



The HFSS beat goes on

Awareness of marketing for high fat, salt and sugar foods and the association with consumption in the 2017 and 2019 Youth Obesity Policy Surveys

December 2020

Together we will beat cancer



Foreword

My name is Dev, I'm 15 and live in Leicester.

The internet is vast, unregulated and sadly flooded with ads for unhealthy food. The unfortunate reality is that not much has changed to safeguard young people's health digitally between 2017 and 2019.

This report comes at a time when the UK Government is wrapping up a consultation on their proposal for a total restriction on all junk food advertising online. As industry spokespeople and shadowy think tanks rage against an initiative which would improve children's health, we hope this report gives you a clear view from the ground.

Advertising of unhealthy food is everywhere - including social media, TV and YouTube, where young people spend their free time - making them an easy target for these massive companies. This intentional targeting of teens must stop; and companies must start putting more emphasis on other healthier options.

Why does all this matter so much to me? Because it's about my health! How can anyone easily be or stay healthy when our whole digital environment is flooded to promote foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt?

My friends and I don't want to feel bombarded with junk food ads every day. The battleground that exists on our phones and other devices leave us victims to the savage tricks of marketing every hour of our lives.

It is accepted that there is a link between kids seeing ads and what they eat. Now we need action!

The UK Government must follow through on plans set out in their recent obesity strategy to restrict junk food marketing.

Ultimately, we need to work on creating an environment better suited to help young people to eat healthily.

I refuse to sit and watch a failed food system continue to have such a negative impact, and yet still be granted the privileges of self-regulation.

We all need to play an active role in voicing some of the battles young people face today in the digital world ... and that includes against junk food advertising.

Now is the time we must all stand up in support of a total restriction on digital junk food advertising. Because health is wealth, and Government have that role to step in where needed; so that we, young people, can prosper and become the innovative generation we want to be.



Dev Sharma
BiteBack 2030 Youth Board Member

Executive Summary

Overweight and obesity is the second biggest cause of cancer in the UK after smoking. It is causally linked to 13 types of cancer and is accountable for approximately 6% of total cancer cases per year in the UK.¹ Currently in the UK, more than six in ten adults live with overweight or obesity.² The UK-wide costs of overweight and obesity to the NHS are estimated to reach £9.7 billion by 2030, with wider society costs estimated to reach £49.9 billion.³

Children with obesity are around five times more likely than non-obese children to have obesity as an adult.⁴ With over one-third of children in England leaving primary school with overweight or obese,⁵ tackling childhood obesity is key for cancer prevention.

Marketing of high fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS) food and drinks is a well-documented driver for increased consumption of unhealthy food and drinks in children and young people.⁶⁻¹⁰ The first wave of the Youth Obesity Policy Survey (YOPS), a UK-wide repeat cross-sectional survey of 11-19-year olds, which aimed to understand young people's attitudes around diet and food marketing, was conducted in 2017. This survey showed that increased recall of HFSS advertising was associated with obesity and consumption of HFSS food and drinks.^{8, 11}

Since the publication of these reports from 2017, there have been various commitments from governments across the UK to tackle obesity,^{12, 13} and young people's media habits have changed.¹⁴ There is a need to understand what shifts in the political environment and young people's behaviours may mean for their HFSS marketing awareness (i.e. what they remember seeing and where), and

associations between this awareness and their dietary behaviours.

This is particularly pertinent now, as in July 2020 the UK Government announced a new strategy aimed at tackling overweight and obesity.¹⁵ The announcement included policies to reduce the amount of HFSS marketing seen on TV via implementation of a 9pm watershed, potentially end all HFSS advertising online and restrict location- and volume-based promotions in stores.

This report supports the case for swift implementation of this new strategy. Using repeat cross-sectional data from the first and second waves of YOPS, conducted in 2017 and 2019, this report examines changes in young people's awareness of HFSS marketing over time, and to what extent (if at all) the association between marketing awareness and reported HFSS consumption remains two years on.

Key findings

Two years on from our initial reports, the data suggest that little has changed concerning HFSS marketing awareness and the association with consumption. Specifically, young people still recall a range of HFSS marketing activities, particularly adverts on TV and social media and special price offers, and increased awareness is still associated with higher reported consumption across a range of HFSS foods (Figure 1).

Most young people recalled seeing some HFSS marketing in the last month

In both 2017 and 2019, around nine in ten young people recalled seeing at least one form of HFSS marketing in the past month

in each wave.

At least half of young people recalled seeing 2-3 instances of HFSS marketing a day

In both waves, at least half of young people were estimated to have seen 2-3 or more instances of HFSS marketing a day in the past month, and there was no difference between 2017 and 2019.

Young people recall a range of marketing activities online

In both waves, a range of different online marketing activities were recalled by young people. In 2019, 85.8% of young people reported seeing HFSS adverts on social media, 68.4% saw adverts on catch up and streaming services, and 63.5% saw influencers promoting HFSS brands in the past month.

TV, social media and special price offers are still where most young people recall seeing HFSS marketing

Special price offers for HFSS foods, adverts on live TV and adverts on social media were the top three marketing activities recalled by most young people in both waves, followed by adverts on billboards. Specifically, in both 2017 and 2019, more than eight in ten young people recalled seeing HFSS food and drink marketed through TV, social media, special price offers and billboards in the past month.

While these remain the marketing activities recalled by the *most* young people, between 2017 and 2019, there was a decrease in how *often* young people recalled seeing HFSS adverts on TV and social media and special price offers. This could be reflective of changing media habits, a downward trend

in young people's HFSS marketing exposure through these marketing activities, or a combination of both factors.

Young people's recall of HFSS marketing on catch-up or streaming services and radio has increased

There was an increase in the proportion of young people who recalled seeing HFSS adverts on catch-up or streaming services and hearing HFSS adverts on the radio. There was also an increase in how frequently young people recalled seeing/hearing these marketing activities. The proportion of young people who recalled seeing HFSS adverts in newspapers or magazines decreased. These findings may represent changes in HFSS marketing, media habits, or both.

Higher awareness of HFSS marketing was associated with higher monthly consumption...

In both the 2017 and 2019 data, we found that greater awareness of HFSS marketing was associated with increased monthly consumption of a range of HFSS food and drinks.

...Across a range of different HFSS foods

For all 15 HFSS foods we measured in 2019 – from sugary snacks and drinks, to savoury snacks, fast food and online takeaways - there were associations between HFSS marketing awareness and higher monthly consumption.

What should the UK Government do?

The UK Government must follow through on implementing the commitments set

out in their obesity strategy to restrict HFSS marketing on TV and online, and (alongside devolved governments) price promotions, within the timeframes already announced. These restrictions are supported by governments in each of the devolved nations.

An end to online HFSS advertising, including on social media and via influencers, would be a world-leading protective measure for young people's health and wellbeing and reduce their risk of developing diet-related diseases, including cancer, later in life.

Figure 1: Summary of key findings comparing young people's awareness of HFSS marketing and the association with HFSS consumption in two waves of the Youth Obesity Policy Survey

Little has changed in young people's recall of HFSS food marketing. In both 2017 and 2019...



Policy Recommendations

The world we live in doesn't make it easy for young people to be healthy - especially when junk food is put in the spotlight by advertising.

Two years on from our initial reports on how young people felt under pressure from HFSS marketing,^{7, 8, 11} young people continue to recall high levels of HFSS advertising and promotions, and this recall is associated with consuming more unhealthy food and drink.

This report builds on the existing wealth of evidence showing the negative impact that junk food advertising has on young people's dietary intake and behaviours and on consumption of excess calories. Reducing young people's exposure to advertising would appear to be an important component in helping the UK Government reach their ambition of halving childhood obesity by 2030.

To be most effective, restrictions need to follow the eyeballs and clicks of young people, and be placed where the HFSS advertising is seen as most prevalent or pervasive. This report confirms that the UK Government's obesity strategy is taking the right approach: by focusing on the very marketing activities – of TV, online platforms and social media, and special price offers – that our analysis tells us are seen by the most young people.

We know that young people feel HFSS marketing is pervasive, targeted to them and are supportive of protective measures.¹⁹ The proposed measures, including banning HFSS products being shown on TV and online before 9pm (or even a total ban online) by the end of 2022, and ending promotion of HFSS products by volume (e.g. buy one get one free offers) and location (e.g. end of aisle displays), would help empower parents and young people themselves to make and maintain healthier habits by removing the unhealthy nudges in their environment.

It is essential that the UK Government follows through on implementing these commitments within the timeframes that have been announced.

But we also can't let young people's health suffer for another two years whilst we wait for these measures to be put in place. Industry must not consider the next two years as business as usual - they cannot continue to bombard young people with unhealthy advertising as they have done so far and they should not use this time to try and find potential loopholes in the proposals they then could exploit. On the contrary, as we saw with Soft Drinks Industry Levy, industry should see this as a transition period and start switching to advertising healthier products instead. To ensure that young people are protected until the measures are enshrined in law, the UK Government must push industry to start enacting now the changes that they will be forced to implement in two years in time.

Young people have told us that they recall junk food adverts on catch-up and streaming services and radio more frequently now. Young people's viewing habits are changing – and the more time they spend online, the higher their risk of being exposed to harmful advertising. Unhealthy advertising must no longer be allowed to play a starring role in children's minds.

It is therefore essential that the online restrictions that are put in place sufficiently protect young people from all forms of online HFSS advertising, including social media which operates in a different way to more traditional adverts. Because of how complex the online landscape is and the ways in which we engage with content online, this will require implementing a total end to all online HFSS advertising.

This report has shown that beyond TV, catch-up and social media, young people also recall a range of other HFSS marketing activities, including on billboards and through sports sponsorship. In order to minimise industry's opportunity to shift HFSS advertising from these spaces to less regulated channels after the restrictions are put in place, there may be a need for further interventions. This is something the UK Government should plan to assess.

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Report

This report should be referred to as follows:

Newman, A., Newberry Le Vay, J., Critchlow, N., Froguel, A., Clark, M., Vohra, J., "The HFSS beat goes on: Awareness of marketing for high fat, salt and sugar foods and the association with consumption in the 2017 and 2019 Youth Obesity Policy Surveys." Cancer Research UK. 2020.

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This research was funded by the Cancer Policy Research Centre, Cancer Research UK.

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