Public Health

Systematic literature review of the effects of food and drink advertising on food and drink-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs in adult populations

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Summary

A large body of research confirms that food advertising affects the food preferences and behaviour of children. The impact of food advertising on adults is less clear. We conducted a systematic review exploring the effects of advertising of food and non-alcoholic drinks (referred to as ‘food’ throughout) on food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs in adult populations.

We searched seven electronic databases, grey literature sources, and references and citations of included material for experimental studies written in English investigating the effects of commercial food advertising on the food-related behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of adults aged 16 years and over.

Nine studies, rated moderate to poor quality, were included in the review; all were from developed countries and explored the impact of televised food advertising. Overall, the results did not show conclusively whether or not food advertising affects food-related behaviour, attitudes or beliefs in adults, but suggest that the impact varies inconsistently within subgroups, including gender, weight and existing food psychology.

The identification of a small number of relevant studies, none of which were high quality, and with substantial heterogeneity, highlights the need for further research. Future studies investigating longer term outcomes, diverse advertising formats, and in countries with different levels of economic development will be of particular value.

Keywords: Diet, marketing, mass media.

Abbreviations: ASSIA, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts; RCT, randomized controlled trial; WTP, willingness to pay.

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Introduction

Countries worldwide are facing an obesity epidemic (1), and in the United Kingdom (UK), research has highlighted significant, steady increases in population levels of overweight and obesity, creating an environment in which adult overweight is no longer an exception, but has become the norm (2). The substantial health and economic impacts of obesity have generated widespread commitment to tackling this epidemic (3,4).

Food and non-alcoholic drink (collectively referred to as ‘food’ throughout) advertising is hypothesized to play an important role in the growing levels of obesity (4), and provides a significant contribution to UK media, with an estimated 10% of all advertising spend directed towards the food market (5), and approximately 15% of total...
television advertising time devoted to food (6). With the mean time spent viewing television of 4 h d⁻¹ in the UK in 2011 (7), this represents substantial overall exposure to these television food advertisements. UK advertising expenditure in the food and confectionery sector was calculated at £821.9 million in 2010 (8), and recent evidence supports a disproportionate over-representation of ‘less healthy’ foods high in fat and/or sugar, e.g. (9,10). The potential for food advertising to drive an increase in total overall energy consumption, especially of ‘less healthy’ foods, and its role in establishing new cultural values and norms, is of particular controversy and concern (11).

A large body of evidence regarding the extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children has been reviewed, with regular updates (10,12), and associated international recommendations for practice have been developed (13). However, we are not aware of any analogous reviews of the effects of food promotion, including food advertising, specifically on adults. Food promotion involves a range of activities beyond traditional advertising, including event sponsorship, product placement, viral marketing and use of social media. Evidence is growing in support of the relationship between food advertising and increased intake of calorie-dense products in adult populations, e.g. (14), and policy makers are becoming generally more accepting of an association linking advertising and dietary choices (15). This study therefore aims to systematically review current experimental evidence regarding the effects of food advertising on food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs in adults.

Methods

Inclusion criteria

We searched for published and unpublished experimental studies of the effects of food advertising on adult food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs. Inclusion criteria are detailed in full in Table 1.

Search strategy

Our methods were developed using existing guidance on systematic reviewing methodology (16–18) and reported using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines (19). The protocol was registered with the PROSPERO International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (20) in advance of commencing searches (see http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/ protocol registration number: CRD42012002264).

Electronic databases of peer-reviewed literature were chosen according to the extent of their coverage of relevant studies. The databases searched were: Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), the Cochrane Library, International Bibliography for the Social Sciences, Medline, PsycInfo, Scopus and Web of Science.

The search terms used were ‘food’, ‘beverage’ and ‘advertising’, with synonyms chosen according to each database thesaurus and medical subject heading term availability. A large previous review of food promotion to children was used to guide this approach (10). The search strings created were iteratively expanded according to the results generated from initial pilot searches. A full record of the search string utilized for the Medline database is shown in Table 2.

Additional resources searched for suitable articles are shown in Box 1. Relevant publications, websites, grey literature sources and experts in the research field were identified, and contacted or searched directly. All the references cited in studies meeting the inclusion criteria were reviewed, and full citation searches of these studies were also undertaken using the Science and Social Sciences Citation Indices.

Screening and data extraction

Titles and abstracts of studies located through literature searches were initially screened by the lead reviewer (SM) to exclude those definitely not relevant to the review. Search results from the ASSIA, Medline and PsycInfo databases and grey literature (27% of total references found) were also independently screened by a second researcher (LT). Full-text versions of all references deemed potentially
Box 1 Additional sources searched for studies suitable for inclusion in a systematic review of the effects of food advertising in adults.

Advertising age: http://www.adage.com
Centre for Science in the Public Interest: http://www.cspinet.org
Food Politics, curated by Marion Nestle: http://www.foodpolitics.com
http://www.google.com (first 100 hits) for: ‘food’ AND ‘advertising’; ‘beverage’ AND ‘advertising’
International Journal of Advertising; 2006, 25(2): Food advertising special edition
International Obesity Taskforce: http://www.iasso.org/
Sustain (National Food Alliance): http://www.sustainweb.org
UK Advertising Association: http://www.adassoc.org.uk
Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (Scirus Electronic Theses and Dissertations Search and Virginia Tech Libraries Visualizer search)
ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database
OpenThesis database
JISC mail lists (Food-for-thought, public-health, publichealthfornhs)

Table 2 Example search strategy (Ovid Medline) used in a systematic review of the effects of food advertising in adults

| Search term                                      | Hits   |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|
| food*.ti, ab.                                   | 224,259|
| beverage*.ti, ab.                               | 11,243 |
| soda*.ti, ab.                                    | 2,287  |
| cola*.ti, ab.                                    | 2,196  |
| (fizzy adj drink*).ti, ab.                      | 38     |
| (carbonated adj beverage*).ti, ab.              | 254    |
| (carbonated adj drink*).ti, ab.                 | 124    |
| (soft adj beverage*).ti, ab.                    | 12     |
| (soft adj drink*).ti, ab.                       | 1,738  |
| diet fads/or energy intake/                     | 28,311 |
| 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 | 254,053|
| marketing.ti, ab.                               | 14,251 |
| commercial.ti, ab.                              | 76,707 |
| exp Mass Media/                                 | 36,868 |
| Periodicals as Topic/                           | 32,452 |
| marketing/or advertising as topic/              | 14,774 |
| (adverti?ement or ads or advert or adverts or   | 9,832  |
| advert?ed or advert?ing).ti, ab.               |        |
| 12 or 13 or 14 or 15 or 16 or 17                | 173,466|
| 11 and 18                                       | 8,164  |
| limit 19 to (English language and humans)      | 4,294  |
| limit 18 to ‘all adult (19 plus years)’         | 1,137  |

suitable for inclusion, or where an abstract was unavailable but further information was required to guide decision-making, were obtained. Study authors were contacted for additional details where necessary. A standardized checklist of inclusion criteria was used independently by the two reviewers (SM and LT) to guide decision-making, and reasons for the rejection of studies were recorded.

A bespoke data extraction tool, piloted on a small sample of literature included in the review and modified as necessary, was used as a template for recording study characteristics and results. These included details on study design, number of participants, participant demographics, intervention and comparator, setting, time period, outcomes and outcome measures, results, analysis and conclusions. Data were extracted by the lead (SM) and second reviewer (LT), and a tabulated summary was produced.

Throughout the research, whenever the two reviewers initially disagreed, a discussion was held to explore their rationale and reach an acceptable consensus, and a third researcher (JA) was consulted for advice as required.

Data synthesis and quality appraisal

As previously (21), studies similar in terms of overall results and conclusions were grouped together in a tabulated summary for narrative synthesis. It was anticipated that heterogeneity in the design and outcomes of the studies would be too great to permit meta-analysis.

The Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies (22), which has previously demonstrated inter-rater and test–retest reliability, and acceptable content validity (23), was used to undertake quality appraisal at both the study and outcome levels (see Table 3). Studies included in the review were appraised independently by the two researchers (SM and LT), and a consensus was then reached through pooling and discussion of evaluations. The tool dictionary was used to improve familiarity with the task, and enhance the robustness of this process (24), and the quality of studies was recorded in a tabulated summary.

Results

Studies identified

Database searches initially retrieved 7,869 studies; after automated removal of duplicates, 6,830 studies remained,
with 5 additional records identified through searching other sources. Preliminary screening led to the exclusion of 6,730 studies. Of the remaining 105 studies, for which the full text was obtained, 9 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the narrative synthesis (see Fig. 1). Inter-rater percentage agreement between the reviewers, and Cohen’s kappa coefficients were calculated: ASSIA 94% and 0.313, Medline 97% and 0.492, PsycInfo 95% and 0.560, other sources at initial screening 100% and 1.000, and all studies at full-text stage 80% and 0.379. Because of heterogeneity between studies in terms of design, outcome measurement and reporting, meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate.

Characteristics of included studies

The nine studies included in the review (summarized in Table 4) were published between 1980 and 2012, and all badged as randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Five studies (56%) used university students as participants (25–29), one study used university staff members (30), and another study used American households (31). Two studies (22%) did not describe the participants (32,33). Five studies (56%) sub-classified participants according to specific descriptive criteria. In three studies (33%) this was eating restraint (26,27,32): ‘a tendency to constantly and consciously restrict one’s food intake instead of using physiological cues, hunger and satiety, as regulators of food intake’ (34). In another study, participants were sub-classified according to external eating status (28): an individual’s responsiveness to food-related sensory cues in the immediate environment (35). In a further study, participants were sub-classified by obesity (33). With the exception of the experiment conducted in American households (31), the studies were carried out on a small scale, with between 40 and 227 participants, and only two studies provided a power calculation as rationale for the study size (29,32). The mean age of subjects was stated in six studies and was young, ranging from 19.6 to 27.0 years.

All the studies included in this review were conducted in economically developed countries (France, the Netherlands and the United States). The majority of studies (7, 78%) investigated the effects of food advertising by showing television programmes or films, interspersed with food or beverage advertisements. Other parallel intervention groups in these studies varied according to the project aims. Among these seven studies, the control conditions described were non-food television advertisements (25, 26,28,33), being alone in a quiet room (32), water advertisements (27) or no advertisements (29). A differing study design investigated the effects of exposure to negative media information regarding beef-related diseases, positive food advertising for beef, both media exposures or a control of no information (30). A further study used split-panel experiments in American households, with participants receiving either television advertisements for Frito-Lay brands, or public service announcements (31). Six studies addressed individual food consumption during exposure to television including food advertising (25,27–29,32,33), while another measured food intake shortly after exposure to advertising, in the form of a ‘taste-test’ (26). In all of these seven studies, the foods offered for consumption differed from those featured in the advertisements shown. Participants’ ratings of taste or palatability of the foods offered for consumption were only measured in two studies (26,32), and in only one case was this associated with actual consumption (26). One study investigated participants’ willingness to pay (30) (WTP: the amount of money someone is prepared to exchange in return for goods or services). A further study measured sales volume changes for specific food brands (31).
Quality appraisal of included studies resulted in none receiving a strong quality rating; six studies (67%) were designated as moderate (25,27–29,31,32); and three studies (33%) were classed as weak (26,30,33) quality (see Table 3). The most common weakness was selection bias, indicating that conclusions drawn from the review may not necessarily be generalizable to the wider population. Furthermore, performance in terms of blinding of the participants and experimental assessors was not classified as strong in any of the included studies.

Study results

The main experimental characteristics, and results from included studies, are shown in Table 4 and described here, classified into three groups on the basis of results.

**Group 1: Studies demonstrating a significant positive effect of food advertising on food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs.**

Falciglia & Gussow found that food advertising increased the consumption of cookies among women while watching television adverts, and the effect was greatest for obese subjects (33). Koordeman *et al.* found that television advertisements for sugar-sweetened beverages positively affected concomitant soda consumption among women, whereas commercials for water did not increase water intake (27). Risky’s study of television advertising for Frito-Lay brands indicated that sizable sales volume increases occurred for slightly over half of the brands advertised (57%). They also reported that advertisements for smaller brands were more likely than larger brands to result in significant volume increases, and adverts for new innovations were more successful in comparison with existing product lines or attributes (31). Information on other potentially important factors, such as price, was not reported in this study.

**Group 2: Studies showing food advertising are not effective in influencing food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs.**

Bellisle *et al.* measured food consumption in grams and kilojoules during meals in a number of varied environments. Food intake during exposure to television with food...
## Table 4: Characteristics and results of studies included in a systematic review of the effects of food advertising in adults

| Author (date) | Sample size and gender | Procedure | Intervention and control | Primary outcome | Results | Reviewer's interpretation |
|---------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------------|
| Falciglia & Gussow (1980) (33) | 102, all female | Showing of soap opera with two commercial breaks. Cookies available beforehand, and during TV viewing. | (1) Adverts for jelly (English jam) and breakfast cereal. (2) Control: non-food adverts. | Concomitant snack food consumption (number of cookies) | Both condition (food advertising) and weight (obesity) significantly associated with increased food consumption ($P < 0.001$). Significant interaction: food adverts increased consumption more among obese subjects. | Food advertising increased concomitant food intake among female, with greatest effect among obese subjects. Conclusion: effective. |
| Koordeman et al. (2010) (27) | 51, all female | Showing of film with two commercial breaks. Three types of soda or water available during TV viewing. | (1) 4 soda adverts + 10 non-food adverts. (2) Control: 4 water adverts + 10 non-food adverts. | Concomitant soda consumption (ounces) | Soda consumption for soda adverts > water adverts ($P = 0.027$). Effect of advertising condition on water intake NS ($P = 0.187$). | Advertising for sugar-sweetened beverages increased concomitant soda consumption among female. Conclusion: effective. |
| Riskey (1997) (31) | Not stated (American households) | Split-panel experiments in BehaviourScan markets, delivering advertising or no-advertising conditions to households. | (1) TV advertising for Frito-Lay brands. (2) Control: brand’s adverts replaced with public service announcements. | Sales volume (percentage change) | 57% adverts showed sizable sales volume increases in advertised households compared to controls. Average gain in sales volume between conditions = 15%. Smaller brands more successful than larger brands (83 vs. 27%) and innovations more successful than existing attributes (88 vs. 40%) in generating significant volume increases. | Food advertising increased purchases for slightly over half of advertisements. Conclusion: effective. |
| Bellisle et al. (2009) (32) | 40, all female | 5 days of experiments, each 7 days apart. Self-service meals of main dish and dessert provided at lunchtime. | (1) Participants ate in groups of 3. (2) Participants ate alone with TV on (no food cues). (3) Participants ate alone, listening to the radio. (5) Control: participants ate alone in a quiet room. | Concomitant food consumption (grams and calorie intake in kJ) | NS interaction between meal condition and eating restraint level on food intake. Overall, energy and main dish intake ($P < 0.05$), and degree of post-prandial fullness ($P < 0.0001$), lower in the group meal condition than the others, which did not significantly differ. | Food advertising did not affect concomitant food intake among female, compared to TV without food cues. Participants ate less in groups than when eating alone under other conditions. Conclusion: not effective. |
| Wonderlich-Tierney (2010) (29) | 83, 43 female | Showing of TV comedy program with commercial breaks totaling 20 min or no breaks. Cookies available during viewing. | (1) 20 min of food adverts. (2) 20 min of non-food adverts. (3) Control: no adverts. | Concomitant snack food consumption (number of cookies) | NS effect of advertising condition on consumption ($P = 0.64$) | Food advertising did not influence concomitant food consumption. Conclusion: not effective. |
| Anschutz et al. (2011) (25) | 82, 41 female | Showing of nature film with two commercial breaks. Crisps, M&Ms and water available during viewing. | (1) 6 adverts for energy-dense foods + 10 non-food adverts. (2) Control: 16 non-food adverts. | Concomitant snack food consumption (calorie intake in kcal) | In female, food consumption for food adverts > neutral adverts; among male consumption for neutral adverts > food adverts ($P < 0.05$). Food intake in male > female ($P < 0.05$). Addition of commercial condition to regression model predicting food intake showed NS increase in explained variance. | Food advertising showed opposite effect on concomitant food consumption for male and female. Conclusion: inconclusive. |
| Author (date) | Sample size and gender | Procedure | Intervention and control | Primary outcome | Results | Reviewer’s interpretation |
|--------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------------|
| Harris et al. (2009) (26) | 98, 60 female, 6 unknown gender | Showing of TV comedy program with two commercial breaks. Taste tests for ‘unhealthy’ and ‘healthy’ foods following viewing. | (1) 7 non-food adverts + 4 food and beverage adverts with snacking message of ‘fun and excitement’. (2) 7 non-food adverts + 4 food and beverage adverts with nutrition message. (3) Control: 7 same non-food adverts + 4 further non-food adverts. | Subsequent food consumption (standardized food consumption score) | Food consumption for snack adverts > nutrition adverts ($P < 0.01$); snack adverts vs. control NS ($P = 0.08$); nutrition adverts vs. control NS ($P = 0.30$). Snack adverts had greatest effect on male (interaction between advertising condition and gender, $P = 0.04$) and restrained eaters (interaction between advertising condition and eating restraint, $P = 0.07$). Food consumption for male > female ($P < 0.001$). | Food advertising showed varying impact on subsequent food intake according to type of commercial (nutrition/snacking), gender and eating restraint. Conclusion: inconclusive. |
| Messer et al. (2011) (30) | 227, gender not stated | Participants indicated WTP for cash, a pen and a hamburger, following media exposure | (1) 5 min negative information video on BSE and nvCJD. (2) 5 min positive video of TV beef adverts and radio adverts with magazine advert images. (3) Negative information + positive advertising. (4) Control: no media information. | WTP, value in $. | Negative media information generated significantly lower WTP compared to controls ($P = 0.000$). Positive generic advertising alone showed NS higher WTP ($P = 0.237$). Negative information was counteracted by advertising, with combined conditions reporting WTP significantly higher than negative information alone, comparable with controls ($P = 0.004$). | Food advertising did not significantly increase WTP from baseline, but significantly counteracted effects of negative media information. Conclusion: inconclusive. |
| van Strien et al. (2012) (28) | 125, 65 female | Showing of film with two commercial breaks. Crisps, M&Ms and water available during viewing. | (1) 6 adverts for energy-dense foods + 10 non-food adverts. (2) Control: 16 non-food adverts. | Concomitant snack food consumption (grams) | In the external eating extreme-scores cohort, no main effect of advertising condition on food intake ($P = 0.71$ chocolate; $P = 0.14$ crisps). High external eaters in the food advertising condition ate more crisps than their counterparts in the non-food condition ($P = 0.025$). In the full-range cohort, main effect of commercial condition on intake of crisps observed ($P = 0.036$), but not for chocolate. | Food advertising influenced concomitant intake of only one food type, with inconsistent results between data sets. Effect of commercial condition influenced by external eating status. Conclusion: inconclusive. |

BSE, bovine spongiform encephalopathy; kcal, kilocalories; kJ, kilojoules; min, minutes; NS, not significant; nvCJD, new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease; WTP, willingness to pay.
advertising did not significantly differ from consumption while viewing in the absence of food-related cues (32). Wonderlich-Tierney investigated the number of cookies eaten during food adverts, in comparison with non-food, and no advertising, and found no significant impact of commercial condition on food intake (29).

Group 3: Studies yielding inconclusive findings on the effects of food advertising on food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs.

Harris et al. measured food consumption using a standardized score computed for each participant by calculating z-scores for the quantity of each of a number of foods presented in grams, and averaging the standardized scores across foods. They found that food consumption immediately subsequent to television advertisements for snack foods was significantly greater than that immediately subsequent to television advertising for nutritious ‘healthy’ foods. However, the food score for those exposed to non-food adverts only was not significantly different from that in those who viewed snack food advertisements, or those who saw ‘healthy’ foods advertisements. Snack food advertising had the greatest influence on food consumption in men, and groups of restrained eaters (26).

Messer et al. investigated WTP for hamburgers and found that positive generic beef advertising did not significantly increase the sum offered compared to no media exposure. However, the effects of advertising were shown to counteract negative media information regarding beef-related diseases, such that combined conditions reported WTP significantly higher than the negative media information condition alone, and similar to WTP among those who had no media exposure of either kind (30).

Van Strien et al. noted that food advertising influenced subjects’ intake in grams of crisps, but not chocolate. Furthermore, results were significant only for the cohort with a full range of external eating scores, not for the extreme-scores group (28). Anschutz et al. found that food consumption measured in kilocalories increased among women while viewing televised food advertisements in comparison with non-food adverts, whereas food intake was lower among men when viewing the food advertisements, compared to non-food adverts. Overall, advertising condition did not influence food consumption after controlling for gender (25).

Discussion

This is the first study to systematically review experimental evidence regarding the effects of food advertising on food-related behaviour, attitudes and beliefs specifically in adult populations. Overall, the results did not show conclusively whether or not food advertising affects food-related behaviour, attitudes or beliefs in adults, but suggest that the impact varies inconsistently within subgroups, including gender, weight and existing food psychology. A remarkable lack of high-quality experimental evidence regarding food advertising in adults was also highlighted. The review identified several factors that may moderate the effects of food advertising, which are discussed here.

Gender

Four studies included in this review addressed the role of gender in modifying the effects of food advertising (25,26,29,30). Wonderlich-Tierney did not find a statistically significant interaction between gender and advertising condition on food intake (29). Similarly, Messer et al. noted that gender did not interact significantly with media exposure condition on WTP for a hamburger (30). Harris et al. found that snack food adverts were most effective in increasing the amount of food eaten among men (26). In contrast, Anschutz et al. observed that among women, food advertisements resulted in greater food consumption than non-food adverts, whereas for men, food consumption during programs with non-food advertisements was higher than during programs with food adverts (25).

Overall, the influence of gender on the impact of food advertising appears inconsistent. Research in children has shown that boys respond to televised food advertisements by increasing their consumption of snack foods more than girls (36). This may be because, even among children, social drive to thinness is perceived more strongly by girls than boys (37), and evidence suggests that self-control mechanisms are lower in boys than girls (38). Furthermore, boys generally demonstrate greater responses than girls to external cues (39,40). However, in adulthood, women may be more strongly influenced by food advertising than men due to a greater likelihood of influence from normative cues (41) and demonstration of restrictive eating patterns (42) with associated increased attentional focus on food cues (43).

Obesity

Falciglia & Gussow investigated a moderating role for obesity in the relationship between food advertising and food intake. They found that food adverts increased cookie consumption more among obese participants than those of normal weight (33). This is consistent with previous research demonstrating an association between raised body mass index and greater attention towards food cues (44). Halford et al. also identified a significant effect of body weight on response to food advertising among children. They reported that selective recognition of food advertisements, as assessed through the identification of an item from a list of products which may or may not have been shown in the advertisements, was greater among overweight and obese participants than those of normal weight (45).
Food psychology

Three studies included in this review addressed the impact of eating restraint on the relationship between exposure to food advertising and food intake (26, 27, 32). Two found no evidence of a significant influence of eating restraint on the effects of advertising condition on food-related behaviour, attitudes or beliefs (27, 32). The third identified a borderline statistically significant interaction between advertising condition and eating restraint, such that the effect on food consumption of viewing snack food advertisements, vs. nutritious or non-food advertisements, was greater in those high in eating restraint (26).

Van Strien et al. focused on external eating, and found a moderating effect on the relationship between advertising exposure and food consumption. High external eaters exposed to food advertising ate more crisps, but not chocolate, than high external eaters viewing non-food advertising (28). Dietary restraint (46) and external eating (47) have previously been associated with enhanced responsiveness to food cues; however, the validity of tools used to measure these factors has been controversial (32, 48). The inconclusive results in this review may therefore be attributable to variations in data collection and analysis methods. Wonderlich-Tierney investigated the impact of transportation, ‘a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings’ (49), on the relationship between food advertising and food intake. The results indicated no significant interaction between transportability and the association between advertising condition and food consumption (29).

Adults vs. children

A systematic review conducted in 2011 addressed the effects of food advertising delivered by television only on children and adults (50). The authors concluded that, among adults, a trend exists for a strong association between advertising exposure and effects on food-related behaviour, but the evidence is less consistent than that for children (50). Indeed, studies investigating the impact of food advertising on children have noted significant effects across several age groups, e.g. (26, 51).

The discrepancy between the inconclusive picture of results presented by studies included in this review of adult food advertising, and the more consistent findings noted in previous reviews concerning children (10, 12), could be attributable to several factors. The surprisingly small number of studies conducted among adults creates difficulties in drawing clear inferences from the sparse results, and it is important not to confuse no evidence of an effect with evidence of no effect (16). The network of multiple interacting factors influencing food intake is notoriously complex (4), and as external societal influences gain importance with age, these routes may become increasingly complicated. Disparities between adults and youth in the mechanisms through which advertising exerts any effects, e.g. intellectual engagement compared with appealing imagery (21), may also account for diversity in conclusions. Furthermore, adults may have greater understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising, and therefore be less vulnerable to its impacts.

Strengths and weaknesses of studies in this review

All the studies included in this review were reported as RCTs, considered the gold standard in study design (52). However, the process of randomization was not described in any study, and quality appraisal revealed mixed results, with none allocated a strong rating (see Table 3). The stringent assessment criteria used in the quality appraisal tool could partially account for this outcome. Some studies did not report a complete data set, e.g. (33), and others provided few details on their statistical methods.

With the exception of one study (31), all were conducted on a small scale, and only two provided a power calculation to justify the study size (29, 32). Unfortunately, because of the limited information provided in most papers, we were unable to conduct retrospective power calculations to determine the detectable effect size. Research was generally carried out in populations of young adults, and important details such as socioeconomic position and ethnicity were rarely provided. A large proportion of studies apparently relied on self-referral of participants, resulting in biased recruitment, and the majority explored the effects of food advertising on consumption of a very small range of food and beverages. It is arguable that this provides poor prediction of behaviour in the wider environment with extensive choice.

All the studies included in this review were conducted in economically developed countries, and investigated the impact of televised food advertising only, rather than advertising delivered through other media. With the exception of one (31), every study was conducted in an experimental environment. Although several cited strategies used to create a naturalistic setting, participants would nonetheless be aware of involvement in a research project. This may limit generalizability to snack food consumption in the home environment, which may be maximized when people feel relaxed and uninhibited in a familiar location. The main experimental outcomes were inconsistent between studies, thereby introducing complexity in drawing comparisons and conclusions, particularly for WTP (30) and sales volume effects (31). Six studies measured individual food consumption during advertising exposure (25, 27–29, 32, 33). This may be appropriate for short-term, impulsive eating behaviour; however, it is likely that such
patterns are influenced in an experimental setting, and do not necessarily reflect longer term effects.

Considering the overall weighting apportioned to each of the nine studies included in this review, both study size and risk of bias are crucial. Anschutz et al. (25), Riskey (31), van Strien et al. (28) and Wonderlich-Tierney (29) were ranked highest in these respects, each with more than 80 participants and a moderate quality rating. However, these studies encompass the full range of overall conclusions drawn by the lead reviewer (SM) (see Table 4), thereby illustrating the disparity between results.

Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other reviews

It is possible that studies meeting the inclusion criteria were not retrieved through the search strategy, or were excluded during screening of results, and that the review does not represent all relevant literature. However, comparison with other literature in the field, such as a systematic review of televised food advertising only, concerning both children and adults (50), indicates that this review has not failed to retrieve relevant studies. Furthermore, analysis of the references and citations from studies initially included in this review identified just one additional study suitable for inclusion (33). Previous research has shown that the vast majority of food advertising studies are reported in English (10). Therefore, the impact of including English language studies only is likely to be minor. This review addressed the effects of food advertising, but not the impact of wider food promotion activities. Given that large-scale research projects have identified important findings regarding the impact of such marketing on children (10,12), it will be critical to similarly extend future work in adults. This review was also limited to studies of experimental design. Assessment of observational studies is likely to provide additional valuable insights.

Unanswered questions and future research

All the studies included in this review were conducted in developed countries. Given the rapid growth in consumption within the food and beverage industry in developing nations (53), it will be crucial to undertake research in less economically developed areas. Studies generally focused on young adults. However, in view of the ageing population demographic (54), it will be important to conduct studies involving older people. A review of observational studies, with longer term follow-up addressing weight change over time, may be required to address the practical significance of the size of any impact of food advertising. All of the studies included in this review focused on television food advertising. In the future, it will also be important to investigate the potential effects of food advertising delivered through other means, such as the rapidly developing new media sources. For example, 76% of UK households had access to broadband internet in 2011 and 39% of UK adults owned smartphones (7). Similarly, further research is also required to explore the impacts of broader food promotion activities beyond just traditional food advertising. Both of these issues pose methodological challenges. Consistent outcome reporting between studies, and the use of standardized measurement tools should also be encouraged to facilitate accurate comparisons and reliable conclusions.

Conclusions

Concern regarding the effects of televised ‘unhealthy’ food advertising on children’s food preferences and behaviour has resulted in recent advertising restrictions (55), but no comparable regulations currently exist for adults. The results of this review suggest that the potential effects of food advertising on adults cannot be ignored and merit further research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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