exposure to food cues, compared to normal weight adults [49]. This has not been examined among children, nor with food advertisements as stimulus material. In addition, it would be interesting to examine if brain areas related to the reward system are activated when children are exposed to food advertisements [31], and if this also increases subsequent food intake among children. For example, Gearhardt et al. [40] have shown that adolescents exhibited greater activation in regions implicated in reward areas during food commercials, but this has not yet been tested among children, nor have studies tested the effects on snack intake.

Third, future research should examine whether and how the accumulation of food advertisements influences the classical and operant conditioning of food cues and subsequent intake of palatable food among children. For example, although most studies have focused on primary school children, attentional bias to food cues might develop at an earlier age.

Fourth, the REFCAM suggests that intervention studies may target a number of different mechanisms that are responsible for the effects of food cues on palatable food intake. For example, future research should investigate if increased advertising literacy for children, possibly via training or education, could increase the level of cognitive processing of the food cues. This could foster children’s skepticism towards the advertisements and thereby possibly decrease the cue-reactivity to such food cues. What is more, the extinction of a classical conditioning relationship between food cues and subsequent intake seems to be successful among adults following training [50], but this has not been studied in children. In summary, intervention studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of training or educational programs in reducing susceptibility to food cues, disrupt progression of the incentive sensitization process, and ultimately protect children from overeating.

Conclusions
Evidence shows that food advertising affects eating behavior among children, but more research is needed to examine individual susceptibility factors and the exact underlying mechanisms. The proposed REFCAM provides a framework for, first, explaining the relationship between exposure to advertised food cues and food behaviors and second, guiding future research questions and intervention opportunities. Although companies assert their right to freedom of commercial speech, restrictions of marketing efforts should be seriously considered — especially those directed at children, because this marketing contributes to childhood obesity [4,5]. In times of increasing childhood obesity rates and related rises in health service utilization and costs, there is a need for public debate on advertising techniques attempting to persuade children subconsciously. Reversing the trend of increased childhood obesity will require both bold action by policymakers to restrict children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing and evidence-based interventions to help children defend themselves against commercial messages promoting unhealthy food intake.

Conflict of interest statement
Frans Folkvord, Doeschka J Anschütz, Emma Boyland, Bridget Kelly, and Moniek Buijzen declare that they have no possible conflicts of interest. Emma Boyland receives no funding for food advertising research but receives funding from Weight Watchers for weight management work and from Bristol-Myers Squibb for pharmaco-therapy research.

Acknowledgements
Frans Folkvord drafted the manuscript, Doeschka J Anschütz, Emma Boyland, Bridget Kelly, and Moniek Buijzen provided critical revisions and writing assistance. All authors proofread the article and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

References and recommended reading
Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


This study is the most comprehensive systematic review that recently has been conducted and shows that food promotions have a direct effect on children’s eating behavior. The authors show that the collective review evidence on marketing practice indicates little progress towards policy aims has been achieved during the period previously.
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8. Galbraith-Emami S, Lobstein T: The impact of initiatives to limit the advertising of food and beverage products to children: a systematic review. Obes Rev 2013, 14:960-974. This study shows that, in response to increasing evidence that advertising of foods and beverages affects children’s eating behavior and public pressure to protect children, several national governments and food and beverage manufacturers have introduced voluntary codes/pledges to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food products to children. This review identified that scientific, peer reviewed papers have found no evidence that industry self-regulation has been effective in reducing children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing in several different countries worldwide.


21. Boyland EJ, Kavaghan-Safaran M, Halford JCG: Exposure to ‘healthy’ fast food meal bundles in television advertisements promotes liking for fast food but not healthier choices in children. Br J Nutr 2015, 6:1012-1018. This study was the first to experimentally show that when fast food companies, forced by regulatory changes, advertise healthier food options, this does not drive healthier choices in children, but instead promotes liking for fast food generally.


23. Folkvord F, Anschütz DJ, Buijzen M, Valkenburg PM: The effect of playing advergames that promote energy-dense snacks or fruit on actual food intake among children. Am J Clin Nutr 2013, 97:239-245. This study experimentally tested the effect of a relatively new form of food marketing, advergames, on children’s actual snack intake. Advergames promoting energy-dense snacks or fruit strongly increased the consumption of energy-dense snacks among children.

24. Folkvord F, Anschütz DJ, Nederkoorn C, Westerkink H, Buijzen M: Impulsivity, ‘advergames’, and food intake. Pediatrics 2014, 133:1007-1012. This is the first study to experimentally test the effect of children’s individual susceptibility factors to food marketing. Impulsive children seemed to be more susceptible to food marketing than less impulsive children.

25. Folkvord F, Anschütz DJ, Wiers RW, Buijzen M: The role of attentional bias in the effect of food advertising on actual food intake among children. Appetite 2015, 84:251-258. Previous studies have related attentional bias for food cues with eating behavior and obesity. This study was unique in showing that children with greater attention to food cues ate more of the energy-dense snacks than children with less attention. Attention to food cues in advertisements seems to affect eating behavior among children.


This article provides a new integrative model to improve the understanding of food advertising effects. It discusses a theoretical explanation for why some children could be more susceptible to food advertisements than other children.

40. Gearhardt AN, Yokum S, Stice E, Harris JL, Brownell KD: Relation of obesity to neural activation in response to food commercials. Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci 2014, 9:932-938. This study was the first to examine neurological responses to food advertisements and test differences by weight status. Obese individuals showed greater activation in regions implicated in attention, cognition and reward during food related commercials compared to non-food commercials. These results warrant further research in this area.


