

Monitoring food and beverage marketing to children via television and the Internet

A proposed tool for the WHO European Region





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1. Background and rationale

The Vienna Declaration on Nutrition and Noncommunicable Diseases, the WHO European Food and Nutrition Action Plan and, most recently, the report of the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (1–3) all recommend that Member States enact a series of comprehensive programmes to promote the intake of healthy foods and reduce the intake of foods and non-alcoholic beverages high in saturated fat, salt and/or free sugars (HFSS foods). They particularly emphasize children and adolescents as a priority. A key recommendation is the full implementation of the WHO recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children (4), reflecting the unequivocal evidence that the marketing of HFSS foods influences childhood obesity. As a result, WHO has explicitly called on Member States to introduce comprehensive restrictions on marketing of HFSS foods to children in all media, including digital, and progressively to close any existing regulatory loopholes.

WHO recommends that “all policy frameworks should include a monitoring system to ensure compliance with the objectives set out in the national policy” (4). In addition, where policies do not currently exist, monitoring is essential to build the case for action on food marketing. Within the recommendations, WHO states the need for assessments of both exposure (the quantity, frequency, and reach of marketing communications for unhealthy foods to children) and power (the prevalence of specific techniques used) (4). This protocol therefore outlines monitoring activity that would capture both aspects, and can be used to support the making or evaluation of policy related to food marketing to children.

Most data on the prevalence of food and beverage marketing come from high-income, English-speaking countries, specifically Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. They show that the marketing of HFSS foods to children is highly prevalent, actively uses persuasive techniques likely to appeal to children and is present across multiple media, including broadcast television and social media online. Continued monitoring is needed in these countries, to ensure that up-to-date evidence is available to inform and strengthen policy and that policies are adequately evaluated. More data are urgently needed from other countries, however, to support the domestic policy-making process and to build a more representative global picture of food-marketing activity.

Studies conducted in accordance with this protocol will interest policy-makers, academic researchers, public health practitioners and advocacy groups in the WHO European Region and worldwide.

2. Study objective

The aim of this proposed protocol is to provide the basis for monitoring work that seeks to quantify the extent and nature of children’s exposure to marketing for HFSS foods via television and the Internet. The protocol, and accompanying coding forms, sets out a system by which Member States can catalogue marketing via either or both of these avenues, and includes both minimal and expanded versions to allow for different levels of complexity of data collection, depending on a country’s needs and the research capabilities of the team doing the work. Using this method will provide data on both exposure and power of marketing to children.

3. Method of data collection and analysis

The protocol for this research combines the best attributes of previous studies (such as those by Kelly et al. (5) and Boyland et al. (6)), the WHO framework for implementing its set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children (7), the monitoring framework described by Kelly et al. (8), as part of the International Network for

Food and Obesity/Non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS), and the Consumers International manual for monitoring food promotions to children (9). It also reflects the rationale outlined above.

Sampling

Television

Record television (TV) data in the following way.

- For both weekdays and weekend days, sample a minimum of four days: two weekdays and two weekend days.
- These may be sampled consecutively or over a period of time.
- On selected days, record all programming between 06:00 and 22:00.
- Where possible, avoid national holidays, large sporting competitions, special events and low rating periods (i.e. other holidays).
- Select the most popular five commercial TV channels¹ watched by children under 16 years of age. Consider the reach of channels, and select subscription-based channels only if available to a significant proportion of the young population.
- Record TV programmes on DVDs or hard-drives of DVD recorders.

Internet

Record Internet data in the following way.

- Sample the most popular websites with young people (food-brand or e.g. entertainment sites²).
 - Depending on the funds available, ascertain these by purchase of Internet-usage data from market-research companies, identification from existing online sources or research on children's online behaviour, or small pilot surveys of the population of interest regarding popular brands and/or websites.
 - Alternatively, select websites of those companies of particular interest (e.g. for a comparison of companies that are signatories to a self-regulatory pledge versus those who are non-signatories).
- There is no true limit on the number of websites that could be assessed, but coding a maximum of the 20 most popular sites is recommended.
- Capture Internet data by downloading the content of webpages using specialized software (ZyloX, as cited by Henry & Story (10)), coding while viewing or using screenshot images stored for later coding.
- View all pages of each site.
- Where applicable, play the first level of each advergame.

Coding

Intercoder reliability must be established if more than one person codes the data. Before beginning the data analysis, each person must code one hour of TV and/or one website, determine the correlation between the results (person 1/person 2) and resolve any discrepancies. The WHO Regional Office for Europe can be consulted to refine definitions and answer queries.

Television

- i. Screen all TV data for advertisements. This involves viewing the TV recordings (fast-forwarding through the programme content) and making the necessary analysis of the advertisements as described below.

¹ If public broadcasters also show advertisements, include them.

² Social-media websites (e.g. Facebook), although popular with young people, cannot be coded in this way.

- ii. Items considered to be part of programming and therefore not to be included as advertising are: opening and closing credits, closed captioning acknowledgements, brief sponsorship announcements,³ and promotions for content to appear later in the same programme.
- iii. Code the following details of all TV advertisements (when following the expanded protocol) (Table 1).

Table 1. Details of TV advertisements to be coded under the expanded protocol

Variable	Details and response format
Country	Name of country (e.g. Denmark, Russian Federation, United Kingdom)
Channel	Channel name (and number if relevant)
Date	DD/MM/YYYY
Day of the week	Day of the week (e.g. Monday, Saturday)
Name of programme in which the advertisement is shown	If the advertisement occurs between programmes, name the preceding one.
Programme category	Codes given on spreadsheet
Starting time of the programme	Twenty-four-hour clock format (e.g. 13:50, not 1.50 p.m.)
Time slot of the programme	Codes given on spreadsheet
Whether programme occurs during peak children's viewing times or other times ^a	Peak viewing time = 1 Non-peak viewing time = 0
Whether the advertising recorded occurs between or within programmes	Within programme = 1 Between programmes = 0
Type of advertised product	Codes given on spreadsheet, including food and beverage products and other products

^a These data can be purchased or determined in other ways (e.g. based on national media-use data). A peak viewing period is defined as one in which the number of children watching television (all channels combined) is greater than a quarter of the maximum child-audience rating for the day. Where these data are not available, study leads should try to obtain representative data and make a considered judgement. Peak periods may vary between weekdays and weekend days.

- iv. Further code all food and beverage advertisements, including:

- information about the product itself (measuring exposure):
 - brand name of advertised product (manufacturer's name and brand name of product);
 - description of the advertised product;
 - food-category code under the WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile model (12);
 - nutritional information (see below);
 - whether marketing is permitted according to WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile model (12);
- information about the content (or power) of the advertisement:
 - primary persuasive appeal;
 - dynamic audiovisual components;

³ Sponsorship can vary dramatically, from simply flashing a logo on screen to a short (almost advertisement-like) segment. Capturing it all under the same banner without losing accuracy is therefore difficult. This protocol thus focuses solely on spot advertising, and does not include programme sponsorship. As sponsorship is not included, findings are likely to underestimate the full extent of food promotion on TV.

- brand-equity characters: characters created for the sole purpose of promoting a product or brand and thus have no context or identity beyond their association with it;
- licensed characters: characters that has been created for an animated programme or movie and is then licensed by brands to appear in their promotions;
- cartoon characters;
- celebrity endorsers;
- website address;
- links to social media platforms;
- brand logos;
- images of product or packaging;
- children or child-like characters (other than brand-equity character);
- premium offers;
- health claims;
- physical activity depicted;
- disclaimers;
- primary target.

Notes

- i. When assessing exposure, if the advertisement shows more than one food product, code the most dominant one. If a number of products receive equal attention (e.g. a meal deal from a fast-food restaurant), assess all products. When necessary, obtain the nutritional information and/or other information required to correctly classify advertised products by consulting company websites or the ingredients labels on product packaging.
- ii. When assessing power, use the codes for each component, with definitions and examples, provided on the coding forms. For minimal monitoring, code a reduced subset of variables onto the relevant spreadsheet.

Internet

Code the following details of all selected websites when following the expanded protocol:

- country;
- date;
- parent brand (if relevant);
- homepage URL;
- whether there is a designated children's area within two clicks of homepage;
- **information about the product(s)** (measuring exposure):
 - brand name;
 - description;
 - category code under the WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile food model (12);
 - nutritional information (see below);
 - whether marketing is permitted according to the WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile model (12);
- **information about the content of the advertisement** (measuring power):
 - primary persuasive appeal;

- dynamic audiovisual components;
- leader boards;
- members' clubs;
- high-score rewards;
- point collection for universal product codes;
- activities such as collecting or drawing;
- clickable e-buttons;
- surveys or polls;
- user-generated content;
- advergame(s);
- TV advertisements viewable online via website;
- TV programmes and movies viewable online via website;
- brand-owned Youtube channels;
- brand-equity characters;
- licensed characters;
- cartoon characters;
- celebrity endorsers;
- brand logos (within advergames);
- brand or product as game pieces (within advergames);
- product in background scenery (within advergames);
- taglines featured in games (within advergames);
- clicking or moving mouse over product (within advergames);
- branded downloadable materials including wallpapers;
- new/upcoming advertisements;
- direct prompts to forward/like/share with friends;
- links to social-media platforms;
- sign-up to newsletter;
- brand logos;
- images of products or packaging;
- children or child-like characters (other than brand-equity characters);
- premium offers;
- health claims;
- physical activity depicted;
- disclaimers;
- primary target;
- age restrictions;
- peer influencers (vloggers).

Notes

- i. Persuasive techniques draw on the best attributes of Boyland et al. (6), Brady et al. (11) and the WHO framework (7).
- ii. The spreadsheets give codes for each component, with descriptions.
- iii. For minimal monitoring, code a reduced subset of variables on the relevant spreadsheet.

Nutritional information (TV and Internet)

All featured foods or beverages must be classified in accordance with the WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile model (12):

Variables to be included in the coding templates for this purpose are:

- category code under the WHO Regional Office for Europe nutrient profile model (12);
- total fat (g/100 g);⁴
- saturated fat (g/100 g);
- total sugars (g/100 g);
- added sugars (present/absent);⁵
- non-sugar sweeteners (present/absent);
- salt (g/100g);
- energy (kcal/100 g);
- fibre (g/100 g) (not in codes of the WHO nutrient profile model (12) but informs the debate around refined carbohydrates).

Things to remember when coding

- i. Saving an image of the marketing communication you are coding is good practice. For TV, this would be a still photograph of the video recording; for the Internet, this would be a screenshot (or screengrab) of the website. You can then refer to these for further coding and analysis, and use them in reports and presentations to illustrate the type of marketing to which children are exposed, as long as you have secured in advance the copyright holders' permission to reproduce the material. Be sure to capture the key details of the marketing in the image and try to get a good-quality image.
- ii. Save all coding files, video files, images, etc. to a computer, clearly labelled with the relevant information (e.g. type of media, date of recording, name of coder). Keeping a back-up on an external hard drive/cloud service is also recommended.
- iii. Data collection and coding can be time consuming and arduous, but taking a systematic approach and paying attention to detail (following the coding forms exactly as instructed) are crucial to ensuring that data are replicable, robust and valid.
- iv. Ensure that coders are trained and clear on coding systems before they start work. Be sure to conduct the interrater-reliability analysis described above before starting and allow time for the discussion and resolution of any discrepancies.

Data entry

Enter the Internet data in one of two ways:

⁴ If the product contains > 2 g trans fatty acids per 100 g total fat, then marketing is never permitted, no matter the food-product category.

⁵ If data on added sugars are not available, then check the ingredients list. If any of the following appear in the ingredients list, the product is considered to contain added sugars: agave nectar, brown sugar, cane crystals, cane sugar/juice, (high-fructose) corn syrup, crystalline fructose, dextrose, fructose, fruit-juice concentrates, glucose, honey, invert sugar, maltose, malt syrup, maple syrup, molasses, raw sugar, sucrose, syrup. This list is not exhaustive.

- i. entry directly onto Microsoft Excel while viewing the TV recording or website, the web recording or the screenshots (using standardized spreadsheet), which is preferable if two computers can be used simultaneously; or
- ii. manual entry on the recording sheet (print out the spreadsheet provided as supplementary material) while the TV/ Internet data are being viewed, followed by transfer to the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Analysis

- i. If needed, the WHO Regional Office for Europe can support research teams in compiling and analysing their results.
- ii. When more than one researcher has coded marketing, calculate intercoder correlation and reliability to understand the extent to which the different coders assign the same ratings and have a measure of the reliability of the data.
- iii. The types of analyses to be conducted are as outlined in previous publications (1,2,6,7), but include the rate/frequency of:
 - overall advertisements;
 - food versus non-food advertisements (for peak viewing times/programmes);
 - HFSS-food advertisements versus healthy-food advertisements;
 - food advertisements using persuasive promotional techniques.

4. Anticipated outcomes

The anticipated outcomes of using this protocol include:

- reporting of findings for initial dissemination to WHO Regional Office for Europe;
- preparing papers (one research paper and one policy/position paper) for submission to peer-reviewed journals;
- preparing a media release of the results of the study;
- publishing the findings on relevant websites, determined by the research team.

5. Estimated costs

The level of resources required to undertake the proposed approach can be relatively low if data are collected manually, rather than purchased from commercial sources. Other than the optional step of purchasing software for web capture, costs mostly relate to researcher time in capturing and coding data. A graduate-level researcher usually has the skills required for these tasks.

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Annex 1

This illustrates the type of data that need to be collected in the category TV. The spreadsheets can be downloaded at: <https://euro.sharefile.com/d-se68de1782d74a8d8>

EXPOSURE VARIABLES					
Country	Channel	Date	Day	Programme name	Programme category
United Kingdom	Name of the channel	30/08/16	Tuesday	Name of the programme	10
United Kingdom	Name of the channel	30/08/16	Tuesday	Name of the programme	10

EXPOSURE VARIABLES					
WHO nutrient profile food-category code	Total fat (g/100 g)	Saturated fat (g/100 g)	Total sugars (g/100 g)	Added sugars (g/100 g)	Non-sugar sweeteners (g/100 g)
1	30,5	19	55,5	N/A	0,28



		POWER VARIABLES					
Objective	Increased ad engagement	Increased brand engagement		Increased awareness of the brand and website		Influencing children's brand preferences and consumption norms	
Marketing technique	Visual and auditory appeal	Brand synergy				Brand and product imagery	
		Primary persuasive appeal	Dynamic audio-visual components	Licensed characters	Cartoon character	Celebrity endorsers	
8	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
						0	0
						0	0
						0	2

Notes:

- 1 The above example shows coding for two separate advertisements, both shown within the same programme.
- 2 The first advertisement (logged on the first response row of the spreadsheet) is for a lottery item, and therefore information beyond "advertised product, type" is not recorded.
- 3 The second advertisement (logged on the second response row) is a food advertisement, and therefore the full set of variables are completed.
- 4 The coding here for the food advertisement shows that it had "fun" as the primary persuasive appeal, featured a licensed character that was a cartoon, displayed a web address and a link to social media, showed the brand logo and an image of the product, and was targeted at "children and teens".
- 5 Most of the information can be completed while viewing the advertisement, but researchers are likely to need to look up the nutritional information later, and complete these variables for a number of products at the same time. It is therefore very important to fill in the "food product, brand name" and "food product, detailed description" comprehensively during viewing, so that this can be referred to later when retrieving nutritional information from websites, etc.

Annex 2

This illustrates the type of data that need to be collected in the category Internet. The spreadsheets can be downloaded at: <https://euro.sharefile.com/d-sf91f9614a3644259>

EXPOSURE VARIABLES					
Country	Date	Parent Brand	Homepage URL	Designated children's area (within 2 clicks of homepage)?	
United Kingdom	02/09/16	Name of the parent brand	Link	0	
EXPOSURE VARIABLES					
Food product 1, brand name	Food product 1, WHO nutrient profile category code	Food product 1, total fat (g/100 g)	Food product 1, saturated fat (g/100 g)	Food product 1, added sugars (g/100 g)	Marketing permitted according to WHO nutrient profile model?
Name of the product, incl. brand	Flaky milk-chocolate bar	1	30,5	19	55,5
		N/A	N/A	0,28	535
				0	
EXPOSURE VARIABLES					
Food product 2, brand name	Food product 2, WHO nutrient profile category code	Food product 2, total fat (g/100 g)	Food product 2, saturated fat (g/100 g)	Food product 2, added sugars (g/100 g)	Marketing permitted according to WHO nutrient profile model?
Name of the product, incl. brand	Milk chocolate bar with "bubbles"	1	34	21	52,5
		N/A	N/A	0,23	550
				0	

EXPOSURE VARIABLES						
Food product 3, brand name	Food product 3, WHO nutrient profile category code	Food product 3, total fat (g/100 g)	Food product 3, saturated fat (g/100 g)	Food product 3, total sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 3, added sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 3, non-sugar sweeteners
Food product 4, brand name	Food product 4, WHO nutrient profile category code	Food product 4, total fat (g/100 g)	Food product 4, saturated fat (g/100 g)	Food product 4, total sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 4, added sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 4, non-sugar sweeteners
Food product 5, brand name	Food product 5, WHO nutrient profile category code	Food product 5, total fat (g/100 g)	Food product 5, saturated fat (g/100 g)	Food product 5, total sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 5, added sugars (g/100 g)	Food product 5, non-sugar sweeteners

POWER VARIABLES	
Objective:	Marketing technique
Increased site engagement	
Visual and auditory appeal	
Primary persuasive appeal	Dynamic audiovisual components
3	0
Prompts for repeat visits and prolonged visits	
Members' clubs	
Leaderboards	High-score rewards
1	0
Point collection for universal product codes	
Activities such as collecting or drawing	
0	0
Interactive elements	
User-generated content	
Advergame(s)	
0	

POWER VARIABLES	
Marketing technique	Objective:
Increased brand engagement	
Brand synergy	
In-game integration of branded elements	
Life-scape branding	
Brand-owned YouTube channel	Brand-equity characters
TV advertisements	Licensed characters
1	1
Cartoon characters	
Celebrity endorsers	
0	0
0	1
1	0
0	1
0	0
0	0
Clicking or moving mouse over product	
Branded downloadable materials including wallpapers	
New/Upcoming advertisements	
Other	
0	

POWER VARIABLES	
Marketing technique	Objective:
Influencing children's brand preferences and consumption norms	
Associate product with health or healthy diet	
Engaging key demographic	
Targeting content	
Health-related imagery or messaging	
Brand and product imagery	
Influencing children's brand preferences and consumption norms	
Associate product with health or healthy diet	
Engaging key demographic	
Targeting content	
Direct prompts to forward/like/share with friends	Links to social-media platforms
1	1
Sign up to newsletter	
Brand logos	
1	1
Images of product or packaging	
Children or child-like characters (other than brand equity/licensed characters)	
Premium offers	
Health claims	
Physical activity depicted	
Disclaimers	
Primary target	
1	7
Age restrictions	
Peer influencers (vloggers)	
0	
0	

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