Synopsis
A Review of Food Advertising to Children in Quebec
**Foreword**

This synopsis, produced by the Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems (Weight Coalition) outlines advertising strategies aimed at children under the age of 13 in Quebec. It sets out the findings of four documents that present an overview of food advertising directed at children in the food retail sector, fast-food and family restaurants, as well as family venues and events.

*Information contained in the document may be cited provided that the source is mentioned.* © Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems (2019)

**Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems**

The mandate of the Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems (Weight Coalition), an initiative sponsored by the Association pour la santé publique du Québec, is to advocate for legislative, regulatory and public policy changes in an effort to foster the creation of healthy lifestyle-promoting environments that help prevent weight problems and chronic conditions.

The Weight Coalition has the support of more than 550 partners from the education, municipal, health, research, environment, nutrition and physical activity sectors.
Introduction

Children are vulnerable to advertising targeted at them because they are unable to recognize the commercial goals of marketing. They actually only understand the true nature of advertising at the pre-teen stage, namely at around the ages of 11-12. Prior to that age, their cognitive development prevents them from detecting the persuasive intentions of advertisers and from thinking critically, which makes them vulnerable to the effects of different commercial strategies.

Research shows a link between the promotional activities of the agri-food industry and the knowledge, attitudes towards junk food, food preferences and eating habits of young people. Namely, advertising directed at children increases preferences for high-calorie foods, in particular among those children who watch more television and in overweight children.

Quebec Context

Since 1980, under section 248 of the Consumer Protection Act (CPA), in Quebec, “no person may make use of commercial advertising directed at persons under thirteen years of age.” However, exceptions to the Act result in children not being fully protected from the consequences of the advertising directed at them.

Given its mandate to prevent and reduce obesity, the Weight Coalition is concerned with the consequences of food advertising directed at children. Over the past decade, it has recorded and reported to the Office de la protection du consommateur several advertising practices that illegally target children. Many of these reports have led to convictions.

In addition to these illegal practices, application exceptions, such as window displays, showcases and packaging, are still widely used by retailers and food companies to target young people in different places, and cause repeated nagging of parents.

Given the persistence of advertising directed at children in Quebec, and the federal government's intention to introduce legislation to regulate the advertising of unhealthy foods to children, the Weight Coalition produced a progress report on the Quebec context in the food retail sector, fast-food and family restaurants, as well as family venues and events.

Please refer to the report A Review of Food Advertising to Children in Quebec to learn more about Quebec’s Consumer Protection Act and the Weight Coalition’s methodology for this study.
Food Retail Sector
As window displays, showcases and packaging are not covered by Quebec’s CPA11, the food retail sector is saturated with advertising directed at children. As a result, merchants and companies can use different marketing strategies to catch children’s eye and capture their interest.

Over a period of six months, the Weight Coalition identified 469 examples of food product packaging aimed at children in different stores (grocery stores, convenience stores, big-box stores and drug stores), excluding chewing gum, chocolate and candy, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, and bottled water.

Key Findings

- 90% of the products identified are ultra-processed foods high in sugar, salt or fat;
- The advertising techniques most commonly used on packaging are:
  - juvenile writing (puffy, unevenly sized, shaded or colourful letters, or a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters);
  - positive images (humour, pleasure, independence, freedom, success);
  - animated foods that seem to be in motion;
  - the use of popular or brand characters;
  - references to magic and fantasy.
- On average, the identified packaging uses three to four marketing strategies, with some products using as many as eight.

Images referencing magic, fantasy and adventure appear on 43% of the inventoried packaging.

More than half of all regular packaging features a brand character (242 products) or a character popular among children, such as PAW Patrol, the Incredibles, the Minions or other Avengers or Disney characters (55 products).
- Nearly 100 products use the *foods-as-toys* strategy. These foods are shaped like animals, letters or characters.

- Many companies offer the same product in a **wide range of varieties and packages**, making it possible to take up more shelf space and maximizing the visibility of the packages.

- Large companies in the food industry use **display units** to attract children’s attention.

- Many companies **change their packaging several times per year**, be it to celebrate a holiday, an event or a new movie.

- The categories of products most advertised to children are **snacks, cereals, dairy products, sugary drinks** and **frozen desserts**.

»» **These highlights do not represent all of the grocery store-related findings. Please refer to the report Food Advertising to Children in the Food Retail Sector** to learn more and for all of the identified products and marketing practices.
Fast-food and Family Restaurants

Restaurants use several strategies to attract children’s attention and create a feeling of belonging and loyalty. Many use marketing-mix strategies in particular to create brand loyalty among young consumers.

About twenty chains of popular Quebec fast-food and family restaurants were visited in March and April 2018. The advertising strategies used differ based on the type of restaurant. While promotional collectible toys are included with most kids’ meals in fast-food restaurants, family restaurants prefer fun tablecloths or activity books.

Key Findings

- Two thirds of the restaurants visited use brand characters. They are featured on menus, activity books, advertising posters and some containers used to serve kids’ meals.

- Many restaurants use kids’ menus for product placement for a specific brand.

- Kids’ menus use funny meal names (e.g., Bugs ’n’ Cheese, Happy Face Macaroni), attractive colours or fonts, and pictures of toys or brand characters.

- Menus combined with games or activity books are frequently offered.

Popular drinks, desserts or side dishes are sometimes featured on kids’ menus.
• **Most of the fast-food restaurants** visited put kids’ meals in distinctive, often fun **packaging** featuring bright colours and characters.

• The advertising tactic of offering toys with kids’ meals is **widely used in fast-food restaurants**. These toys are frequently associated with children’s **movies, television shows** or **series of popular toys**.

Most of the toys offered are time-limited collections, encouraging young consumers to come back soon to get the full set of toys in the promotion.

• Other strategies are used **inside** restaurants to draw children’s attention, such as **posters, toy displays** and access to a **playroom**.

"» Please refer to the report **Food Advertising to Children at Fast-food and Family Restaurants** to learn more about the practices observed in restaurants."
Family Venues and Events

Children are exposed to advertising for foods high in sugar, salt and fat, some of which specifically targets them, at many family events and venues. The Weight Coalition visited 24 venues and events in six different regions of Quebec. Whether at family festivals such as the Carnaval de Québec, ski hills, amusement parks such as La Ronde, or cinemas, a number of tactics were observed, such as the use of posters and sponsorships in areas regularly visited by children. Although some ads were identified, the situation has improved at family events.

Key Findings

In cinemas

- Children are exposed to a number of food ads before screenings.

- A number of food ads were observed in the space before the entrance to the movie theatres, including concession areas.

- Candy, chocolate, chips, popcorn and sugary drinks are heavily promoted. M&M’S brand products and characters and sugary Coca-Cola beverages abound and are specifically advertised.

At the five films viewed, the Weight Coalition observed and reported only one ad directed at children (as defined in Quebec law), namely an ad for movie popcorn.
During family festivals
- Food sponsorships are conspicuous at different sites. However, a number of reports by the Weight Coalition in recent years have changed sponsorship practices, particularly at winter festivals*.

At amusement parks
- Despite a few convictions by the Office de la protection du consommateur, there are still a large number of food ads at amusement parks and family entertainment centres. Many spaces display brands, such as Coca-Cola, especially in dining areas.

In downhill skiing areas
- Although the situation has greatly improved in downhill skiing areas, some locations, such as Mont-Tremblant, display the Coca-Cola brand in several places in the family area.

»» Please refer to the report Food Advertising to Children at Family Venues and Events to learn more about the observed marketing strategies and the Weight Coalition’s complaints to the Office de la protection du consommateur.
Conclusion

The advertising of low-nutrition/high-calorie foods and drinks to children contributes to the obesity epidemic. Although children are partially protected in Quebec, the work done by the Weight Coalition reveals that the food industry takes advantage of exceptions in the Quebec legislation to target children.

An IPSOS poll conducted on behalf of the Weight Coalition* indicates that a large majority of the Quebec population agrees that Quebec children are over-exposed to advertising, packaging, junk food displays, and that this should be regulated in stores for children under the age of 13:

- 86% agree that the federal government should regulate advertising directed at children under 13, in stores.
- 85% believe that Quebec children are over-exposed to junk food advertising.
- 84% find that there is too much junk food packaging and displays in grocery stores and food retailers.
- 70% have expressed a desire to have access to check-outs without junk food when paying for their purchases.

The Weight Coalition and the population have arrived at the same finding: children are over-exposed to food marketing. Since self-regulation is not sufficient, advertising practices targeting children should be regulated by legislation. Several studies conclude that self-regulation has little impact on reducing exposure of children [to advertising] and note that government intervention in food marketing would more likely have the desired results [13,14,15,16,17].

* Online Omnibus carried out by IPSOS, on behalf of the Weight Coalition, from March 11 to 15, 2019, among 1,296 French-speaking and English-speaking respondents 18 years of age or older living in Quebec.
References

15 Kovic, Y., et al. (2018). The impact of junk food marketing regulations on food sales: An ecological study. *Obesity Reviews*, * currently only available online, the edition is not publicly available.

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