

Online food and drink marketing to young people

Key findings

Lucy Turner and Tara Hackett

February 2022



About Nesta

We are Nesta, the UK's innovation agency for social good. We design, test and scale solutions to society's biggest problems. Our three missions are to give every child a fair start, help people live healthy lives, and create a sustainable future where the economy works for both people and the planet.

For over 20 years, we have worked to support, encourage and inspire

innovation. We work in three roles: as an innovation partner working with frontline organisations to design and test new solutions, as a venture builder supporting new and early stage businesses, and as a system shaper creating the conditions for innovation.

Harnessing the rigour of science and the creativity of design, we work relentlessly to change millions of lives for the better.

Find out more at [nesta.org.uk](https://www.nesta.org.uk)

If you'd like this publication in an alternative format such as Braille or large print please contact us at information@nesta.org.uk

Executive summary

Young people are exposed to a range of marketing for unhealthy food and drink online, from adverts for fast food on social media to price offers and limited edition deals encouraging them to buy food via email and apps.

In November and December 2021, Nesta ran a project with 284 young people in the UK aged 13–16 to crowdsource data about the food and drink marketing they saw online. Young people were given information about the food and drink marketing to look out for online as part of the project and were able to talk to other

participants about capturing and sharing examples of online marketing. Participants also completed before and after surveys to share their views about the marketing that they see and its influence on food and drink consumption.

Key findings

- > The majority of food and drink marketing reported by the young people in the project was for unhealthy products. **Of the 4,879 food and drink adverts collected, over 70 per cent were deemed unhealthy.**
- > Some groups of young people reported seeing more unhealthy food and drink marketing than others. In our project, **young people in lower income groups reported about 50 per cent more examples of unhealthy food and drink marketing than the young people in higher income groups.**
- > Participants in the project agreed that they wanted the government to take action and regulate the marketing they see online. After taking part in the project, **over 65 per cent of teenagers agreed that the government should take action to ban online marketing.**^{1a}
- > Participants agreed that marketing influences their food and drink choices. When asked in the project, over **80 per cent of participants agreed that food and drink marketing has a great influence on eating and drinking habits.**^{1b}

Recommendations

The government should not delay implementing a ban on paid-for advertising of unhealthy food and drink products online. **More than 60 per cent of the unhealthy marketing collected in the project was paid-for product advertising.**

Young people need further protection from the unhealthy marketing that they are exposed to on social media, when playing online games, watching videos and browsing websites.

Introduction

Food and drink companies are flooding young people's social media feeds, appearing in online games and filling their screens when they spend time online. Being exposed to these sorts of unhealthy food adverts leads young people to eat more calories, and has a greater impact on children and young people living with overweight and obesity.²

Research from an Obesity Policy Research Unit meta-analysis indicates that children who were exposed to food screen adverts on TV consumed more calories. This difference was greater for children living with overweight or obesity, as they consumed an average of 125 kcal more compared to children categorised as having a healthy weight who consumed an additional 80 kcal.³

All young people deserve to experience environments that support healthy choices and well-balanced diets. By the age of 11, more than a third of children in the UK are overweight or obese, and by the time they reach adolescence 25 per cent boys and 19 per cent of girls are obese.⁴ This trend continues into adulthood, with obese children more likely to become obese adults, with an increased risk of developing diseases such as type two diabetes, heart disease and cancer.⁵ Obesity is a complex issue, with many past efforts putting too much burden on individuals, without fully recognising the influence of our environments.

The UK government is taking steps to address this issue and reduce the amount of unhealthy food and drink marketing young people see. Unhealthy adverts are to be banned from TV before 9pm and brands will be prevented from paying to advertise unhealthy food and drink products online from January 2023.⁶ It is a positive first step towards improving some of the factors contributing to rising obesity levels in young people, but does it go far enough? A 2021 Ofcom report shared that teenagers spend on average almost four hours a day online.⁷ This amount increased as teenagers got older, with some 15–16 year old boys reporting spending more than six hours a day online. A ban on broadcast media alone will not protect young people from a large proportion of the adverts that they are exposed to.

Key insights

Young people's exposure to unhealthy marketing

Brands target young people online in a variety of ways, from tailoring adverts to young people's interests, offering them limited edition offers and engaging them in challenges to get them to share their content.

> **The majority of food and drink marketing reported by the young people in the project was for unhealthy products. Of the 4,879 marketing examples that we collected, over 70 per cent were deemed unhealthy**, according to guidance from the government.⁸ This suggests that a ban on 'less healthy' food and drink adverts is critical to reducing teenagers' exposure to such adverts.

In addition to unhealthy food and sugary drinks, young people aged under 18 reported seeing adverts for alcohol online. **More than 7 per cent of our participants reported being exposed to alcohol marketing.**

> **Not all young people experience unhealthy marketing equally.** Our data indicates that online food and drink marketing could exacerbate inequalities. In our project, young people in households with an annual income of less than £29,999 reported on average 16.5 examples of unhealthy food and drink marketing. Young people in households with an income of £29,999 or more reported on average 11 examples of unhealthy marketing, a difference of around 50 per cent.

Whilst more robust data is needed, this is an area of concern given that obesity prevalence is highest among the lowest income groups in society.⁹ Analysis from Cancer Research UK, which looked at a survey of young people and the unhealthy food and drink adverts they recalled seeing, reported that young people from the most deprived areas were 40 per cent more likely to report that they remembered seeing unhealthy food adverts everyday than more affluent teenagers.¹⁰

> **Government action would be an effective way to protect young people.** The proposed ban on paid-for adverts for unhealthy food and drink products would be a positive step towards reducing the amount of marketing that young people see. **More than 60 per cent of the unhealthy marketing that young people reported seeing was paid-for product advertising.**



Example of the marketing seen by teens

Types of marketing young people see

Young people are an attractive audience for brands promoting their products. Young people spend increasing amounts of time online and often have some purchasing power – but lack the cognitive development to identify and resist marketing tactics.¹¹ Brands target and influence young people by tapping into their social-developmental needs for connection with peers and work to build long-lasting relationships with young people.¹²

- > **Our data revealed that nearly a quarter of the marketing young people reported came from ten big food and drink brands**, including two food delivery companies.
- > **Social media websites are a key source of marketing.** Online platforms should take greater care to ensure that they provide a safe and healthy space for young people to spend time online, away from the tactics of brands that seek to bombard them with marketing. **More than 70 per cent of the marketing we collected came from just four social media platforms.**
- > **Food and drinks brands use a range of tactics to capture young people's attention and mimic their online behaviour.**

Government estimates suggest that young people are exposed to 15 billion unhealthy adverts each year.¹³ The examples we collected showed brands using attractive colours, personalised content and influencers and celebrities to promote their products. In 2020, it's estimated that there were 6.12 billion brand sponsored influencer posts globally, with food being the second most active area promoted by influencers.¹⁴

Young people in our project talked about how challenging it can be to identify when content is marketing and the tactics used to engage them and their peers.

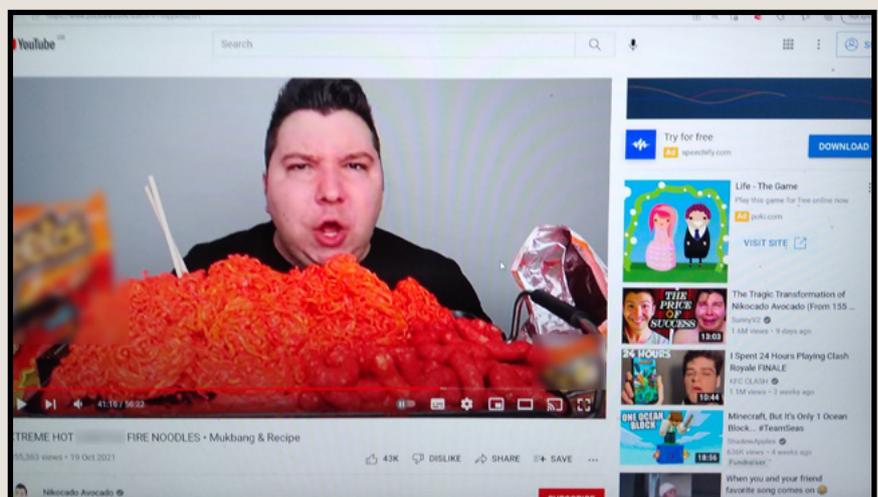
"Some of the marketing is dead obvious but some is sneaky. When it's not the brand itself, but an ambassador for a brand that can be difficult to spot."

"It is unavoidable, as it pops up as you open the app. It's also a dance challenge to try to get more teens involved and therefore eating the unhealthy fast food."

- > **Discounts and offers are a common way to target young people online.** Participants reported being exposed to a range of types of products, from sugary drinks and chocolate to fast food and takeaways, which are often promoted alongside limited edition and savings offers to entice young people to purchase food at a discounted price.

"The lot of food/drink marketing ads which I found today had a visit option - when I clicked on it it came up with lots of 'offers and discounts' etc."

"Promotes the ice cream by having a limited edition Christmas version of one of them, saying 'Get it while you can' gives the public a sense of urgency."



Example of the marketing seen by teens

What do young people think about unhealthy food marketing?

We asked the young people in our project what they think about how online food and drink marketing influences eating habits, and whether the government and industry should act to reduce the amount of marketing that they see. These results may have been influenced by the information young people were given about what sort of marketing to capture online.

- > **Our participants agreed that marketing influences their food and drink choices.** When asked, more than 80 per cent of participants agreed that food and drink marketing has a great influence on eating and drinking habits. With the majority of marketing promoting unhealthy products, this is likely to have a negative impact on young people's health. Young people in the project talked about the volume of food and drink marketing they see online, and how it's designed to encourage them to eat unhealthy products.

"It's surprising how many adverts pop up and actually make you think about going to buy that particular food – it's quite scary how it influences you!"

"I think marketing and advertising is manipulating teenagers into deals and unhealthy produce, as here with alcohol and fast food, we should be advertising eating healthy in a more appealing way."

- > **Participants said they want the government to take action and regulate the marketing they see online.** Public opinion is critically important to the government and the food industry, and so public acceptability is likely to affect the delivery and uptake of potential interventions.
- > We asked the participating teenagers if they support the government's efforts to regulate more tightly the unhealthy marketing that they see online. **After taking part in the project, over 65 per cent of teenagers agreed that the government should take action to ban online marketing.**^{15a} This was a 10 per cent increase from before the project and could suggest that when teenagers take time to engage with the issue, their support for government action increases.

- > **Food and drink brands should take on a greater responsibility to support young people to make healthier choices, a sentiment supported by our participants.** After participating in Nesta's project, more than 60 per cent of the young people agreed that food and drinks companies should avoid targeting young people online.^{15b}
- > **Young people may find it challenging to identify marketing when they see it online.** The young people in our project took part in a before and after quiz to identify different types of online marketing. The average score for the quiz after completing the project was about 3.6 points lower than the score for the first quiz. As the level of difficulty between pre and post quiz was comparable, it is difficult to know what led to the fall in performance in the post project quiz.



Example of the marketing seen by teens

Recommendations

All young people deserve to have food environments that make it easy, appealing and convenient to choose healthy food and drink. To help protect young people from influential food and drink marketing, the government should not delay bringing in a ban on paid for unhealthy online food and drink marketing, as this would be an important first step in reducing the amount of marketing young people see.

Nesta wants to work with the government, industry, researchers, charities and young people to find new and innovative solutions to tackle this issue, as we work to halve the prevalence of obesity by 2030. This would increase healthy life expectancy by an average of nearly two years for around 10 million people in the UK, while narrowing health inequalities between the richest and poorest in society.

We know we can't achieve this alone, it must be a collective effort and we invite anyone who shares our vision to reach out.

Please email the team at:
healthylife-team@nesta.org.uk

Methodology

To better understand the marketing that young people are exposed to online, and what they think about it, we worked with the youth-led organisation BiteBack 2030 to design a citizen science project to engage young people across the country.

In November 2021, we developed the Marketing Detective platform and engaged 284 young people aged 13–16 from across the UK to crowdsource examples of the food and drink marketing that they saw online over a seven-day period. As well as collecting 4,879

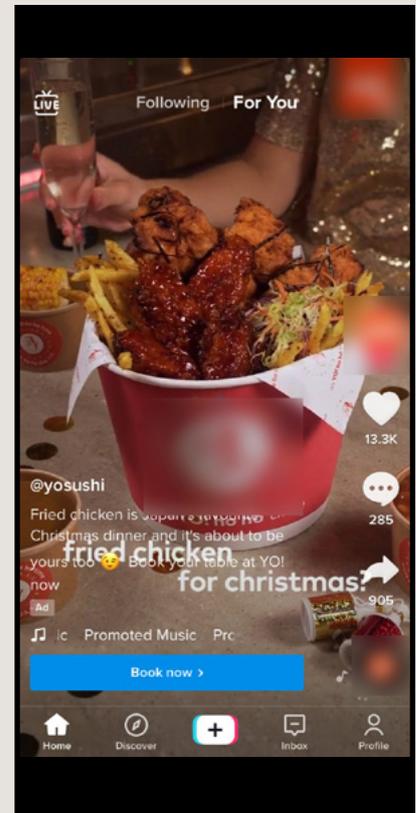
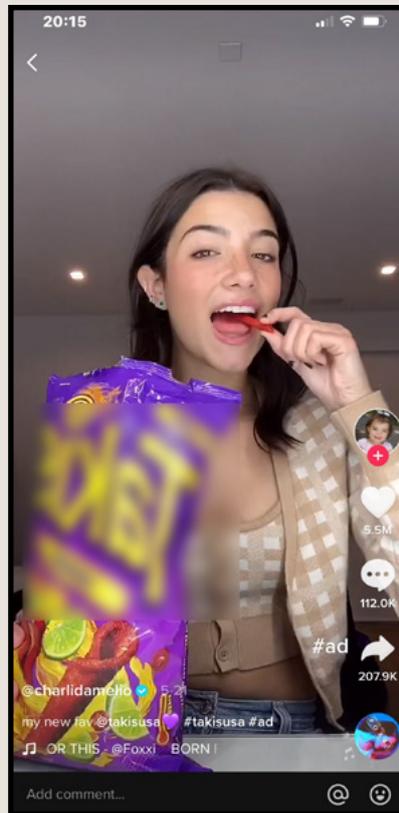
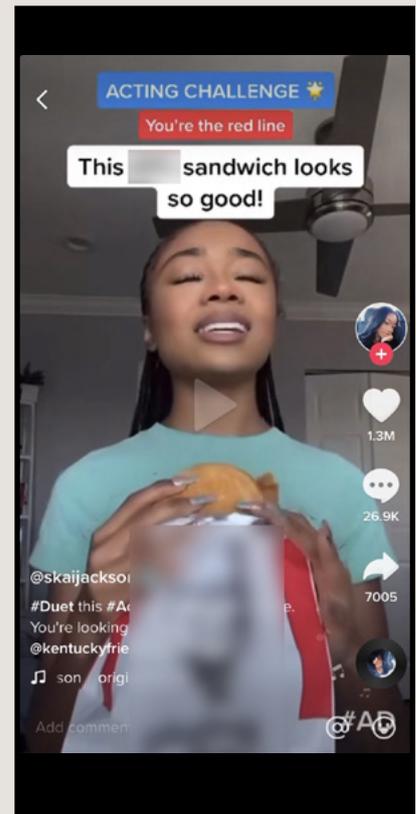
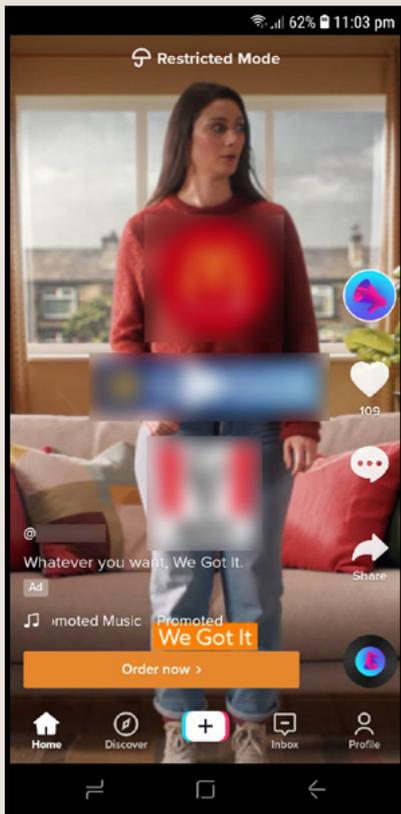
examples of adverts, we also asked the young people to tell us more about what they think about this marketing and the influence it has on what they choose to eat and drink.

The young people were recruited through the recruitment agency Roots Research and were compensated for their involvement. The adverts were coded by the data labelling platform 1715 Labs. You can read more about the methodology and full results on OSF <https://osf.io/x3zkq>

This project got teenagers engaged and gave us an insight into the unhealthy advertising to which they're exposed. It cannot tell us whether or not the change in teenagers' attitudes was a result of taking

part in the crowdsourcing activity but it does show us that teenagers who took part think the government should act to regulate the unhealthy food and drink marketing they see online.

Examples of the marketing seen by teens



Endnotes

1. a,b Questions asking how much participants agreed with a statement were asked on a scale of 1-10 (1 = completely disagree and 10 = completely agree). This interpretation assumes anyone who gave a response of 6-10 was assumed to agree and anyone who gave a response of 1-5 was assumed to disagree.
2. Russell SJ, Croker H, Viner RM. The effect of screen advertising on children's dietary intake: A systematic review and meta analysis. *Obesity Reviews*, 2019; 20:554-568. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12812>
3. Russell SJ, Croker H, Viner RM. The effect of screen advertising on children's dietary intake: A systematic review and meta analysis. *Obesity Reviews*, 2019; 20:554-568. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12812>
4. Health Survey for England 2019 Overweight and obesity in adults and children, <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/9D/4195D5/HSE19-Overweight-obesity-rep.pdf>
5. House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 3336, Obesity Statistics January 2021 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03336/SN03336.pdf>
6. Consultation Outcome, Further advertising restrictions for products high in fat, salt and sugar, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/further-advertising-restrictions-for-products-high-in-fat-salt-and-sugar>
7. Ofcom, Online Nation 2021 report [Online Nation 2021 report](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/consult/condocs/online-nation-2021/online-nation-2021-report/).
8. Consultation outcome: Introducing further advertising restrictions on TV and online for products high in fat, salt and sugar: government response, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/further-advertising-restrictions-for-products-high-in-fat-salt-and-sugar/outcome/introducing-further-advertising-restrictions-on-tv-and-online-for-products-high-in-fat-salt-and-sugar-government-response>
9. Holmes J, Tackling obesity: the role of the NHS in a whole-system approach, The King's Fund, 2021 <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/Tackling%20obesity.pdf>
10. Cancer Research UK: Obesity risk doubles for teens bombarded with junk food adverts <https://news.cancerresearchuk.org/2018/03/15/obesity-risk-doubles-for-teens-bombarded-with-junk-food-adverts>
11. Truman, E., Elliott, C. Identifying food marketing to teenagers: a scoping review. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 16, 67 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-019-0833-2>
12. Tatlow-Golden M, Parker D. The devil is in the detail: challenging the UK department of health's 2019 impact assessment of the extent of online marketing of unhealthy foods to children. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020 Oct 02;17(19):7231. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17197231. <https://www.mdpi.com/resolver?pii=ijerph17197231>
13. Consultation outcome evidence note <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss/evidence-note#summary-of-costs-and-benefits>
14. Tatlow-Golden M, Parker D. The devil is in the detail: challenging the UK department of health's 2019 impact assessment of the extent of online marketing of unhealthy foods to children. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020 Oct 02;17(19):7231. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17197231. <https://www.mdpi.com/resolver?pii=ijerph17197231>
15. a,b Questions asking how much participants agreed with a statement were asked on a scale of 1-10 (1 = completely disagree and 10 = completely agree). This interpretation assumes anyone who gave a response of 6-10 was assumed to agree and anyone who gave a response of 1-5 was assumed to disagree.

58 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DS

+44 (0)20 7438 2500

information@nesta.org.uk

 [@nesta_uk](https://twitter.com/nesta_uk)

 [nesta.uk](https://www.facebook.com/nesta.uk)

www.nesta.org.uk