Selling Dreams: An Overview of Slimming Products’ Advertisements in Switzerland

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Abstract
Objective: The aim of this work was to assess weight loss claims of slimming products available in Switzerland. Method: Between May 2008 and February 2013, 31 advertisements for 13 slimming products were analyzed. Results: Total daily weight loss claims ranged between 300 g and 1 kg. 84% of the advertisements included the photograph of a woman, 61% showed a picture of a person before and after using the product, and 51% claimed that the product had improved marital relationships. The terms ‘natural’, ‘miracle/extraordinary’ and ‘scientific’ were present in 92%, 77% and 31% of the advertisements, respectively. Cost for one package of the product ranged between CHF 49.00 and 59.00 (USD 52.00 and 63.00), and no correlation was found between cost and weight loss claims. No differences were found for weight loss claims according to presence or absence of a picture or of the terms ‘natural’, ‘miracle/extraordinary’, and ‘scientific’. Assuming that 5.3% of readers bought the product, yearly revenues would range between CHF 12.5 and 33.8 million (USD 13.4 and 36.2 million). Conclusions: In Switzerland, advertisements for slimming products use positive and reassuring terms to attract consumers, which are lured by unreachable, false promises of rapid and easy weight loss.
Introduction

Obesity is increasing worldwide, and the market of slimming or low-calorie products has evolved at a similar if not a higher pace. In the USA, 15.2% of adults have ever used a weight loss supplement [1], and it has been estimated that the global weight management market will attain USD 586 billion in 2014 [2]. In a competitive market and in the absence of strict regulations, unethical marketing strategies are put forward to sell slimming products whose properties have not been scientifically proven [3]. These strategies induce obese subjects into buying products of little or even no proven efficacy, leading to deleterious effects in self-esteem [4] and to a spiral of disappointment / increased expectations/action, which could significantly decrease further adherence to adequate weight loss strategies [5]. Indeed, overweight or obese subjects continuously submitted to claims of quick and easy weight losses by these marketing strategies will be less prone in adhering to efficient weight loss strategies [6]. Still, to the best of our knowledge, little objective data has been published on the marketing strategies of slimming products. Hence, we assessed the weight loss claims of several slimming products available in Switzerland by analyzing the publicities for these products as they appeared in the most read Swiss magazine.

Material and Methods

Between May 2008 and February 2013, 31 advertisements for 13 different slimming products appearing in the largest Swiss magazine ('Touring') were analyzed. This bimonthly magazine claims over 1.2 million readers per issue, corresponding to almost one fifth of the Swiss adult population. The magazine is issued in the three official languages of Switzerland (German, French, and Italian). The advertisements appeared in all language editions, and their text was similar. Hence, only the advertisements in the French-speaking issues were collected.

Data Extraction

For each advertisement, we conducted a text analysis searching for the words related to evidence-based data ('science/scientific'; 'trial/study') or not ('miracle/wonderful/marvellous/extraordinary/revolutionary'; 'secret/hidden'). The characteristics of the weight loss were categorized by searching words such as 'quick', 'easy' or 'no change' (in lifestyle), and by collecting the promised weight loss (number of kg and duration of weight loss period). The characteristics of the product were categorized by searching words such as 'natural' or 'bio' and by assessing, whenever possible, its origin (plant extract or other). Personal and social benefits of the weight loss were evaluated by searching situations such as recovering self-esteem, recovering the love from family, or obtaining a job position. Other data, such as the presence of a before/after picture, the gender of the person in the picture (male/female) or the presence of a promotional gift, were also collected.

Market Value

It was not possible to assess directly the true returns of these products; hence, we calculated the overall yearly costs for their advertisements based on the advertising costs for 2012 as indicated by the magazine. The number of readers susceptible to buy such products was estimated using the following assumptions: i) gender distribution 50/50; ii) prevalence of obesity of 14.2% in men and 12.5% in women [7] and iii) 28% of obese men and 53% of obese women would buy a slimming product [8]. A second estimation was performed supposing that for each advertisement 15% of the readers of the magazine would buy one unit of the product [1].

Statistical Analyses

Data was analyzed using Stata v. 12.0 (Stata corp, College Station, TX, USA). Descriptive results were expressed as number of advertisements and (percentage) or as range. Comparisons were performed using Fisher’s exact test for qualitative data and Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test for quantitative data.
Results

31 advertisements for 13 different slimming products appeared in the French issue of the magazine. As the advertisements for a given product appeared several times, the analysis was based on the 13 different products. The name of the product/advertisement and the advertised content are summarized in the tables 1 and 2. Most products claimed to be vegetable.
Table 2. Details of the contents of the different advertisements for slimming products

| Name of product/advertisement | Type   | Weight loss, kg | Delay, days | Picture before/after | Picture of a woman | Marital improvement | Miracle/extraordinary/revolutionary§ | Science/scientific§ | Natural/bio§ | Price for 1 package, CHF | Free gift |
|-------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------------------|----------|
| 11 plantes qui font maigrir   | pill   | 20              | 21          | no                  | no                | yes                 | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| 19 aliments qui font maigrir  | book   | 20              | NR          | no                  | no                | no                  | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.8                     | no       |
| Algoline                      | pill   | 12              | 28          | yes                 | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.5                     | no       |
| Algomed                       | pill   | 21              | 42          | yes                 | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | yes                 | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| Bioline formule turbo dynamique | pill   | 31              | 49          | yes                 | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| Elixir bio fettstop           | pill   | 26              | 49          | yes                 | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | yes                 | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| Elixir minceur aux fruits     | pill   | 24              | NR          | no                  | yes               | no                  | no                    | yes                 | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| Kilostop                      | pill   | 24              | 30          | yes                 | yes               | no                  | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |
| L’Carnitine                   | pill   | 7               | 7           | yes                 | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 59.0                     | yes      |
| Patch minceur                 | patch  | 10              | 30          | yes                 | yes               | no                  | yes                    | no                  | yes          | 49.0                     | yes      |
| Planto Slim                   | pill   | 22              | 49          | no                  | yes               | yes                 | yes                    | yes                 | yes          | 48.0                     | no       |
| Semelles acupressure          | soles  | 9               | 30          | no                  | yes               | no                  | no                     | no                  | no           | 59.0                     | yes      |
| Vita Ever Slim                | pill   | 21              | 28          | yes                 | yes               | no                  | no                     | yes                 | yes          | 49.5                     | yes      |

NR = Not reported.

§Presence of the word in the advertisement.
extracts. More than half did not indicate which products were included or indicated only a fraction of them. In some advertisements visual identification of the fruits/herbs could be performed, but it was unclear if other components were present. No advertisement provided the exact composition of the product.

The terms ‘natural’, ‘miracle/extraordinary’ and ‘scientific’ were present in 92%, 77%, and 31% of the products, respectively. The promises of weight loss ranged between 7 and 31 kg within a period of time ranging between 7 days and 7 weeks. The estimated daily weight loss ranged between 300 g and 1 kg. Almost all (94%) of the advertisements targeted women by including the photograph of a woman; 61% showed a picture of a person before and after using the product, and 51% claimed that the product had improved marital relationships. Free gifts were provided to buyers for 69% of the products.

Cost per one package was very similar for all 13 products (range CHF 49.00 to 59.00 (= USD 52.00 to 63.00), with 8 products costing the same amount), and no correlation was found between cost of the product and weight loss claims (Spearman correlation between cost of one package and total weight loss −0.41, p = 0.16 and between cost of one package and weight loss rate 0.28, p = 0.41). No differences were found for weight loss claims according to presence or absence of a picture or of the terms ‘natural’, ‘miracle/extraordinary’, and ‘scientific’ (all p > 0.05, not shown).

The yearly costs for advertising such products in this specific magazine ranged between CHF 56,000.00 and 126,000.00 (USD 60,000.00 and 135,000.00) for French-speaking Switzerland, and between CHF 190,000.00 and 428,000.00 (USD 204,000.00 and 459,000.00) for whole Switzerland. Considering that at least 5.3% of the 1.2 million readers actually bought one unit of the product, the estimated annual revenues ranged between CHF 12.5 and 33.8 million (USD 13.4 and 36.2 million). When the percentage was increased to 15%, the values ranged between CHF 35.3 and 95.6 million (USD 37.9 and 102.5 million).

**Discussion**

There are few if any studies on the content of advertisements for slimming products marketed in Switzerland or in Europe. A similar study conducted in the early 1990s in France concluded that most advertisements for slimming products do not give any indication on the composition of products or on the nature of the proposed methods, and that the selling arguments are most often fallacious [3]. Indeed, the arguments of the advertisements for slimming products in 1992 differed little from the ones collected in our study, suggesting that the general public is still receptive to them. Further, the weight loss claims are several orders of magnitude higher than achieved by adequately conducted randomized controlled trials [9, 10], which raises ethical [11] and even legal issues [12], as they lure vulnerable obese people into falsely believing that weight loss can be easily achieved without any change in lifestyle.

Interestingly, the EU (non-Swiss) legislation on slimming products relates to foods that replace the whole or part of the total daily diet [13], while most if not all products analyzed here were considered as supplements, hence not encompassed strictu sensu by the legislation. Our results thus suggest that some companies consistently exploit legislative voids to use fallacious arguments which would be forbidden, had their products be commercialized as dietary replacements. More worryingly, Switzerland has a specific regulation regarding the slimming properties of dietary products (ODAI0Us), which prohibits any kind of endorsement for foodstuffs as a weight loss product, or suggesting that it has similar properties (article 10) [14]. The fact that several companies manage to promote and sell such kind of products in Switzerland further stresses the need of adequately enforcement of the existing regulations, rather the issuing of new ones. It would also be of interest that popular magazines agree on
an ethics chart that would forbid publishing such type of advertisements. Still, given the profits generated, such chart would be difficult to implement. Finally, in 2011, CHF 14.8 million (USD 15.9 million) were invested in Switzerland for healthy body weight promotion campaigns [15], and it would be of interest that these campaigns also include evidence-based information on slimming products to deter consumers from buying ineffective ones.

This study has some limitations. First, we only overviewed a single magazine, and it might not be representative of the other magazines read by the Swiss general population. Also, its share of the percent of total media contacts is unknown. Still, this is by far the most read magazine in Switzerland (1.2 million copies bimonthly), and a further search on other public magazines (including one distributed in pharmacies at 400,000 copies/month) showed the same type of advertisements. Hence, we do believe that this sort of advertisement is rather common in the Swiss public press, although the precise impact of such advertisements is difficult to establish. Second, we could only provide a rough estimate of the potential income generated by such products. Still, our results also suggest that the revenues are considerable, even if a conservative estimate is assumed that only 5.3% of the readers (compared to the 15% observed in the USA [1]) buy one single unit of the product.

We conclude that in Switzerland, advertisements for slimming products use positive and reassuring terms to lure consumers and to obtain considerable revenues. Adequate implementation of the regulation of such products and objective information of the consumers is urgently needed.

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Disclosure Statement

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