

Youth Policy Survey: Obesity Results Briefing

Topline Summary

This survey highlights a high daily consumption of high fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) products among young people, with significant exposure to, and engagement with, related social media content. A considerable number of young people support stronger regulations to prevent those under 16 from seeing these posts.

Introduction

Cancer cases in the UK are thought to rise by a third by 2040¹, but four in ten cancers can be prevented. Smoking, overweight and obesity, and alcohol all increase cancer risk². E-cigarettes are less harmful than smoking and are used to help people quit, but their long-term effects aren't known³ and there are concerns about their increased uptake by young people⁴.



Why obesity matters

Obesity is the second-largest preventable cause of cancer following smoking⁵. A child living with obesity is around five times more likely to continue to do so into adulthood⁶. It is also estimated that over 21 million UK adults will be living with obesity by 2040, and that those in the most deprived areas will be the most effected, with the gap between the prevalence in obesity in the least and most deprived populations rising by 13%.⁷

Survey aims

We have developed a new survey to explore in detail how and to what extent young people are exposed to, and interact with, marketing related to tobacco, e-cigarettes, high fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) food/drink, and alcohol on social media apps.

*Results shown are representative across all nations unless otherwise stated. No differences in IMD were found unless stated.

The survey set out to investigate:

- How young people engage with, and report exposure to, marketing on social media for tobacco, e-cigarettes, HFSS products and alcohol.
- Young people's intentions to use these products, and how this might relate to their social media use.
- How young people use food delivery apps and what influence marketing has on decisions.
- If young people are okay with the marketing of these products on social media and what they think about potential policy options.

What we did

Methods



The survey collected responses from 4049 young people aged 11–21-years-old across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland*.



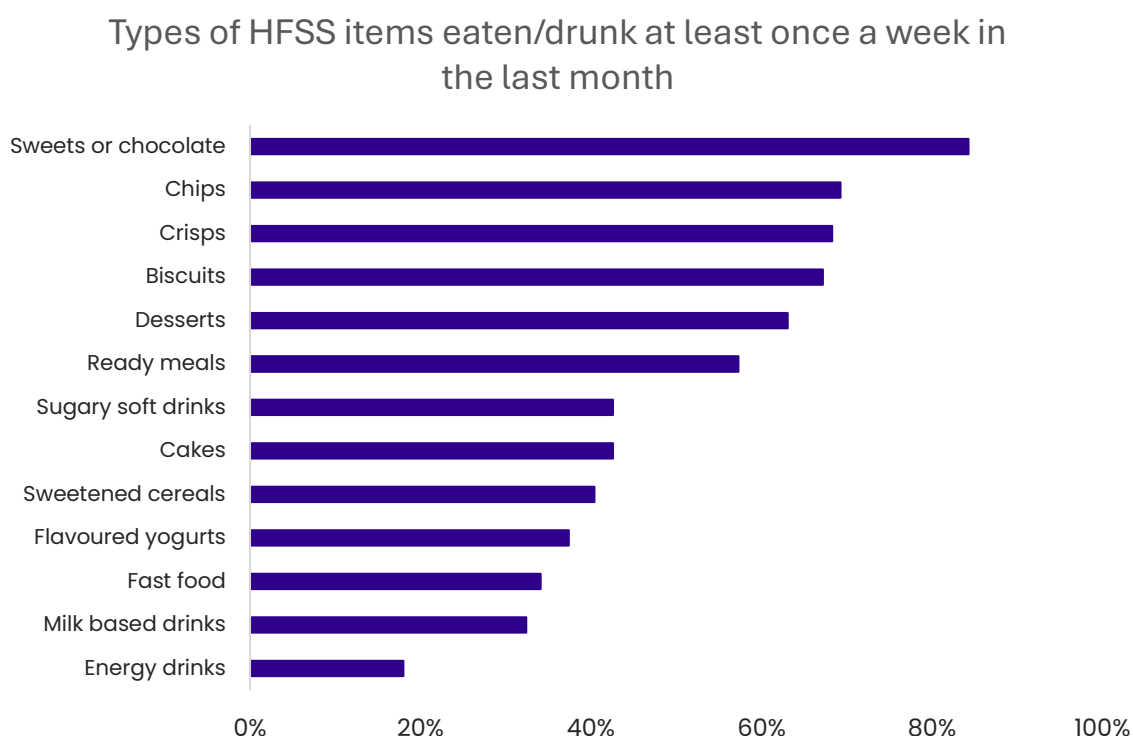
This brief will focus on the results relating to unhealthy food and drink, including:

1. Eating and drinking habits
2. HFSS food and drink on social media
3. HFSS food and drink policies
4. Food delivery apps

1. Eating and drinking habits

HFSS food/drink

Almost all (99%) of young people said they ate at least one type of HFSS food/drink listed in the last week, and just over two-fifths (40%) said they ate at least one type every day. The most popular weekly choices were sweets or chocolates, chips, crisps, and biscuitsⁱ

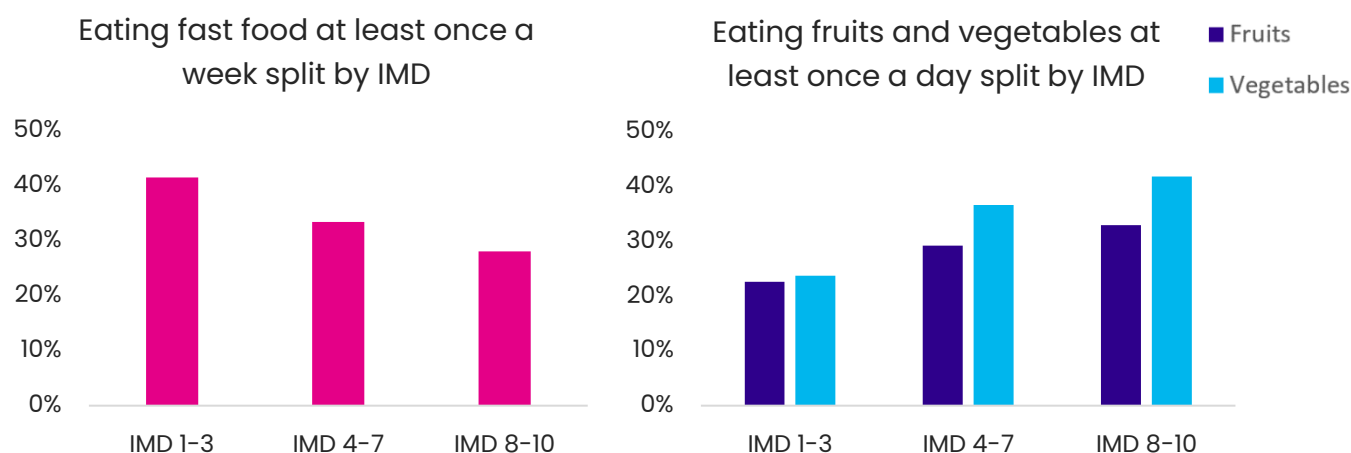


Just over a third (34%) of young people said they had eaten fast food like McDonald's or Greggs at least once a week in the last month. When responses were split by IMD, this was higher in young people in lower socioeconomic groups (IMD 1-3) compared to other IMD groups.

Fruits and vegetables

Just over a quarter (28%) of young people said that in the last month they ate fruit every day, and just over a third (34%) said they ate vegetables every day. When responses were split by IMD, more young people ate fruits and vegetables every day in higher socioeconomic groups (IMD 8-10) compared to other IMD groups.

ⁱ In the survey, young people reported what they had eaten in the last month from a list of food/drink items, including healthier items such as fruits and vegetables, and items that are typically HFSS such as sweets, crisps, sugary drinks, and sweetened cereal.



Where do young people buy HFSS food/drink?

Most young people got their unhealthy food and drink from large supermarkets (59%) or via their family (53%). Following this was: convenience stores (39%), restaurant/takeaway websites (23%) and restaurants (21%).

Why do young people buy HFSS food/drink?

When buying unhealthy food and drink, price was influential: 77% said it was an important factor, and just over two thirds (64%) said discounts (e.g., 20% off) were important too. Price was closely followed by product quality (75%), promotional offers (e.g., buy one get one free 57%), brand appeal (55%), how healthy the product seems (52%), and new flavours and products to try (44%).

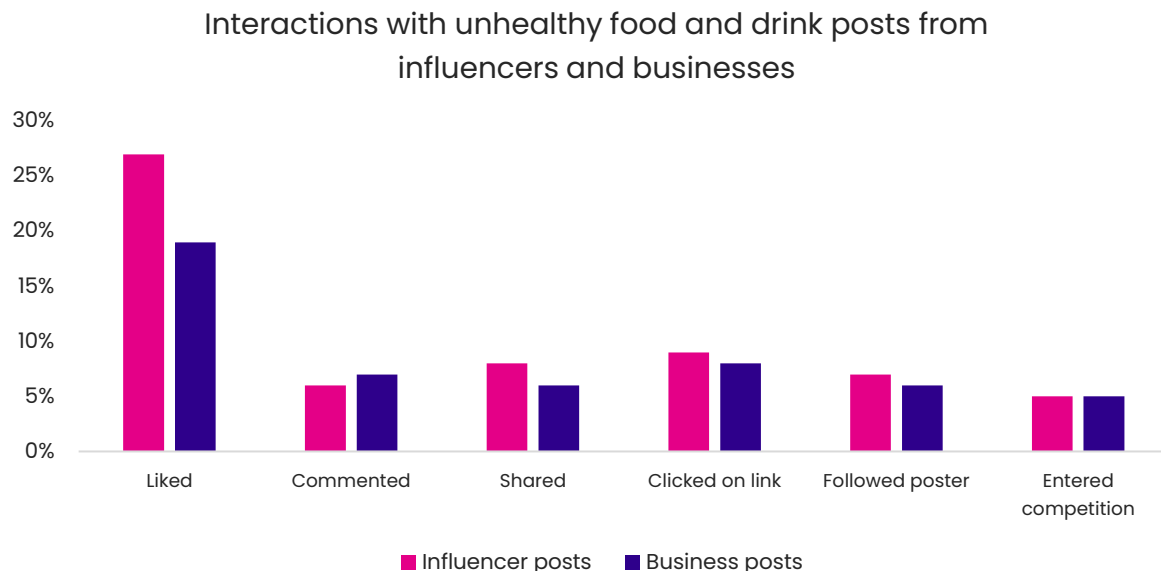
2. HFSS food and drink on social media

Over half (58%) of young people said they had seen adverts for unhealthy food and drink on social media apps in the last month. This was one of the most popular places young people saw these adverts, second only to TV (61%).

Businesses and influencers

Over half (52%) of young people who use social media (n = 3,939) also specifically recalled seeing influencers and businesses post about unhealthy food and drink in the last month, with 39% (influencers) and 40% (businesses) saying they saw this content at least one day a week.

Overall, 39% of young people engaged with at least one type of post in the last month. Young people were more likely to engage with posts by influencers than businesses: two fifths (40%) of those who saw at least one post by an influencer actively engaged with it in some way, including liking, commenting, and sharing; whereas one third (33%) actively engaged with a business post.



3. HFSS food and drink policies

Young people were presented with a range of statements and possible policies and were asked to rate how much they agreed with them.

Private accounts

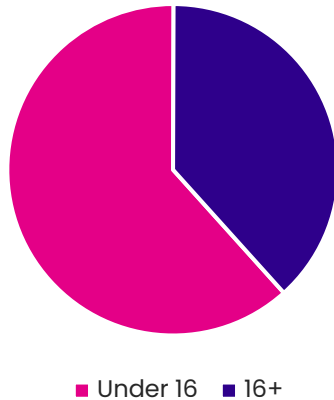
One policy option suggested was that unhealthy food and drink businesses would need to have their social media accounts set to private, so that people would have to follow them to see what they post. This would stop posts from businesses showing up in young people's algorithmic feeds, such as in Instagram or TikTok where posts appear that the app thinks you would like to see, not just from those you follow. Many young people agreed with this approach: 43% agreed or strongly agreed on this idea compared to 27% who disagreed in some way. The remaining 30% said they didn't know/neither agreed nor disagreed.

However, fewer young people (35%) agreed or strongly agreed that if accounts cannot be made private on an app, then businesses who make and sell unhealthy

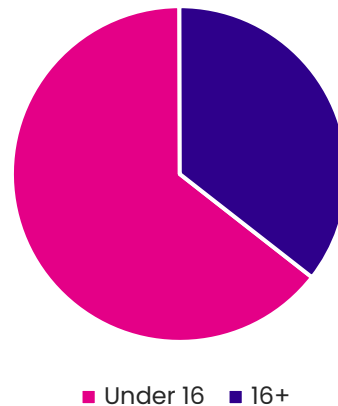
food and drink should not be allowed to have an account on that app. This is compared to 36% who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Under 16s were more likely to think businesses should be regulated with private accounts.

Accounts should be private



No private option, no account

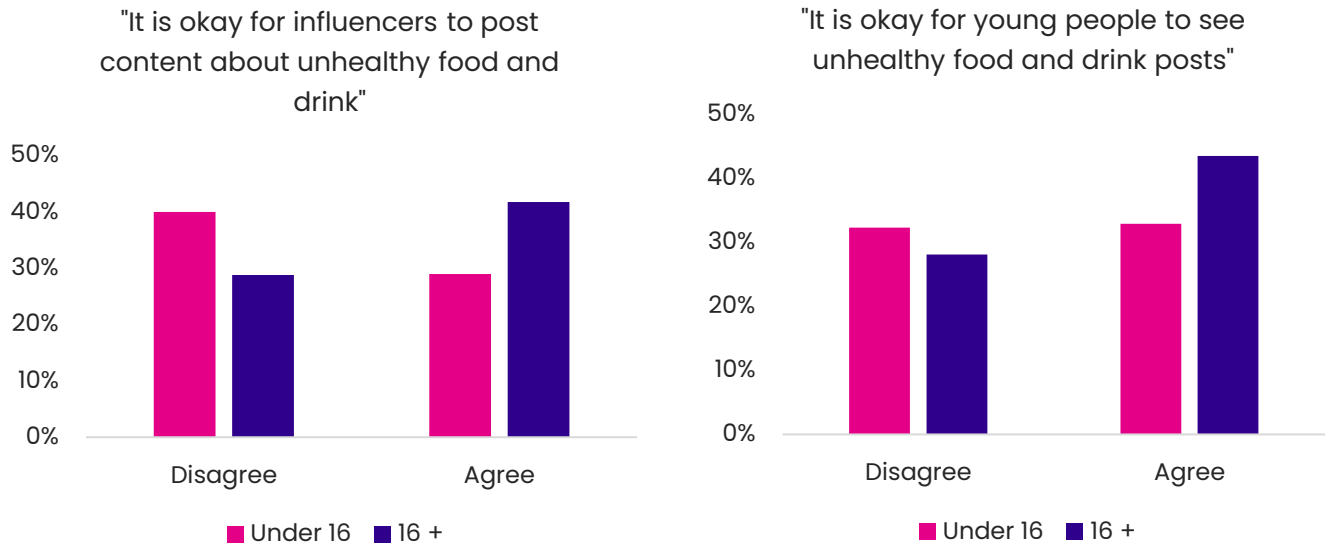


Online promotion

In this section, young people were asked if they thought it was OK for influencers to promote unhealthy food and drink on social media. Opinions were split: over a third (34%) of young people disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 36% who thought it was fine.

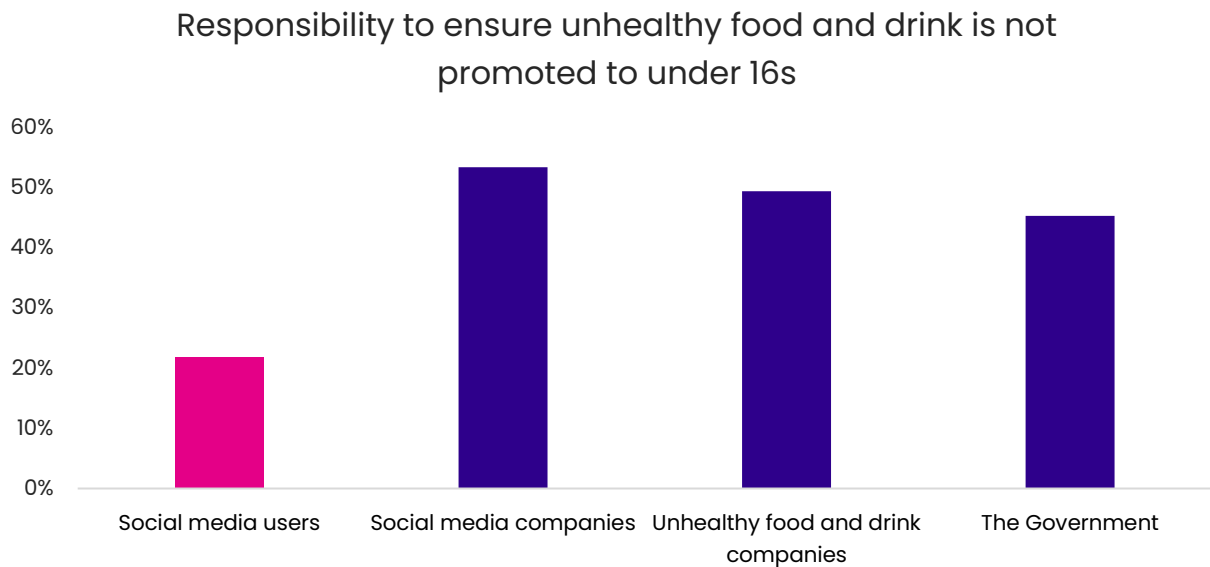
Unhealthy food and drink adverts are not allowed to be targeted at people under the age of 16, but opinions on this were split too. When asked, just under a third (30%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that people under 16 should see posts promoting or talking about unhealthy food and drink on social media, compared to 39% who thought it was fine (agreed/ strongly agreed).

Under 16s were more likely to say it wasn't OK for them to see these types of posts online compared to those 16 and over.



Responsibility

Young people were asked about who held responsibility for making sure unhealthy food and drink isn't promoted to those under 16. Most young people thought the responsibility was someone else's: over half believed it was the responsibility of the social media companies (54%), half believed it was the responsibility of the unhealthy food and drink companies (50%), and just under half thought it was the responsibility of the Government (45%). Just under a quarter (22%) of young people believed that social media users were responsible.



4. Food delivery apps

What delivery apps do young people use?

Over half of all young people (51%) have access to their own or their family's account for a food delivery app. The most popular apps were UberEats (31%), JustEat (28%), and Deliveroo (26%).

Why do young people buy from delivery apps?

For most young people, price was as important factor when choosing what to buy from a food delivery app, with 80% stating this was important. Other important factors included discounts (71%) and promotional offers (67%). Following price, 76% of young people thought product quality was an important factor.

57% of young people said they had seen adverts for food delivery apps in the last month on social media.

This was one of the most popular places young people saw these adverts, second only to on TV (61%).

Restaurant or takeaway food

A lot of young people frequently used food delivery apps to order takeaways. Over three quarters (76%) of those with access to an app had ordered restaurant or takeaway food in the last month. A third (33%) had ordered at least once a week.

Groceries

Of those who have access to their own or their family's account for a food delivery app, over a third (34%) had ordered groceries from one in the last month. One fifth (20%) had ordered at least once a week. The most popular groceries to order included ready meals (37%), sweets or chocolate (36%), and chips or fried potatoes (34%).

Cigarettes, vapes, and alcohol

Buying these products was much less common on food delivery apps compared to takeaways and groceries. Purchase of these items is only legal if an adult is receiving and signing for the goods. In the last month, 160 young people (8%) had ordered cigarettes – including 103 (11%) of those aged under 18. Similarly, 186 (9%) had ordered vapes – including 111 (12%) of those aged under 18. Ordering alcohol was slightly more popular, with 276 (13%) young people ordering in the last month, including 143 (15%) of those aged under 18.

Conclusion

This survey shows young people are eating unhealthy foods and drinks on a daily basis, as well as frequently getting takeaways from food delivery apps. A small number of young people are using food delivery apps to buy other unhealthy products, such as alcohol, cigarettes and vapes. Many young people are seeing posts and adverts for HFSS products on social media by both businesses and influencers at least once a week, but a number of them, particularly those under 16, think there should be stronger regulations to stop under 16s from seeing them.

References

¹ Calculated by the Cancer Intelligence Team, Cancer Research UK. February 2023. Cancer incidence and mortality projections for UK and constituent nations, using data to 2018.

² Brown KF, Rumgay H, Dunlop C, Ryan M, Quartly F, Cox A, Deas A, Elliss-Brookes L, Gavin A, Hounscome L, Huws D. The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 2015. *British journal of cancer*. 2018 Apr 17;118(8):1130–41.

³ Berry KM, Fetterman JL, Benjamin EJ, Bhatnagar A, Barrington-Trimis JL, Leventhal AM, Stokes A. Association of electronic cigarette use with subsequent initiation of tobacco cigarettes in US youths. *JAMA network open*. 2019 Feb 1;2(2):e187794–.

⁴ Action on Smoking and Health. 2023. Use of e-cigarettes (vapes) among young people in Great Britain 2023. Accessed July 2023.

⁵ Brown, K. F. et al. The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 2015. *Br. J. Cancer* 118, 1130–1141 (2018).

⁶ Simmonds, M., Llewellyn, A., Owen, C. G., & Woolacott, N. (2016). Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obesity reviews*, 17(2), 95–107.

⁷ Cancer Intelligence Team, Cancer Research UK. Overweight and obesity prevalence projections for the UK, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, based on data to 2019/20. Published May 2022.