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Advertising for climate killers

How TV and YouTube advertising violates the German Interstate Media Treaty

Summary of the study

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At a glance

- Section 8 of the Interstate Media Treaty prohibits advertising for behavior that “endangers the protection of the environment significantly”. The study shows that current advertising practice violates this point.
- A content analysis of almost 10,000 commercials from five TV stations and 20 YouTube channels shows that about one third of all commercials advertises goods that are harmful to the climate.
- The advertising industry often works with strategies that make the harmfulness of the products to the climate invisible or even turn it into the opposite (greenwashing). 
- Media Policymakers have various regulatory measures at their disposal to remedy this situation, including advertising bans for specific product groups.

General context of the study

While a bill to restrict junk food advertising is currently being discussed and tobacco products and alcohol may no longer be advertised at all or only to a strictly limited extent, the same does not apply to products with a large carbon footprint. This would be an obvious task for climate and media policy in view of advancing climate change and the binding climate targets set in Paris. There is also a provision in the Interstate Media Treaty stating that advertising must not promote behavior that “to a high degree” endangers the protection of the environment. This standard applies to both public and private broadcasting as well as online media (e.g. social media platforms).

The aim of the study is to quantify the climate-damaging potential of TV and YouTube advertising in order to determine the scale of the problem. Specifically, the study asks which goods are advertised on TV and YouTube,

how emission-intensive the advertised products are and which strategies are used to advertise climate-damaging goods.

Method

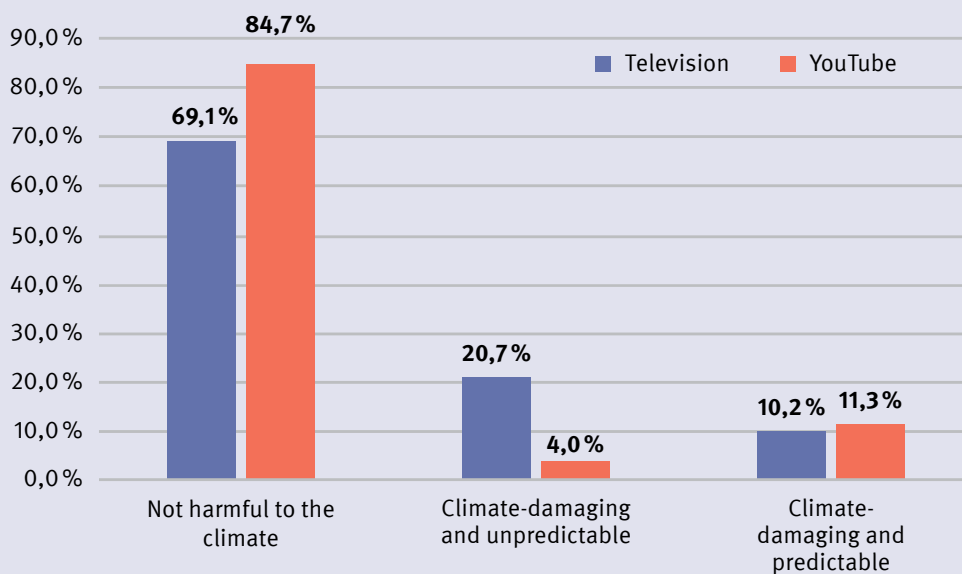
To answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis of commercials on television and YouTube in 2022 and 2023 was carried out. In the TV sector, five of the six channels with the largest market shares in 2022 - Das Erste, ZDF, RTL, Sat.1 and ProSieben - were selected and their programs were recorded during two constructed weeks between 5pm and 11pm. On YouTube, the most widely used video sharing platform in the world, commercials from the videos with the highest number of views from the 20 largest German channels by followers were recorded during four constructed weeks. In total 9,779 commercials with a total length of

almost 52 hours were recorded and coded. In addition to estimating - or if possible: calculating (CO₂ footprint) - the climate impact of the products, the advertising spots were coded for the persuasive strategies used.

Results

Of the 9,779 commercials recorded, 69.7 percent were about goods that could be classified as non-climate-damaging. However, almost one third of the commercials - 30.3 percent, around 3,000 spots - appealed to viewers to purchase or consume climate-damaging goods and services. If we look at television and YouTube advertising separately, it is noticeable that the proportion of advertisements for climate-damaging products is higher on television (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Proportion of commercials by climate impact of the advertised products (in percent)



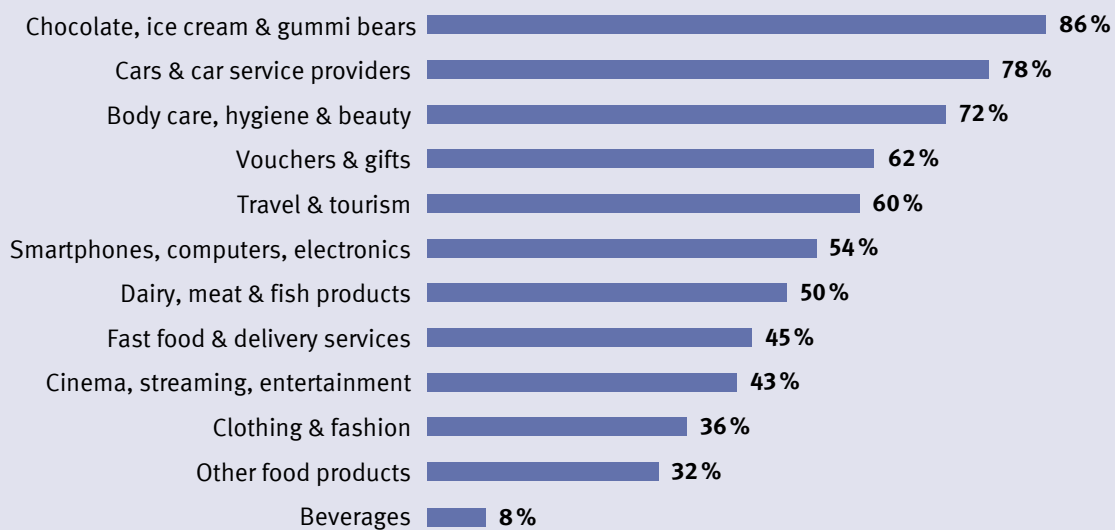
Source: Own illustration (see long version p. 31)

Of the various product groups into which the commercials could be divided, some appear to be particularly climate-relevant. For example, 86% of the commercials in the “chocolate, ice cream & gummy bears” category were assigned to climate-damaging products, especially as chocolate has a fairly large carbon footprint. However, the majority of goods in the “Cars & car service providers” (78%) and “Body care, hygiene & beauty” (72%) categories are also classified as harmful to the climate. These are followed by “Vouchers and gifts” (62%) and “Travel & tourism” (60%, see Figure 2).

In some cases, the extent of climate damage is significant: with just one of the advertised cars, just one of the advertised flights or vacation destinations, one sea cruise, the fair CO2 budget per capita for the whole year and all areas of life

(1.5 tons) has largely already been used up, and in many cases is exceeded by far. The differences in the area of food and drugstore products are less dramatic, but still relevant: Beef, coffee or chocolate have a significantly larger footprint than other, more climate-friendly food and beverages. Disposable baby diapers and many other hygiene and beauty products contribute to the growth of mountains of waste and the enrichment of the environment with greenhouse gases and toxins. Conversely, climate-friendly products from mostly smaller producers are often not present in advertising: for example, the smartphones from major manufacturers shown in commercials have a larger carbon footprint per lifetime than an available (but not advertised) more durable alternative product.

Figure 2:
Proportion of spots for climate-damaging goods per product group (in percent)



Source: Own illustration (see long version p. 32).

Moreover, the advertising often works with strategies that make the harmfulness of the product to the climate invisible or even turn it into the opposite: A long-distance trip is associated with nature conservation, a fuel-intensive hybrid SUV is advertised with wild animals and natural landscapes, the consumption of coffee capsules is supposed to replace a failed climate policy. From a climate protection perspective, the advertising messages can sometimes be described as absurd or even as misleading greenwashing. The most common arguments used to promote climate-damaging goods were the sensual qualities of the products such as taste, appearance and aroma (in 51.3% of the commercials) or the association with fun, sociability and social popularity (32.6%). In many advertising clips, several strategies were used.

Recommendations for action

In view of the results of the study, it must be acknowledged that the stipulation in Section 8 of the German Interstate Media Treaty, which declares advertising for highly environmentally damaging behavior to be inadmissible, is being violated by current advertising practice. There is an urgent need for action in terms of media policy. Mandatory warnings for commercials for climate-damaging goods, advertising bans for certain product groups, the specification of a total CO₂ advertising budget per broadcaster or platform or the development of a dynamic price system in which advertising for climate-damaging goods is made more expensive and advertising for climate-friendly goods is made cheaper: The regulatory options are many and varied. They must be used consistently.

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You can find more information and the long version of the study on our website: www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de (only available in German)