

Don't take *this* with a grain of salt!

The majority of the food and beverage brands that appear in movies are energy-dense and nutrient-poor, according to a study led by Dartmouth nutritionist Lisa Sutherland, Ph.D.

Films: Sutherland and her team catalogued the brands of foods, beverages, and food retailers (restaurants, grocery stores, and convenience stores) that got screen time in the top 20 highest-grossing films each year from 1996 to 2005. They found 1,180 separate brand-name appearances; 69% of the 200 movies contained at least one brand. Sweet and salty snacks were the most prevalent food brands, while sugary drinks dominated the beverage category and fast-food restaurants the retail category. The researchers assumed that most, if not all, of the appearances were paid placements, but given the proprietary nature of product marketing, Sutherland explains, that's impossible to verify.

Unsurprisingly, PG-13 and R-rated films—particularly those in the comedy, action/adventure, and horror genres—were more likely to showcase food brands than films in other genres and rating categories. But even movies geared toward young children displayed such products; 33% of the G-rated films analyzed in the study contained food, beverage, or retail brands.

“Should soft drinks be in a G movie? Absolutely not,” says Sutherland. “Why would we allow products that are 50% added sugar to be on kids’ programming? It’s not that it all needs to go away. It’s about where do we set the bar.”

Obese: Sutherland’s study has drawn much attention from the media, including the *New York Times* and *U.S. News & World Report*, since its publication in the February issue of *Pediatrics*. She credits this to two factors. First is the alarming rise in the rate of obesity among children; the World Health Organization estimates that more than 40% of North American children are overweight or

obese. And second is scrutiny that is being given to a Council of Better Business Bureaus project called the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI). Launched in 2006, this attempt at self-regulation by the food and beverage industry (its members include corporations like Coca-Cola and McDonald’s USA) aims to promote healthy food choices in advertising directed at children under 12 years of age.

Standards: A May 2010 report from the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity criticized the CFBAI’s efforts, in part because “each company developed its own nutritional standards.” But Sutherland thinks that the companies are actually “doing a very good job.” Besides, she points out, the White House report focused largely on television advertising and not on movies.

In coming years, Sutherland’s study will provide “a benchmark,” she says, against which CFBAI efforts can be measured, because it examined the status quo in movies before the initiative began. “We [conducted the study] before this whole initiative was even formed,” Sutherland says. “We [will] be able to see what progress has been made—at least in the movie sector.”

Her team’s goal, however, was not to demonstrate causality between product placement in movies and childhood obesity. In fact, she was frustrated by some of the media coverage, especially an April 19 article in the *New York Times*, which implied that the research drew conclusions about the effects of advertisements on children.

“Childhood obesity is a multifaceted issue,” she explains. “Our study wasn’t meant



Sutherland found that 11% of the food brands shown in movies were cereals.

to show cause and effect but rather to raise awareness.”

Sutherland’s interest in brand placement in movies was piqued when she took her then-preteen son to see the action flick *S.W.A.T.* She was taken aback by the prevalence of Dr. Pepper in the film, especially because the beverage was shown alongside products from McDonald’s, which is a partner of the Coca-Cola Company. Dr. Pepper must have arranged for exclusive placement rights in *S.W.A.T.*, reasoned Sutherland, who spent 10 years in marketing and advertising before earning her Ph.D. in nutrition.

Kids: That impelled her to try to understand “the prevalence of product placement in film, and in particular in film that’s directed toward kids,” she recalls.

Although the objective of her study was not to show an effect on childhood obesity rates, the results do give the public a better idea of the methods companies use to promote their brands. As a mother herself, Sutherland hopes her findings will provide parents with useful information.

“Marketing definitely influences kids’ preferences,” says Sutherland. “It definitely influences what they’re asking their parents for . . . the meltdown in the snack aisle,” as she puts it. “I think that if we could curtail some of that, that’s a help to parents”—and ultimately to their children. ALICIA I. KIM