Staying healthy in a fast-changing world

Young people's perceptions of how food marketing and wider environmental pressures influence their ability to be healthy

March 2022

Together we will beat cancer

CANCER RESEARCH UK

Foreword

Hi, I'm Yumna. I am a 17-year-old youth advocate and campaigner, living in Birmingham, committed to disrupting systems that are not equipped to serve us.

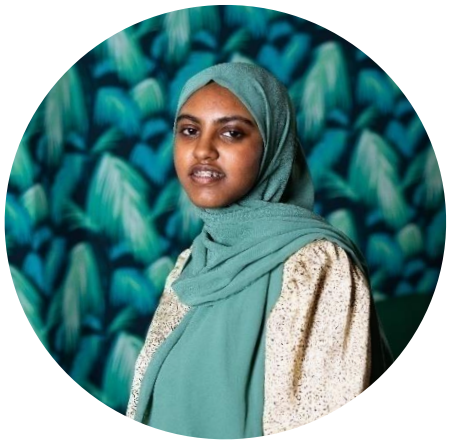
To change systems externally, we must change our mindsets internally. If you compare the ever-shrinking budgets for public health professionals to the large sums being poured into persuasive advertising by massive companies, it is no wonder children's health is being affected, as we are lured into buying more fast food. From a walk down the aisle in a supermarket, or on my way to school on the bus, these manipulative tactics must stop. Our built environment plays a part too, with socio-economically deprived areas and communities of colour finding it more difficult to access local, healthy and fresh food, due to factors like income inequality.

In 2020, the UK Government made a promise to put children's health first and introduce legislation to restrict the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and drink. It's time they followed through with these crucial measures.

It will also be important to ensure that the rise of food delivery apps like Uber Eats and Deliveroo and social platforms like TikTok, do not allow for companies to find new ways to target children.

I live in one of the most deprived areas of the city, with high unemployment rates, high levels of food insecurity and a lack of opportunities for young people, which makes it difficult for children and young people to thrive in life. I have seen the effects of this myself. It is difficult to access fresh, nutritious, affordable and sustainably cultivated food, which could lead to a lack of focus in school and even contribute to increasing mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and panic disorders.

We are often seen as just consumers. But we must be seen more than that as people with specific constraints and pressures in our lives that influence what we will likely eat and not eat. We must hold governments and businesses to account for the impacts of their policies and practices on local and global food security. Healthier eating should be the easier choice. Our food systems need to be strengthened worldwide to result in a dramatic shift in changing diets, health outcomes and adapt to the current climate crisis. Together, we can achieve transformational system change by listening, learning, applying, embedding and reflecting on the work we are doing.



Yumna Hussen, Chair of Birmingham Youth Board for BiteBack 2030

Executive Summary

Pushing towards wider changes to tackle obesity

This report has been developed from the Youth Obesity Policy Survey (YOPS) which is the third in a series of qualitative studies carried out with 11-19-year-olds across the UK. This survey examines the influence of high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) advertising on children and young people's perceptions and dietary choices [1]. Our 2019 wave showed that young people felt the marketing of HFSS food and drinks was pervasive and targeted at them, and young people were supportive of protective measures against this marketing [1]. Since the last report, the UK Government have announced a new obesity strategy, committing to a 9 p.m. watershed on HFSS advertising on TV and the near total end of HFSS marketing online, expected in early 2023. Restrictions on locations and volume-based promotions in stores are expected to come into effect in late 2022 [2]. These policies will be a crucial step in protecting young people and improving their health. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about new pressures for young people to try to live healthy lifestyles, by impacting their mental health, increasing snacking and limiting their ability to exercise [3].

Overweight and obesity is the second biggest cause of cancer in the UK [4]. The UK Government have begun taking crucial steps to protect young people, but it is vital that momentum and progress continue across all nations. It is also important to progress the national efforts to level up the health of the nation by continuing to support individuals to have a healthy lifestyle, and providing them with the tools they need to maintain this [5, 6]. To ensure progress is maintained, it is important to monitor how young people's dietary perceptions and attitudes are impacted by food marketing, and broaden our understanding of wider determinants of health, to understand what other environmental factors make it easier or harder for young people to be healthy.

The obesity prevalence gap among children continues to widen, with children from the most deprived areas more than twice as likely to be obese as those from the least deprived areas [7]. Over 2 million children experience moderate or severe food insecurity, defined as the inability to afford or have access to food to make up a healthy diet [8]. Inequalities are a key driver of obesity [9], and it's important to recognise that there are unique challenges facing those from more deprived communities. Therefore, we designed this study to hear the views of the many young people experiencing this.

Key findings:

- Young people's recall of high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) marketing remains high, and they highlighted new sources of advertising, including TikTok and food delivery apps.
- Young people have high recognition of HFSS brands.
- Young people broadly support marketing restrictions of HFSS products.
- Young people gave tangible examples of marketing influencing their food choices and purchases.
- Young people highlighted the impact of income inequality, and of mental health, as barriers to living a healthier life.

Key Findings

Young people[i] are exposed to and influenced by the fast-changing marketing landscape for HFSS products

Recall of HFSS marketing remains high, with TikTok and food delivery apps highlighted as new sources of HFSS advertising

Young people recalled high exposure to the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks and recalled seeing this marketing on the same platforms that were reported in the 2019 iteration [10]. However, TikTok and food delivery apps (e.g., Just Eat and Uber Eats) were mentioned for the first time. Young people gave examples of both paid-for and brand-owned advertising within TikTok and other users posting about HFSS products. For food delivery apps, young people spoke about pop-up adverts and promotions offering free delivery and increasing the accessibility of purchasing HFSS products. The emergence of these new sources of advertising highlights the fast-changing nature of social media platforms and HFSS marketing strategies, and the need for regulations that can be future-proofed against such developments.

Young people have high recognition of HFSS brands

This current iteration included a brand recognition exercise for the first time. Young people across all age groups continued to show a high brand recall, identifying the company names of over 10 out of 12 logo snippets they were shown. Even when they couldn't name the brand, young people could still identify that they were associated with HFSS products.

Lockdown had varied effects on young people's exposure to HFSS advertising and HFSS consumption

Differing opinions were expressed by young people on how the lockdowns due to COVID-19 had impacted their HFSS advertising exposure. It was felt that brands were more heavily marketed on social media during lockdown, and some young people said spending more time on their phones and devices meant they saw more advertising. Others reported less HFSS advertising exposure, particularly out-of-home advertising due to the restrictions in being able to go outside. 17-19-year-olds, with more independence over their purchasing and meal choices, reported increased HFSS consumption due to boredom and staying at home, whereas younger age groups believed that they had reduced control over their purchasing choices.

> *"Yes, because in lockdown I just thought, oh, I'm in the house anyway, so I'll just pig out. I'm at the point now where it's like, oh, I shouldn't have done that, but adverts keep coming up so I'm just like, oh, should I? No, I'll just leave it." (S01, aged 17-19)*

[i] In reference to young people who participated in this study.

Young people gave explicit examples of how marketing influenced their food choices, particularly amongst the younger age group

In 2019, despite strongly expressing the opinion that advertising did not have an impact on them, young people still gave examples of HFSS marketing influencing their food choices. This was seen again in this wave; young people gave explicit examples of HFSS marketing influencing their own purchasing or what they asked their parents to purchase, particularly in the younger age groups.

Young people broadly support marketing restrictions of HFSS products

On the whole, young people were supportive of forthcoming restrictions related to the marketing and sale of HFSS products and considered the benefits to public health to offer a net positive impact. In line with previous iterations of this study [1], young people expressed concerns about the ubiquity of HFSS marketing, and called for a range of changes to be made to restrict the marketing of HFSS products.

> *"The thing is, it will have to be quite big if it's going to deter all these big companies from actually sticking to the rules because obviously, they can afford to pay a small fine, so it's going to have to be really significant." (E04, aged 17-19)*

...and whilst supportive of these restrictions, further questions were raised

Some young people were concerned that high levels of brand awareness might limit the restrictions' impact on young people's consumption habits. Young people also emphasised the importance of addressing the underlying problems, such as income inequality and access to healthier foods. Moreover, some sympathy was expressed for brands being able to promote themselves, particularly online.

Other marketing tactics such as 'health washing' and packaging design also target and influence young people

'Health washing' marketing tactics influenced perceptions of healthiness but had complex impacts on young people

'Health washing' refers to advertising or packaging which employs marketing tactics that make a product appear to be healthier than it actually is [10]. When shown 'health washing' examples, young people were able to recognise that this marketing was different from HFSS advertising and perceived these products as healthier based on both nutritional cues (e.g., words such as free range, natural, protein, fruit, fibre) and non-nutritional cues (such as showing 'healthy looking' people in the adverts). However, young people, particularly the

older age groups, were critical of the accuracy of these health claims and found the products to be unappealing. However, where the brands were already established as marketing and selling HFSS products, perceived impact was more complex. While young people were more likely to want to buy the products as a result of the advert, it was not always clear if this was in relation to the specific product shown or the more famous HFSS products from the brand's portfolio.

> *"To be honest, I think it's healthy and you can see in the video, it's showing organic stuff." (W01, aged 11-13, G&B)*

Young people proposed reforms on packaging and labelling of HFSS products

Design elements on packaging shaped young people's perceptions and appreciation of HFSS products. For example, young people were drawn towards packaging examples which included brighter as opposed to neutral colour schemes. Young people expressed similar concerns in this wave as in 2019, perceiving HFSS marketing to be misleading and focused on positive rather than adverse effects in product promotion. Young people proposed changes which included reducing the attractiveness of HFSS products and having clearer product labelling.

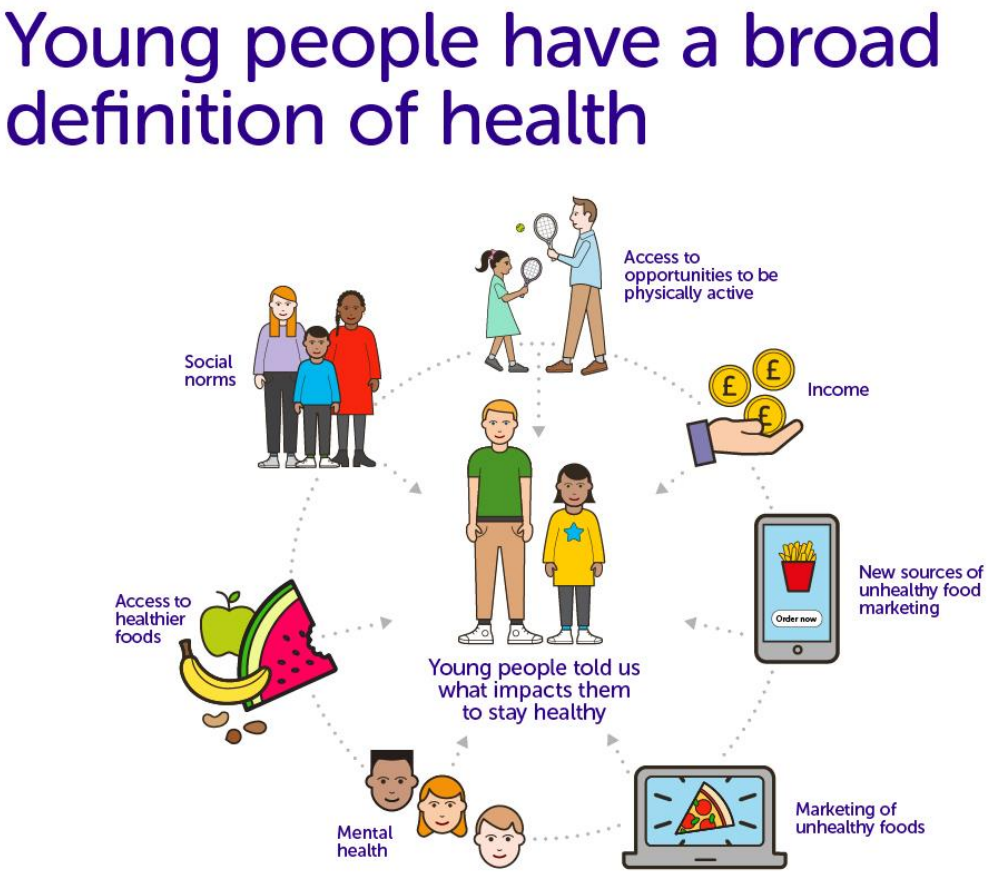
Young people highlighted mental health and systemic barriers such as low income as factors making it harder to be healthier

Young people had a holistic view of what it means to be healthy

In general, young people gave a broad definition of health and described the ways in which different elements of health are interlinked. Mental health, exercise and a healthy diet were identified to be key elements of a healthy lifestyle. Positive mental health was linked with being important for self-care, whilst a balanced diet, which involved moderating HFSS consumption, was also important. A summary of the factors that have been identified by young people to impact on their ability to stay healthy is shown in Figure 1.

> *"I think the basis of being healthy is to have a healthy mind and a healthy body, but that doesn't have to look a certain way." (E04, aged 17-19)*

Figure 1: Overview of the factors young people highlighted as important for them to live a healthy lifestyle.



Low income was a key barrier to being healthy, by limiting access to healthy food and exercise facilities and influencing the burden of worrying about money

Income inequality was widely discussed by young people as a factor which affected the prospects of a healthier lifestyle. Like the 2019 findings, low income was perceived to be a barrier to eating a healthy diet. It was also identified as a barrier to accessing local food outlets which sold healthy food options. High prices for memberships of exercise facilities were also identified as a barrier towards making exercise less accessible. Low income was also associated with poor psychological outcomes such as stress and was seen to prevent families from being able to prioritise health in their lifestyles.

Young people called for support via school and outdoor facilities to help them live a healthier lifestyle

The participants highlighted possible changes in schools that could help support young people. These included providing healthier food options or expanding the health education curriculum to include broader topics including nutrition, mental health and eating disorders.

Young people also suggested improving accessibility to exercise through more affordable gym memberships and information on ways to exercise without cost.

Mental health was seen to underpin and interact with other elements of health

Mental health was an ongoing theme that was very prevalent in this current iteration. Young people highlighted the ways in which low mood had made healthy living more difficult and how this impacted their daily activities. Young people also identified disordered eating and the impact of poor interpersonal relationships on their wellbeing as barriers to healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle. Finally, poor mental health also limited personal motivation, which was an important factor for young people to eat healthily and exercise.

Societal pressures, including interpersonal relationships, could act as both a barrier to and facilitator of a healthy lifestyle

Young people indicated that their ability to live a healthy lifestyle was influenced by the food choices made by their family and friends. At home, healthy cooked meals, rather than HFSS foods, were identified to support a healthier lifestyle. Meanwhile, out of home, young people felt under pressure to make the same food choices as their friends, regardless of whether this was healthy or unhealthy. Overall, young people were more likely to consume unhealthy foods out of home with friends.

"The people around you, your circle, all your mates an all they would determine your future, for example, if they're doing bad stuff then you're going to end up doing that. If they're around good stuff you're going to end up doing that." (NI02, aged 14-16)

COVID-19 lockdowns were mostly viewed as detrimental to a healthy lifestyle

During periods of lockdown, over half of young people reported experiencing mental health issues, perceiving the pandemic as having a long-term negative impact on their mental health**.** Young people described how lockdown had led to the development of poor mental health and increased food consumption, alongside a reduction in time being spent on exercise due to restrictions to indoor and outdoor facilities.

"I think COVID has messed up everyone's mental health completely." (NI03, aged 17-19)

What should the UK Government do?

Prioritise the work of the Cabinet-level Health Promotion Taskforce

The UK Government must not lose its focus on securing the gains made to address childhood obesity and to level up health across the UK.

CRUK welcomes the newly created Cabinet-level Health Promotion Taskforce and encourages continued work to ensure oversight of the delivery of the Government's obesity and prevention commitments and co-ordination of the development of the obesity strategy's next stages.

Implement proposed HFSS marketing legislation in full and without further delay

CRUK supports the UK Government in introducing planned restrictions on the advertising and promotions of unhealthy food and drink, and calls for the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to take forward similar measures.

Address potential loopholes and displacement from proposed HFSS marketing regulation

The digital landscape is fast evolving. The UK Government must task Ofcom, as the regulatory backstop, to undertake an annual review to monitor the use and impact of different and emerging types of advertising and platforms - including brands' own social media profiles, brand advertising and food delivery apps - on young people's dietary habits and exposure to HFSS advertising and consider whether further interventions are needed.

Address other packaging and promotional techniques that target young people

'Child friendly packaging' used by HFSS products influences young people's preferences [11]. CRUK therefore supports the Obesity Health Alliance's calls to address these promotional techniques, including the use of cartoons, brand equity and licensed characters, along with celebrities and sports stars.

Address the wider barriers that prevent young people from living healthier lives

If the UK Government wishes to deliver on its pledge to level up for all groups in society, it must:

- Restore the public health grant to its pre-2015/16 real terms per-capita value and increase it to meet future pressure. An estimated £1.4 billion per year is needed by 2024/25 to address cost pressures and demand levels. This will ensure young people across England have access to services they need to support their mental and physical health. Funding should also be channelled into the local communities that need it most.
- Undertake further research – including by governments across the UK - to better understand policy measures to tackle deprivation and mental health and their relationship to childhood obesity.

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Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2020/21, we committed £388m towards cancer research. Our ambition is to accelerate progress and see 3 in 4 patients surviving their cancer by 2034.

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