

Digital Food and Beverage Marketing to Kids

Children have increased access to digital devices and spend significantly more time on them than they did seven years ago.¹ In 2022, nearly 95 percent of teens had access to a smartphone and the proportion of teens who said they are almost constantly online nearly doubled to 46 percent compared to 2014-15.² The growth of online platforms and digital devices has led many food and beverage companies to invest increasingly in online advertisements. For example, in 2019, fast food brands spent \$119 million on digital advertising in the U.S., a 74 percent increase from 2012.³ Innovative digital ad techniques, such as influencer marketing, on social media platforms are unlike traditional forms of advertisements on television and can be particularly hard for children to identify and understand. Many food and beverage advertisements online depict unhealthy food,⁴ and these ads can increase children's requests for and selection of unhealthy foods.⁵ Policymakers and advocates should work together to promote regulations that protect children from targeted food and beverage marketing.

Kids frequently use online platforms

- In a 2021 survey, 84 percent of teens ages 13 to 18 years old and 38 percent of children ages 8 to 12 reported to have used social media at least once.⁶ Sixty-two percent of teens ages 13 to 18 years old and 18 percent of children ages 8 to 12 reported using social media every day.⁷
- YouTube is the most frequently used social media platform amongst teens with 95 percent saying they use it. TikTok follows in popularity with 67 percent of teens saying they use it.⁸
- Children as young as 8 years old use social media, despite users being required to state they are at least 13 years old on many sites.⁹
 - In a survey of parents, 49 percent reported that their children ages 10-12 and 32 percent reported that their children ages 7-9 used social media in the past 6 months.¹⁰
 - Eighty percent of parents with children 11 or younger report allowing their child to watch YouTube and 53 percent of these parents allow their child to watch YouTube at least once a day.¹¹

Children are vulnerable to advertisements, especially those on online platforms

While almost everyone can be influenced by advertisements, research shows that children are particularly vulnerable to marketing messages.^{12,13} The ability to recognize that advertisements seek to influence your emotions, opinions, or behaviors is referred to as 'advertisement literacy.'

- Young brains are still developing, which means children's ability to perceive and analyze information is still forming. As a result, their advertisement literacy is underdeveloped compared to adults.¹⁴
- Research shows that this underdeveloped advertisement literacy makes children and adolescents particularly vulnerable to ad messaging, including online advertisements, and especially when it is in non-traditional forms such as advergames (a game that uses advertising techniques to promote a product or service¹⁵) because it is harder for children to discern the difference between entertainment content and advertisement content.¹⁶
- Children under the age of 8 are not able to understand marketers' intent to sell and therefore perceive advertisements as true and unbiased.¹⁷ While older youth may better understand the persuasive intent of advertising, they may lack the ability to resist immediate gratification and may exhibit impulsive behaviors.¹⁸

- Research shows that youth have a difficult time identifying ads on social media and recognizing the potential intent behind the ads.
 - A 2021 study found that adolescents consistently incorrectly identified traditional ads as Instagram ads when ads were removed from their context, which suggests the artistic quality of Instagram ads may not be perceived as marketing.¹⁹
 - A 2021 report found that two-thirds of teens between the ages of 12 and 15 were able to recognize non-traditional social media advertisements from influencers were sponsored by a brand and may be biased.²⁰

Children are primarily seeing marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages online

- In one study, 72 percent of kids and adolescents reported exposure to food or beverage marketing on a variety of social media apps; 44 percent of ads seen were for fast food and 9 percent were for sugar-sweetened beverages. The most promoted brands were McDonalds, Starbucks, and PepsiCo.²¹
- A study of 400 children-influencer YouTube videos found that 65 percent of videos had at least one-food related appearance and 38 percent of videos had a branded food appearance. Of the videos featuring branded food products, 91 percent featured unhealthy food or beverage products.²²
- A study examining online learning platforms found ads for food and beverage products from Kellogg’s cereals, McDonald’s Happy Meals, and Kraft Heinz Lunchables on ABCya.com. Researchers also identified other food ads on FunBrain.com and Poptropica.com.²³

Children’s behavior is impacted by viewing food advertisements online

- Even brief exposures to unhealthy online advertisements impact children’s brand recognition abilities and create positive association towards advertised brands.²⁴
 - A 2019 study found that children who saw food brands’ advertisements were able to recognize the brand afterwards,²⁵ which could potentially increase brand loyalty and purchasing choices in the future.
- A systematic review found marketing of foods and beverages through social media and advergaming promotes children’s requests for, and choice of (both hypothetical and actual) foods.²⁶
 - Of the four studies included in the review that examined the influence of social media on actual food or beverage intake, the promotion of unhealthy snacks by influencers led to higher snack intake in three studies and had no effect on vegetable intake in another study.
 - Of the seven experimental studies included in the review that examined the



effects of unhealthy advergames on food or beverage consumption, exposure to unhealthy advergames significantly influenced children’s energy-dense snack consumption in four studies. Exposure to any food marketing resulted in increased consumption of the marketed product in one study.

Non-traditional advertisements on social media are a new tool for food and beverage companies

Popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok all contain advertisements, both through advertisement posts made by brands and influencer paid promotions. These new forms of marketing through social media are unlike traditional forms of advertisements seen on television; online platforms embed advertising to make it indistinguishable from other content and allow for targeting of specific populations and individuals.



Image 2

- Brands marketing on social media can embed advertisements in the form of posts on timelines or feeds on a platform. Posts sponsored by advertisers adopt a nearly identical format as unsponsored posts from individual users.^{27,28} Thus, someone who is not careful to search for indications of sponsorship might not realize they have just viewed an ad or might even mistakenly think it was posted by someone they chose to follow (Image 1²⁹).
- Brands also employ social media ‘influencers’ to promote their products. This subtler form of advertisements integrates brands and products in the content created by popular social media users. While other ads on social media might be easier to spot due to placement or disclosure of sponsorship, influencer marketing can be harder to identify as marketing due to the fact that a post an influencer creates for a paid sponsor often looks like a typical unsponsored post (Image 2³⁰).
- Social media also allows for a degree of targeting that is unprecedented in traditional forms of media like television, radio, or print. For example, Meta, the company that owns Instagram and Facebook, provides advertisement services that allow brands to target audiences for embedded advertisements by gender, age, location, and language.³¹

The Federal Trade Commission can take action against influencer marketing

- The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) states that influencers are legally obliged to disclose when they are promoting a brand because of a financial, employment, personal, or familial relationship; this includes receiving free or discounted products and services.^{32,33}
- The same regulation states that disclosures must be ‘clear and conspicuous’ and cannot be hidden amongst a group of hashtags or done with obscure language; video endorsements must include the disclosure in both the video and caption.^{34,35}
- Despite this regulation, there seems to be a rampant lack of ‘clear and conspicuous’ disclosures in social media influencer endorsements for foods and beverages. For example, after an investigation by the Washington Post,³⁶ the FTC sent warning letters to the American Beverage Association and the Canadian Sugar Association, in addition to two dozen TikTok influencers, due to the lack of adequate disclosure on sponsored posts promoting the safety of the artificial sweetener aspartame or the consumption of sugar-containing products.³⁷

- In 2023, the FTC updated its Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsement and Testimonials in Advertising and acknowledged that endorsements in advertisements aimed at children are of particular concern because research indicates disclosures may not work for younger children.³⁸ Research has shown that certain types of disclosures, such as visual disclosures, may be more effective in activating children’s recognition, understanding, and evaluation of sponsored content as advertising.³⁹ However, a systematic review and meta-analysis of experimental studies found that children’s understanding of the purpose of advertising did not limit favorable attitudes towards advertised products.⁴⁰

Recommendations

The FTC should further regulate social media marketing and digital advertisements from food and beverage companies to protect children from unfair marketing. It should also take steps to ensure its rules requiring clear disclosure of paid promotions are implemented and enforced on online platforms. Further, more research should be done on the impact of sponsorship disclosures on children’s brand attitudes, preferences, purchase requests, and behavior in order to inform the FTC’s guidance on disclosures in advertising aimed at children. Policy makers should prioritize legislation that prevents companies from targeting children with advertisements on digital spaces, such as policies that would limit online platforms’ abilities to collect information from users and deliver highly personalized ads.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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