



# HEALTHY VOICES

youth driving change

WORLD  
~~OBESITY~~



# Digital Deception

The Marketing of Unhealthy Food:  
Building a Youth-Led Response

**“ There is unequivocal evidence that childhood obesity is influenced by marketing of foods<sup>1</sup> ”**

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# Introduction

Marketing is a way for companies to attract customers and develop brand loyalty for the products and services they offer. Marketers send targeted commercial messages to potential customers in all industries to increase sales. However, food marketing through digital media (campaigns that use computer, phone, television, or other devices to reach customers) is of concern, especially to children.

One international study found that foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) were promoted more heavily than healthier options, those higher in fibre, vitamins, and minerals.<sup>2</sup> Another study of YouTube food advertisements directed at children in Malaysia found that non-

healthy foods were most frequent.<sup>3</sup> In Canada, a study of the 10 most popular websites among adolescents found that among the 14.4 million food advertisements, cakes, cookies, and ice cream were most prominently featured. Researchers in the United Kingdom found that “that the use of persuasive marketing techniques to promote unhealthy foods was extensive in (television) broadcasting popular with children despite regulations”.<sup>4</sup> In Chile, the researchers found that 85% of the advertising directed at children was for unhealthy food.<sup>5</sup> And the list goes on with many examples of techniques and methods used to market unhealthy food that unfortunately have yet to be properly regulated.



# What are the different common forms of marketing?

Companies use persuasive methods to market foods, and most of us are not equipped with the media literacy to distinguish marketing from other content, making us all vulnerable to persuasive marketing.<sup>6</sup> Marketing techniques include using attractive child-friendly product packaging and toys,<sup>2</sup> appealing mascots, celebrity endorsements,<sup>4</sup> product placements in popular movies and television shows.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly, Internet and mobile marketing has been used in addition to television advertising, especially among children between 12 and 15 years old.<sup>8</sup>

Digital marketing through the Internet and mobile applications is becoming the most sophisticated form of marketing because it can be integrated into web surfing experience.<sup>7</sup> Internet users generate data that marketers use to develop targeted and highly persuasive messages to children. In many instances, marketing can also be interactive, which increases the level of engagement between marketers and children. One example is 'advergaming' defined as "the practice of using games, particularly Web-based games, to promote an organisation's brand or product."<sup>9</sup> A study conducted in Australia revealed that 28.6% of websites contained advergaming, with most of these websites targeting HFSS foods.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1. Appealing mascots on cereal packages



Figure 2 Celebrity endorsement of products



Figure 3. Example of product placement in TV shows



## Why do brands tend to target children?

Many companies market to children to develop preferences for products and brand loyalty early in life and for these children to influence their parents' purchasing decisions.<sup>11</sup> Parents have traditionally been able to limit exposure to digital marketing by controlling access to the television.

But with social media, online games, broadcast messaging, and other applications, children are bombarded, and parents may find it difficult to control what content their children see. Further, parents are often unaware of the online strategies used to market HFSS foods.<sup>1</sup>

### What are the different forms of marketing regulations?

Marketing of HFSS foods has been recognised as a risk for obesity,<sup>1</sup> and thus restricting the marketing of these foods is a policy priority for the World Health Organization and many national governments. Government responses to address this include:

- Laws or rules, referred to as **statutory regulations**, which is the "most effective form of regulation to reduce exposure to child-targeted HFSS food marketing" because these regulations can be enforced by law.<sup>12</sup>
- Guidelines have the same purpose as statutory regulations, but are not mandated by law, and are thus referred to as **non-statutory**.
- **Self-regulation** is the weakest option as companies volunteer to adhere to regulations, but there is no formal enforcement.<sup>13</sup> Though, it is the easiest to initiate and therefore is the most common.

Marketing regulations have been identified as cost-effective policies. One study found "that both food advertising to children and mass media health promotion campaigns had positive cost-effectiveness ratios and predicted to be cost-saving in multiple countries".<sup>14</sup> One study in Australia found that restrictions on food advertising is an effective tool for children's health, however, the food industry opposes these measures.<sup>15</sup>

# How are companies marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the time of the pandemic, when many children and adolescents spent more time on electronic devices, marketers have taken advantage of the opportunity to increase their reach. Food companies have used promotions and sponsorships to associate their products with positive responses to COVID-19 that are widely circulated through digital marketing. Beverage companies have donated sugary drinks to promote COVID-19 testing, processed food to health workers, and offer free or discounted fast food to the public for those who follow health guidelines. Specific examples include:

## Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola gave 1.3 billion Uganda Shillings (US \$365,000) to the Ministry of Health to support families affected by the pandemic.

## Nestle

Nestle donated unhealthy commodities in Trinidad and Tobago to human service organisations, such as cancer hospices, food banks, and recovery centers for substance abuse. In Mexico Nestle donated branded food products that were high in fat, sugar and salt in response to COVID-19.

## Krispy Kreme

Krispy Kreme offered healthcare and other frontline workers a 25% off a dozen donuts in their stores.

## Burger King

Burger King in Brazil offered a free burger for individuals who stay at home during lockdown periods using geo-location technology.

## Case Example: Marketing Regulations in Mexico



According to UNICEF, "Mexico is the largest consumer of ultra-processed products, including sugary drinks, in Latin America", which is the result of a "lack of access to fresh and healthy foods, the aggressive marketing of food products directed at children and high exposure to ultra-processed food in homes, schools and markets".<sup>16</sup>

In 2016, the Mexican government declared the obesity epidemic as a national emergency. One part of the response was to regulate the marketing, packaging, and labelling of these unhealthy products.

These efforts include banning cartoon characters, mascots, and celebrities from the packages of foods that are high in sugar, fat, salt, and/or calories. These products also are required to have warning labels notifying consumers of the product's contents so that they can make more-informed choices. Interactive features, such as digital content for downloading and games, have also been banned.



# What can you do to advocate for change?

Through coordinated activities, everyone can play a role in promoting behaviours and policies that support positive choices and behaviours to encourage healthier lifestyles. In the case of the digital marketing of food, we need more people to advocate for measures to control advertising and promote good practices for the health and good nutrition of children and young people. The section below contains tips to plan an advocacy campaign and advocate with governments to restrict marketing of unhealthy products.<sup>17</sup>

**1**

**Identify the issue that you want to focus on, e.g., restricting the marketing of HFSS to children on the Internet. It might be useful to conduct research to understand the scope and extent of the issue.**

a. Suggested guiding research questions:

- i. Which populations are most effected, how are they effected, why does the marketing of these foods continue, and what is needed to address them?
- ii. How prevalent is the marketing of HFSS and what ages are most targeted, what are the methods used, and how are the behaviours of children affected by these marketing tactics?
- iii. Who is leading these marketing techniques?
- iv. What is the local legal context and how can it be changed to limit marketing?

b. To get started, consult:

- i. Existing resources (secondary data), such as the World Obesity Federation's policy dossier on Digital Marketing and others (see below).
- ii. Consult with local experts from organisations who have worked on these issues.
- iii. Collect information from your stakeholders (primary data) for example, through interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and/or focus groups.

**2**

**Work with your team to set goals and objectives, e.g., increase understanding among stakeholder groups about the strategies and effects of marketing HFSS, change behaviour to a healthier diet, and change policies that promote health.**

**3****Develop an implementation plan:**

- a. Identify who will do what, by when, and to what purpose
- b. Allocate the budget lines for each activity and other support you need (human and materials resources)
- c. Identify the resistance you might face in restricting the advertising of HFSS and develop a strategy to overcome the resistance.

**4**

**Create a stakeholder map to identify the beneficiaries of your advocacy work and to identify allies who can support your advocacy. This can include parent groups, businesses, news outlets, schools, youth groups and civil society organisations.**

**5**

**Create a communication plan and develop key messages that are clear, supported by fact and engage your target audience. Consider the following:**

- a. Provide a snappy, attention grabbing opener
- b. Provide fast facts to frame the problem
- c. Provide a solution
- d. Finish with a call to action

**6**

**Create a plan to track progress: are activities on time, on budget, reaching their audiences, and affecting stakeholders?**



# What resources can we use to get started?

World Obesity has a resource on **Digital Marketing** which includes research and studies, statements, and case studies to support advocacy and program planning.

This resource from **Youth Leaders for Nutrition** provides further guidance on advocacy.

Here are some resources from the World Health Organization (WHO) on **Nutrition for adolescent health** and **Guideline: implementing effective actions for improving adolescent nutrition**.

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Healthy Voices provides young people with the knowledge and advocacy tools to promote their positive engagement to address health-related challenges. Owned by World Obesity and born out of the work of two EU-level projects – STOP and CO-CREATE – it is an educational and capacity building platform and provides a space for blogs and discussions. It aims to provide young people with some tools and expertise about how to become actively involved in shaping their environments and become agents of change.

More info on the about this site page at [www.worldobesity.org/healthy-voices/about-this-site](http://www.worldobesity.org/healthy-voices/about-this-site)



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