Unhealthy Food and Drink Marketing on TV and Online and Childhood Obesity: The Evidence

In 2019, one third of children aged 11 were overweight or living with obesity\(^1\). Children and adolescents with obesity are five times more likely to become adults with obesity than their healthy-weight counterparts\(^2\).

Although many develop obesity through adulthood, research suggests that those with obesity from a young age are more likely to suffer from obesity-related diseases as an adult such as type-2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome\(^3\) and a damaged cardiovascular system which may trigger faster development of heart disease\(^4\).

The Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of 40 plus leading health organisations, are calling for stronger restrictions to protect children from junk food marketing to help reduce childhood obesity.

This document sets out a summary of the key evidence to date and discusses the wealth of available evidence, the majority of which supports a causal link between food marketing exposure and children’s weight.

**How does junk food marketing affect children’s health?**

Food marketing impacts children’s health through a chain of effects\(^5\):

- Increased awareness and recall of a product or brand\(^6\)
- Purchase of the product or brand or purchase requests from children\(^7\)
- Consumption of advertised products\(^8\)
- General food consumption\(^9\)

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• Following increased food consumption, no subsequent reduction in food intake to compensate\textsuperscript{10}

These effects are constant over time, with weight gain occurring as a result of increased food consumption and no subsequent reduction in food intake as a form of compensation. This is particularly problematic in children, considering it can take as little as 46-72 additional kcals a day to gain weight over time\textsuperscript{11}.

Furthermore, the majority of research shows that those from ethnic minorities or lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately exposed to unhealthy food advertising, particularly on television and outdoors\textsuperscript{12}.

**Evidence that junk food marketing is a problem**

There is a wealth of evidence that has been conducted over time, drawing consistent conclusions that marketing impacts children’s dietary health through a multitude of means.

**Television**

• Globally, children are exposed to excessive unhealthy food and drink advertising on television\textsuperscript{13}. Much of this advertising occurs during family viewing time, when the number of children watching television is highest\textsuperscript{14}. Therefore, the current restrictions are not enough to protect children from unhealthy food marketing on television, which is why the government has committed to bringing in a 9pm watershed on junk food adverts.

• Commercial TV exposure is linked to BMI – this relationship can be explained by increased children’s purchase requests and consumption in response to exposure to advertising\textsuperscript{15}.

• The criteria for a causal link between TV marketing and obesity has been met. This means that the available research provides compelling evidence of a cause and effect relationship between food marketing on TV and obesity\textsuperscript{16}.

• Exposure to advertising for food delivery services, digital advertising and advertising in recreational environments is associated with increased odds of obesity in adults\textsuperscript{17}.


• Food marketing influence is exacerbated by the powerful creative techniques utilised by brands to appeal to children\textsuperscript{18} which succeed through increasing brand preferences\textsuperscript{19}.

**Digital advertising**

This form of advertising has been documented less than television due to ethical challenges in data collection\textsuperscript{20}. However from the growing body of existing evidence, it is clear that:

• Digital marketing increases the memorability and likeability of brands in children, as a result of more emotional, entertaining experiences\textsuperscript{21}.
• Influencer adverts, such as those on YouTube, are found to affect snack intake in children on a similar scale to TV ads.
  o One study tested the effectiveness of an advertising disclosure (when an influencer clearly states they are advertising a product), and found advertising awareness increased in children, however so did snack intake\textsuperscript{22}.
• Marketing of healthy foods by influencers has been found to have no impact on intake\textsuperscript{23}.
• Advergames/digital games influence children’s food intake\textsuperscript{24}25.
• Children were more likely to rate brands as “cool” if they played an advergame promoting the brand compared to those who viewed an advert on TV for the same brand\textsuperscript{26}.
• When comparing healthy and unhealthy social media posts, adolescents were more likely to share unhealthy posts, rated peers more positively when they had unhealthy posts in their feed, recalled more unhealthy food brands, and viewed unhealthy advertising posts for longer\textsuperscript{27}.

Potential impact of a junk food advertising ban.

Exposure to 4.4 minutes of food advertising on TV was found to on average increase a child’s food consumption by 60kcals, whilst playing an online advergame with food cues for five minutes would increase average consumption by 53.4kcals\textsuperscript{28}.

A UK modelling study estimated that if all advertising for foods high in fat, sugar and salt before 9pm was withdrawn, the number of children with obesity in the UK would be reduced by 4.6% (equivalent to 40,000 children)\textsuperscript{29}.

There is no direct research that we know of examining the impact of an online junk food advertising ban, however a study of alcohol advertising conducted in the US found that individuals were 8% less likely to say they would purchase an alcoholic beverage if they resided in states with an alcohol advertising ban. However for consumers exposed to online advertising, this gap narrowed to 3% \textsuperscript{30}. This suggests that without online restrictions, any effectiveness of other marketing restrictions is likely to be undermined.

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