

## An End to Junk Food Marketing Online: Policy Position

The Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) is a coalition of over 40 health charities, medical royal colleges and campaign groups. This briefing paper outlines our support for the total removal of junk food adverts online and across all types of digital devices.

### Policy summary

- There is strong evidence linking junk food marketing to child overweight and obesity.
- Food companies spend millions every year on a range of different digital marketing techniques to keep junk food in the spotlight. Children are frequently exposed to this advertising on a range of digital devices and platforms including websites, social media and games and apps.
- The Government has committed to introducing a 9pm watershed on advertising for unhealthy food and drinks online and is also considering whether this should be extended to a total online ban.
- Due to the multiple formats, complexity, and fast changing nature of the digital marketing environment along with the issues in regulating this environment, ending all digital junk food marketing would be the most effective way to protect children and would also benefit adults' health.
- Taking steps to end all junk food marketing online would go further than any other country in protecting children and show the Government's commitment to addressing obesity.

### Why we need to end junk food marketing online

#### Junk food marketing and the link to obesity

There is a pressing need for effective regulation to restrict junk food advertising online as part of a comprehensive approach to reduce obesity. In the UK we have an established principle that food marketing causes harm and needs effective restriction. The conversation now should be how to we make the restrictions as effective as possible and provide the most comprehensive protection to children.

Totally removing junk food marketing online is likely to have health benefits for everyone, with children particularly set to benefit due to their high online media consumption and the strong evidence showing the link between junk food adverts and child obesity.

- A wealth of evidence shows that there is a clear link between food advertising and the food children prefer.<sup>1</sup> Advertising influences how much children eat,<sup>2</sup> and leads to them 'pestering' parents to buy unhealthy products.<sup>3,4</sup> Advertising also influences dietary norms, leading to population level shifts in preferences for certain food categories and also affects cultural values that under-pin eating behaviours.<sup>5</sup>
- Seeing junk food marketing online is associated with obesity-relevant outcomes in children and young people such as consuming unhealthy food and drinks and changes to body-weight.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Recent evidence from well-controlled studies shows that exposure to food advertising does influence adults in terms of their desire to eat and also what and how much they eat.<sup>8</sup>
- There is a link between the time young people spend online and their dietary behaviour.<sup>9</sup> According to a Cancer Research UK study<sup>10</sup>, children who use the internet for more than 3 hours per day:
  - Are almost three times more likely to pester their parents for junk food,
  - Are almost four times more likely to buy junk food,
  - Will eat around three times less fruit and vegetables.

### Junk food marketing online domination

Due to the nature of digitally served advertising, and because data on reach and engagement are not widely available, it is challenging to accurately assess the scale of junk food marketing seen by children online. But food and drinks companies invest millions in online marketing to ensure their products remain centre stage in our minds, and they would not do so if advertising did not work.

- Research by the Department of Health and Social Care shows children are exposed to over 15 billion adverts for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) online every year.<sup>11</sup>
- A recent report estimated UK online advertising spend for food and drink is in the region of £645m- £819m per year. There is evidence food brands are increasingly weighting their advertising spend towards online advertising. For example, Kellogg's now say they spend 60-70% of their overall marketing budget on digital platforms.<sup>12</sup>

### Children and their parents believe that digital junk food advertising is pervasive

- Young people report feeling targeted by junk food marketing, which they perceive as being everywhere. They feel that it is targeting them by using spaces associated with younger audiences such as social media, and through appealing content.<sup>13</sup>
- Nearly one in five 11-19 year olds recall seeing junk food adverts on social media every day and two thirds remember seeing them at least weekly.<sup>14</sup> Research shows adolescents are more likely to share posts about unhealthy food on social media, have higher recognition of these brands and spend longer viewing content featuring unhealthy food.<sup>15</sup>
- Research with parents also highlights high levels of concern about children's exposure to junk food advertising online and beliefs that existing regulation doesn't work to protect children.<sup>16</sup> Parents also report finding it difficult to monitor and control the digital marketing that children are exposed to online.<sup>17</sup>

### The current rules are weak and don't protect children from seeing junk food adverts

The current system to protect children, is one of self-regulation, enforced by the Advertising Standards Authority. The rules ban HFSS advertising in media of obvious appeal to children or where more than 25% of the audience is under 16 years old. In reality this is extremely hard to enforce in the online environment and creates significant loopholes.

- A YouTube channel or social media influencer popular with both adults and children can lead to large nominal numbers of young people being exposed without breaching the current threshold; for example, if a video promoting a junk food product is watched by 10 million people, a breach does not occur until more than 2.5 million children have seen it.
- It is not always possible for advertisers to see the demographics of a social influencer's audience. Plus children often access content and channels such as YouTube (which has an age restriction of 13) via parents' accounts or watch without being signed in. This makes the 'official' demographic of the viewing audience meaningless.

### Every child has the right to grow up free from the influence of unhealthy food marketing

- The United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child (CRC) recognizes and enshrines children as rights holders, with governments acting as duty bearers. In this context, governments have a duty to protect children from the harms of junk food marketing.
- In practice, this means putting children's interests first, so that their right to be healthy is prioritized over the concerns of commercial industry who may challenge this policy.

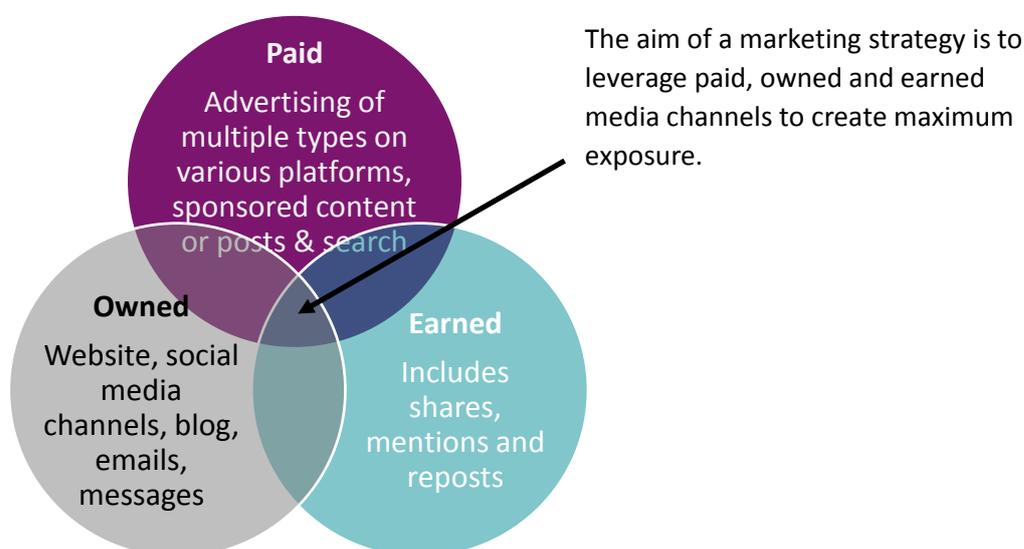
## An end to all digital junk food marketing is the strongest way to protect children now, and in the future

### A total ban would provide the most comprehensive protection to children

Online marketing is a complex eco-system comprising many different types of advertising formats.

- Digital marketers use a range of advertising and engagement tactics to extend online brand presence. These techniques can be broadly categorised into paid, earned and owned media (see figure one). The introduction of a 9pm watershed on digital junk food advertising could apply to paid media. This is because most paid media formats are targeted and can be turned on and off at specific times of day.
- In many cases the reach of earned and owned media is not subject to the same level of advertiser control as paid media. This is due to the way earned and owned content is shared via social media, surfaced through platform content recommendations, and served in search engine results pages. This type of 'word of mouth' marketing is highly valued by brands as it is seen as more credible. Totally removing online junk food advertising is the most effective way to protect children from this type of marketing.
- In addition, the line between paid and earned media increasingly blurs as marketers create advertising that is designed to appear 'native' to the platform or publisher on which it is served. This type of advertising is designed to prompt higher levels of audience engagement and social sharing, which extends the potential reach of content beyond any targeting parameters that may have been set.

Figure 1: Examples of paid, earned and owned media



### Advertising content is designed to be shared – putting it out of reach of a 9pm watershed

- Once advertising content is shared by a user, there is no ability to control what time that content is viewed. Studies show that junk food brands frequently ask users to share or invite others to participate to extend its reach.<sup>18</sup>
- Brands post organically on their own social media pages and channels as part of their marketing mix. Despite changes made by social platforms to limit the reach of organic posts, brands with

large followings can get significant reach. For example on Facebook brands can still expect their posts to be seen by 5.5% of their followers.<sup>18</sup> A major fried chicken retailer's UK Facebook page has over 55 million followers, so each post could be reaching over 2 million people.

- To maximise reach of organic content, social media managers will craft posts so they have the best possible chance of getting engagement and being shared more widely, e.g. via active customer relationship management, production of viral or 'on-trend' content, partnerships and co-creation, use of UGC, 'news-jacking' and use of cultural moments.
- A recent example is the UK KFC Dirty Louisiana Burger campaign, that achieved 75m impressions from a spend (not given) only expected to generate 18m impressions, reaching over 1 in 3 internet users in the UK alone.<sup>19</sup> A award entry for the campaign discusses the 'very high levels of earned media obtained by the campaign' and shows how the agency engineered this via internet trend analysis.<sup>20</sup>

#### The digital feedback loop traps users in a cycle of constant advertising

- Social media platforms like Facebook use algorithms to determine what organic and advertising content to serve to their users, based on what they think the user will engage with. This is based on a combination of the user's profile data (which in the case of children may be based on a false age), social engagement data and cookie data.
- Due to this algorithmic recommendation, social media users can experience a 'feedback loop' effect, where they signal affinity for a particular topic or content type, are exposed to more of the same through both organic and paid, which in turn generates further engagement signals to again create more similar recommendations.
- According to data accessed by a digital marketing consultant on Facebook's paid advertising module, 173,000 – 286,000 13-17 year olds Facebook users in the UK have an affinity to the fast food interest category.<sup>21</sup>
- This mechanism traps children and adults into a cycle of bombardment of unhealthy food adverts, undermining efforts they may be making to improve their health.

#### **Example of the feedback loop trap**

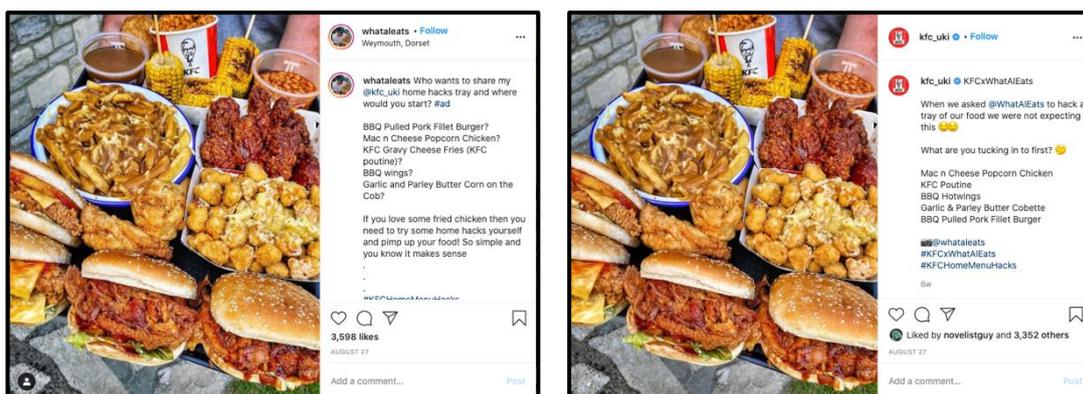
*A Facebook user follows KFC and Burger King and has engaged with a handful of their posts. He has ordered a McDonald's delivery from Deliveroo, (therefore subject to a Facebook cookie drop). He likes one of his friend's Instagram posts which is tagged at a McDonald's Drive Thru. Facebook has used all these signals to place him strongly in the interest category of 'fast food'. In addition he also has similar interests to those of other people within the fast food interest group. For example, he is interested in gaming which this group also has a high affinity for. This shared affinity further reinforces his interest profile.*

*Once a critical mass of signals has been detected by the Facebook algorithm, it begins to upweight the prominence of content that matches his interest in this category. This content could be posted organically by friends or brands he follows, or it could be paid for by advertisers who are targeting the category. If he continues to engage with this paid and organic content, it is served at a higher frequency. Every time this user looks at his Facebook feed, he sees content that reinforces his interest in fast food, and as a result he begins using Deliveroo more frequently. He is now a high value customer of Deliveroo, and the Facebook retargeting cookies dropped on him when he visits the website ensure Deliveroo can continue to target him with special offers. Facebook now deems him as a high value target for their other fast food advertisers and he will continue to be targeted with fast food advertising of all kinds, influencing his food preferences and consumption.*

## Ending all junk food advertising will close the 'influencer' loopholes

- Influencer marketing is now a well-established digital channel, with fast-food brands working with real-life 'micro-influencers' along with more established celebrities. A global analysis of content on Instagram found food is the second most active industry in influencer marketing.<sup>22</sup>
- Adverts with a celebrity presence result in a 16% greater impact on brand awareness than those without and 'Generation Z' are significantly more receptive than other generations to content featuring celebrities and social media celebrities.<sup>23</sup>
- Research has found that social media influencer promotion of unhealthy foods influences children's intake.<sup>24</sup>
- While brands can stipulate an influencer posts content after 9pm, the nature of social means a post could still be surfaced in a user's feed post watershed, and will remain visible on the influencer's channel.
- As the influencer industry is still relatively new, regulation is struggling to keep up. Junk food brands send 'gifts' to influencers, which aren't always labelled as adverts or can share the influencer's created content without labelling it as an advert (see examples below)

*Example of Instagram influencer content commissioned by KFC UK. The post on the left is the original influencer post using #Ad, whilst the post on the right is a repost on the KFC channel that does not use #Ad*



*Example of a celebrity posting on Instagram about a Turkey Twizzler he has been sent with no advert labelling.*

The current system for serving and regulating digital advertising is flawed, and these flaws mean totally removing junk food advertising online is the most effective way to protect children.

- Even in formats that do lend themselves to scheduling advertising to appear pre 9pm ('day-parting'), there is room for error due to the technical complexity of how large advertising

campaigns are bought and served programmatically. This could lead to errors in when advertising is served.

- This is apparent from the scale of breaches to the existing rules. Research from the ASA found 78 adverts for HFSS products appeared on children’s websites and YouTube channels aimed at children in just three months.<sup>25</sup> This is despite the existing rules that ban HFSS advertising on children’s content and brand owners claiming to not target children.
- In addition, a report by Nielsen, studying the reach of more than 60,000 campaigns in over 20 European countries found that just 53% of advertising impressions served were delivered to the audiences advertisers intended.<sup>26</sup>

#### Young people are spending increasingly more time online – with older children using digital devices post 9pm

- Children are increasingly spending more time online. Children aged 12-15 spend the most time per week online (20 hours 30 minutes on average), followed by using a mobile phone (around 17 hours).<sup>27</sup>
- 71% of children aged 12-15 who own a mobile phone (equivalent to 62% of all children that age) and 61% of children aged 12-15 who own a tablet (equivalent to 31% of children of that age) are allowed to take it to bed with them. This indicates that a total online ban on junk food advertising online would provide the most comprehensive protection to children.

#### The digital advertising world is ever-evolving and protection to children must be future-proof

- A total ban on digital HFSS advertising would be a future-proof policy as it would apply to all emerging formats of advertising in a world where innovation is fast-moving.
- The policy should apply to all kinds of digitally served advertising with no exemptions. We know that children consume content that is also popular with adults and that children falsify their age online or use parents’ or shared household accounts. Existing methods to determine a user’s age online are not sufficiently accurate, which means companies cannot guarantee they are not exposing children to their advert.<sup>28</sup> This means that any exemptions based on age inference would not protect children.
- Online advertising bans for some other commodities – such as e-cigarettes – do not currently extend to social media profiles under the control of retailers and marketers (‘owned’ media). This loophole leads to brand owners investing in content marketing that is highly shareable to encourage wide dissemination (‘earned’ media). To avoid this loophole the ban should apply across all types of promotional activity with HFSS brand owners be required to ensure their social media profiles are private.

Due to the multiple formats, complexity, and fast changing nature of the digital marketing environment along with the issues in regulating this environment, ending all digital junk food marketing with a total online ban is the most effective way to protect children and would also benefit adults’ health.

For more information on this briefing, please contact:

Caroline Černý, Alliance Lead, [caroline.cerny@obesityhealthalliance.org.uk](mailto:caroline.cerny@obesityhealthalliance.org.uk), 07879 812306

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