



REPORT 43/2021

Content Area

Barcelona, 12 April 2021

**The presence of advertising for foods and
beverages containing fat, trans-fatty acids, salt
and/or sugars in influencer-generated video
content**

Conclusions

Purpose and sample of the report

This report analyses the presence of content advertising foods and beverages that contain fat, trans-fatty acids, salt or sodium and sugars in videos generated by influencers and targeting young children and teenagers, as well as studying to what extent this advertising is identified as such.

For the analysis, a sample of 50 videos containing advertising for this kind of product was selected, posted on the video-sharing platforms and social media sites of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Twitch.

The variables applied are based on the parameters established in the PAOS Code or *Code of co-regulation of advertising for food products and beverages directed at children, prevention of obesity and health*.

The report falls within the framework of Article 28b of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive in relation to protecting users from surreptitious advertising and the objective of reducing the exposure of children to advertising for such foods or beverages:

“Member States shall encourage the use of co-regulation [...] aiming at effectively reducing the exposure of children to audiovisual commercial communications for foods and beverages containing nutrients and substances with a nutritional or physiological effect, in particular fat, trans-fatty acids, salt or sodium and sugars, of which excessive intakes in the overall diet are not recommended”.

Audience for the sites and channels included in the sample

Food products containing fat, salt and sugar are publicised on sites and channels with content aimed entirely or partially at minors which, in the case of the sample, total 127 million followers.

These videos can be found on very popular channels and sites with content aimed at young children and teenagers, such as dance routines based on hit songs and humorous or gaming content, among other types.

In total, the videos under analysis, which are an example of content with advertising for these foodstuffs, have received over 30 million views.

Type of food products publicised and type of publicity carried out

The videos mainly advertise products such as savoury snacks and crisps (24%), mass-produced biscuits and pastries (22%), sweets (14%) and energy drinks (14%) and, in 75% of the cases, the influencer can be seen consuming these products, an action that is accompanied by a positive message of expressing pleasure.

Consequently, one of the characteristic features of such advertising by influencers is their interaction with the product being promoted and its pleasurable consumption:

“Guys, I just got something that’s going to blow your minds. Look what I’ve got here. [shows the little chocolate cakes being promoted] Sooo good! The first thing I’m going to do is try this giant [product name]. You’ll be saying ‘what’s that, [influencer’s name]?’ It’s heaven, my friends, heaven! [bites into the product and looks pleased]”.

A second feature of the content analysed is the combination of two or more advertising formulas within the same video: in addition to *traditional* promotional formats such as offering prizes or gifts (32% of the videos analysed) and product placement (8.3%), there are also forms specific to the medium, such as unboxing, followed by a review (16%) and the setting of hashtag challenges, which entail the participation of the audience (18%).

A hashtag challenge launched by a brand, one of the most popular advertising formats on social media, can go extremely viral: in one of the cases studied, it achieved over 600 million views.

The type of advertising formulas used varies depending on the platform. Challenges with influencers encouraging their audience to create new videos associated with the product being promoted are particularly popular on TikTok and Instagram, two social media sites that typically encourage users to create short multimedia content.

Advertising discourse

Another characteristic of the advertising for foods high in fat, salt or sugar aimed at young children and teenagers is endorsement by influencers, who sometimes become very popular and manage to establish a special relationship of trust with their followers.

In 48% of the videos, the advertising discourse associates sedentary activities such as gaming, a widespread form of entertainment among young children and teenagers, with the consumption of unhealthy foods.

In these cases, the influencer conveys a message that is doubly harmful to healthy habits: they promote a link between sedentary activities related to intensive screen consumption (playing video games and watching audiovisual content or sports broadcasts) and the consumption of such products.

The association between gaming and the consumption of foods high in fat, salt or sugar is particularly frequent (in 34% of the videos, with an audience of over 10 million views), and often occurs when an influencer known for playing and commenting on video games is promoting the product.

In some content (8% and nearly 4 million views), the advertising discourse downplays the importance of adopting healthy habits such as physical exercise or a diet rich in vegetables, which are presented as not very appetising foods compared with processed products. For example:

Mother: “[*Child’s name*], here’s your dessert.... [*taking out a yellow pepper*]”.

Child: “[*looks disgusted*] [...]”

Father: “Just one bite, come on. Don’t think, like it’s... I don’t know...”

Child: “We’re going to eat a really delicious [*brand of cocoa spread*] sandwich...”.

Father: “Exactly, bite there. Imagine it there, lovely chocolate. Mmm, chocolate!”

Furthermore, 6.0% of the videos analysed, with more than 2.5 million views, present the promoted food as a pleasurable substitute for a main meal:

“Since you’ve asked me so many times to make more miniature Japanese foods or more miniature Japanese sweets, I have this pile here [*shows various boxes of the product to the camera*] so I can spend 24 hours eating miniature Japanese sweets”.

32% of the videos contain discourses related to foods high in fat, salt or sugar that are likely to promote excessive, compulsive or immoderate consumption among minors.

In such content, with almost 10 million views, the influencer explicitly states they will consume a large amount of the unhealthy food being promoted, links a larger quantity of the product with an improvement in taste, or shows a lack of self-control regarding its consumption, among other features:

“I’m going to totally stuff myself with [*product name*]; first, because I love them and, second, because they’ve sent me like 800 kilos [...] and I’ve got to get through them.”

“I’m going to be a bit of a devil; I’m going to be a bit bad [*laughs*] and I’m going to put in four [*spoonfuls of cocoa powder*]. Wait, did I put in four or five? [...] [*Reading the chat comments*] Five? [...] Did I put in five? Get away! Well, it’s going to be better, it’s going to be better”.

Only one of the 50 videos analysed includes advice promoting healthy habits at the same time as advertising a product high in sugar content.

In contrast to advertising for these products in media such as linear TV, where such messages are typically superimposed, only 2% of the advertising content analysed on social media sites feature messages (written or oral) recommending healthy habits.

Identifying advertising

58% of the content analysed, receiving over 17 million views, does not warn that advertising is present and, when it does, the messages are difficult for minors to understand or could be easily missed.

The remaining 42% use heterogeneous expressions (“publi”, “sponsor”; “patrocini”; “promoció” or thanking the brand in a variety of ways), such expressions often being

difficult for minors to understand or easily missed due to their size or how they are presented.

Furthermore, in almost a quarter of the pieces (24.0%) that contain some kind of warning, this is not included within the content of the video per se and therefore disappears when shared with other users or via other platforms.

Consequently, social media sites provide a favourable ecosystem for advertising products with a high fat, salt or sugar content, allowing consumption messages to be conveyed in a medium frequently used by young children and teenagers, with the added value of endorsement by people who, as influencers, use a familiar language and create close bonds and a relationship of trust with their followers. Additionally, in more than half the cases, such content is not identified as advertising and, even when it is, heterogeneous formulas are used that make it difficult for the target, namely young children and teenagers, to recognise it as such.