

Many unhealthy foods advertised in healthy context: Study

By Caroline Scott-Thomas, 19-Nov-2010. Foodnavigator.com.

A new study examining the wider context in which foods are advertised on UK television has found that 'incidental' foods shown tend to be significantly healthier than the primary foods being advertised.

The researchers – from the Institute of Health and Society at Newcastle University – found that about two-thirds of food advertisements did not contain any incidental food or drink items. However, for the remaining third, the primary foods being advertised tended to be high in fat, salt or sugar. The study's authors sought to understand whether food manufacturers' efforts to portray their products as foods to be eaten in moderation, as part of a balanced diet, led to them being portrayed in a healthy context.

"One method of 'reflecting moderation in consumption and portion size' and reinforcing the importance of a balanced diet in food advertisements is to position advertised foods in a wider food context," they wrote. "However, to date, no evidence describing the food context in which foods are advertised has been published."

The researchers examined the food advertised on the channel with the highest viewing figures (ITV1) over a week in July 2008 and compared the nutritional content of food advertised with the nutritional content of incidental foods shown.

"We have found evidence that the wider food context in which foods are advertised on television tends to be 'healthier' than advertised foods themselves – particularly in terms of food groups represented," they wrote.

The researchers included 652 food advertisements in their study, showing 1007 primary and 960 incidental foods.

However, they added that they had not examined the effect of positioning less healthy foods alongside healthy ones, saying that the practice might serve to reinforce the importance of a balanced diet, or it might lend advertised foods an unjustified aura of healthiness.

"It is not yet clear what effect this may have on consumers' perceptions and behaviour, and whether or not this practice should be encouraged or discouraged from a public health perspective," they wrote.

Source: *British Journal of Nutrition*

"Do television food advertisements portray advertised foods in a 'healthy' food context?"

Authors: Jean Adams, Rachel Tyrrell and Martin White