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EXPOSURE TO ADVERTISING OF ‘JUNK FOOD’ IN FIJI

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BACKGROUND

In the Pacific Islands, non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of death, and rates are increasing [1] associated with changing lifestyles. Dietary changes in particular have been extensive in recent decades [2], associated with urbanization and globalization of food supply. Unfortunately Fiji is part of this NCD (non-communicable disease) epidemic; with cases of diabetes, heart disease and stroke increasing. The prevalence of obesity in Fiji among children and adults has increased considerably over the last few decades [3], associated with declining physical activity levels and changing diets, including an increase in consumption of foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt and low intake of fruits and vegetables [3]. Some of the factors that drive dietary behavior are food prices, availability and knowledge. Knowledge and attitudes in turn can be influenced by food marketing and media. There is significant evidence that advertising influences children's attitudes and also that it influences their food buying behavior [4, 5]. The significant expenditure on advertising globally [6] also highlights how much value is placed on advertising by food industry and therefore the perceived scale of its impact. Brand recognition has been found to be high amongst children from an early age [6]. It is now widely accepted that the children need protection from exposure to excess advertising [7], particularly for foods and drinks which are less healthy (often termed ‘junk foods’) as this encourages their excess consumption.

In order to give some indication of the extent of advertising of ‘junk foods’ in Fiji, two small studies was conducted in 2010 [8] and in 2012. The first study in 2010 looked at advertising on television (Fiji TV and Mai TV), knowledge and behavior of a small group of school children and street advertising around schools and in the main areas of Suva. The study found high levels of advertising of ‘junk’ foods and drinks on streets, particularly around schools. The survey of around 200 primary and secondary school children in Suva found that children found adverts interesting and that many had either asked their parents to purchase a product they had seen advertised or bought it themselves. Some were also confused about healthier drinks and foods as they had misunderstood or seen misleading adverts. Almost all of the children watched television every day, particularly secondary students who tended to watch much more. The free to air channels were the most watched, compared to DVDs and satellite television [8].

Since this study was undertaken, a new TV channel started here in Fiji, FBC TV. In 2012, to complement the Hope study [8] this channel was also assessed for its food and drink advertising, using the same methodology. The study’s design was to record the channels from 6am to 9pm on two weekdays and two weekend days. It was expected that advertising and programming would be different during weekdays than weekends, and hence the inclusion of both. The product being advertised was recorded, along with associated information such as promotional/competition, including child actors or cartoon [9]. A nutrient profiling system, which has been previously used in Fiji was then used to classify products as ‘healthier’ or ‘less healthy’/junk foods [10].

This study found that levels of advertising on FBC’s had the lowest proportion of the ‘junk’ advertising compared to other channels (in 2010); however, still almost two thirds of food and drink adverts were for ‘junk’ foods and drinks (65%). FBC was also unusual in that, in the programming intended specifically for young children in the early morning and afternoon, there was no advertising content at all. There was sponsorship of these features but this only included logo of supermarkets or non-food companies. Other broadcasting media could consider a similar approach to this for children’s programming.

The study in 2010 also found that half of the surveyed primary school children and 8 out of 10 secondary school students reported hearing food and drink advertising on the radio [8].

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To explore more on this finding, a study was carried out in 2012 on radio advertising in Fiji. Three prominent radio stations here were included in this study; FM 96, Radio Navtarang and Bula FM. While food and drink advertisements were only a small proportion of the total advertisements (9-15%), adverts for less healthy food and drink exceeded those for healthy ones. On FM96 and Bula FM, 6 out of 10 food advertisements were for less healthy food and drinks. However, Radio Navtarang had more healthy food and drinks adverts, with only 3 out of 10 food adverts on less healthy food. Within the three stations surveyed, the majority of food advertisements were played during the weekdays rather than during the weekend. On FM 96, 57% of the food adverts were aired during the week days; for it was Radio Navtarang 53%; and Bula FM had 68% of its food adverts aired in the week days. A number of food companies or products sponsored specific shows or programs on the radio stations during the data collection period and were therefore advertised heavily.

Studies elsewhere have consistently found that the advertising of less healthy foods and drinks is high [11, 12]. This study along with the previous Hope study [8] clearly indicates problems with the levels of less healthy food and drink advertising. The studies also indicate that children’s ability to distinguish between advertising and fact can be poor; they are particularly vulnerable to the influence of advertising messages which involve cartoons or other children on television and elsewhere. These preliminary studies indicate that there is a problem of marketing ‘junk foods’ in Fiji and that this is particularly a problem, during hours when children are likely to be watching and in areas around schools. We believe these studies point to the need for stronger efforts from government, industry and civil society to protect children and adolescents from ‘junk food’ advertising.

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REFERENCE

you don’t stop moving because you get old........... you get old because you STOP MOVING!!