

Junk food marketers found targeting children on social media without repercussions

June 17 2020, by Gary Sacks, Evelyn Suk Yi Looi



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In [Australia](#) and [around the world](#), junk food companies are targeting children on social media.

In our [new study](#), we found most major social [media](#) platforms have restrictions on the [advertising](#) of tobacco, alcohol and gambling to children.

But there are hardly any such restrictions in place around [junk food](#).

Children are exposed to junk food marketing everywhere

Globally, we've seen [persistent calls](#) to protect children from exposure to the marketing of unhealthy [food](#) and drinks.

This recognizes the [harmful effects](#) of junk food marketing on children.

While [some governments](#) have adopted legislation

to restrict kids' exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods, these laws typically don't apply to social media.

Some [food companies](#) have voluntarily pledged to restrict their marketing of unhealthy foods to children. But most of these pledges are narrow in scope and [full of loopholes](#) that allow junk food marketing to proliferate.

As a result, children are [heavily exposed](#) to unhealthy food marketing, including on TV, online and through outdoor advertising.

Junk food marketing on social media

In Australia, a recent [study](#) found almost half of children aged 10-12, and almost 90% of those aged 13-16, were active on social media.

Junk food brands target children on social media through direct advertising, sponsored posts, and by integrating their brand into engaging and entertaining content.

This includes establishing promotional relationships with online "influencers," who then promote the brand as part of the content they post.

In one recent [study](#), more than half of Australian kids who were active on Facebook had "liked" a fast food brand, which subscribes them to its content. A similar proportion of kids had "liked" a soft drink brand.

Another [study](#) showed teenagers engaged with posts advertising junk food more often than they engaged with posts promoting healthy food.

There's also [evidence](#) that when kids are exposed to unhealthy food marketing on social media, it

increases the chance they'll consume the promoted product over an alternative brand of the same type of snack.

Social media policies on junk food advertising

In our [study](#), we focused on the 16 largest social media platforms globally. These included platforms popular with children, such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and Facebook.

We examined each platform's advertising policies related to food and drinks.

McDonald's Australia advertising on Facebook, 2020. Author provided

We found none of the social media platforms have comprehensive restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy foods to children.

YouTube Kids, a platform popular with children under 13, does ban direct junk food marketing. But [media reports](#) have shown children could still be exposed to junk food brands through product placement and promotional videos on the platform.



Other advertising policies

We also looked at each [platform's](#) advertising policies related to other areas affecting [public health](#).

We found most of the social media platforms were prepared to take a stand against tobacco, alcohol and gambling ads targeting kids.

In many cases, their policies in these areas are aligned with government regulations. But [in some cases](#) they go further.

Facebook and Instagram also [recently implemented](#) a ban on advertising diet and weight-loss products as well as cosmetic procedures to users under 18. These policies are substantially [more restrictive](#) than most government policies.

Notably, current social media advertising policies don't completely eliminate children's exposure to ads in these areas. For example, children still report seeing [gambling ads](#) on social media.

Although these policies need to be more comprehensive, they do signal social media platforms' willingness to take action to protect children from the advertising of unhealthy products.

Social media platforms have an opportunity

Social media platforms have demonstrated they recognize the important role they can play as corporate citizens.

There's now a real opportunity for them to take concerted action to reduce children's exposure to junk food marketing.

In doing so, they can follow the lead of children's entertainment networks, such as [Disney](#) and [Nickelodeon](#), that have taken steps to restrict advertising of junk food to children.

In line with [global public health recommendations](#), social media platforms should adopt junk food advertising restrictions that:

1. apply to all children and adolescents aged under 18
2. cover a wide range of marketing techniques (for example, direct advertising, sponsored posts, and brand relationships with "influencers")
3. use a comprehensive definition of unhealthy foods and drinks, based on [government-endorsed criteria](#).

We need global regulations

Public health groups have consistently highlighted that food industry self-regulation in the area of junk food marketing has proven [ineffective](#). As such, there are [strong global recommendations](#) for comprehensive national and international government regulation.

But the potential role of social media platforms in regulating junk food marketing has largely escaped attention.

While we await further government regulation, [social media](#) platforms can take immediate action to protect [children](#) from the marketing tactics of junk food advertisers. This would be a critical contribution to efforts to improve young people's diets and address the growing problem of obesity worldwide.

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Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: Junk food marketers found targeting children on social media without repercussions (2020, June 17) retrieved 8 December 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-junk-food-children-social-media.html>

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