

WHO warns on kids' digital exposure to junk-food ads

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Digital marketing of unhealthy foods to children poses a unique risk. Marketers can tailor ads to those most likely to buy the products, taking advantage of children's vulnerability online and contributing to childhood obesity around the world, the World Health Organization cautions in a comprehensive report on the subject.

The WHO report, "Tackling food marketing to children in a digital world: trans-disciplinary perspectives," points out that childhood obesity is influenced by marketing of foods and nonalcoholic beverages high in saturated fat, salt and free sugars (HFSS).

Eating habits, often considered an entirely personal choice, are in fact influenced by an individual's food environment. In obesogenic—obesity-promoting—food environments, "the combined actions of producers, retailers, food marketers and others ensure that HFSS foods are widely available and are often cheaper than healthier foods," the report said.

This problem used to live only in print media and on TV, but 80 percent of British children ages 8 to 11 now use a tablet computer to go online—the newest platform for such advertising. In a recent survey from the United Kingdom, children ages 5 to 15 reported spending 15 hours online per week.

Nielsen data suggest that over half of adolescents in the U.S. "always" or "sometimes" look at mobile ads. And in the U.K., 73 percent of teenagers reported following brands they like on social media. Sixty-two percent of these teens click on ads and 57 percent make in-app or in-game purchases, the report said.

Studies from Australia, Ireland, the U.K. and the U.S. similarly found parents to be largely unaware of the many HFSS food-marketing strategies used online. "They assumed that it was not a concern and that their children saw little HFSS-food advertising online and would ignore any they did see," the report said.

“Once parents were shown examples of HFSS-food marketing that appealed to children and adolescents, however, they expressed alarm at the sophisticated, highly engaging techniques used, often considered this form of marketing to be exploitative and expressed a desire for it to be reduced.”

Some protections already exist

Some digital marketing restrictions aimed at protecting children are already in place around the world. In the U.S., the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) says personally identifiable information may not be collected from children under 13 without verifiable parental consent. COPPA does not allow tracking across platforms with persistent identifiers, geolocation or behavioral advertising. But COPPA cannot account for children who lie about their age or whose parents are unaware of their online activities.

In its 2015 annual privacy sweep, the Global Privacy Enforcement Network examined 1,494 websites and apps “targeted at or popular with children.” The sweep identified concerns with 41 percent of those websites and apps, particularly with how personal information was collected and shared. Only 24 percent of the websites and apps encouraged parental involvement.

A few countries have introduced explicit policies or legislation to restrict HFSS-food marketing to children. Ireland and the U.K. have statutory restrictions on broadcast advertising for HFSS-foods in and around child-directed programming. But these policies are narrow in scope and are limited to broadcast, not online advertising.

The AMA has policy supporting public education on the adverse effects of food advertising aimed at children.

WHO’s guidance on effective policies

“As the digital environment continues to evolve rapidly, digital HFSS-food marketing to children deserves close scrutiny and demands prompt, remedial action by policy-makers,” the WHO’s report says. The document also offers recommendations for actions that should be taken with the aim of protecting children from digital marketing of unhealthy foods, including:

- Extend offline protections online
- Draw on existing legislation, regulation and regulatory industries
- Compel private Internet platforms to remove marketing of HFSS foods
- Develop appropriate sanction and penalty mechanisms
- Devise cross-border international responses

It is important that governments acknowledge their duty to protect children from HFSS-food digital marketing with statutory regulation and extend any existing offline protection online, the report said. And rather than leaving commercial interests to define the parameters of marketing to children, governments should define “marketing directed at children” and the legal age at which marketing to children could be permitted.