Kid influencers on YouTube – food marketing that makes a big impression

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**It is well established that unhealthy food marketing is highly prevalent and has a detrimental effect on children’s eating behaviours and diet. A new study highlights how a new type of social media influencer – children themselves – is contributing to this phenomenon.**

Unequivocal evidence demonstrates the negative effects of exposure to unhealthy food and drink (hereafter food) marketing on children’s consumptive behaviours and diet 1. Such marketing has been found to be highly prevalent on television but less is known about the extent of marketing in digital media (e.g. online, social media, mobile applications). Young people are avid users of digital media and YouTube, a digital video-sharing platform, is hugely popular worldwide; yet a clear picture of the extent and nature of food marketing on the platform remains elusive. One way in which marketing occurs on YouTube is via so-called “influencers”. Influencers are individuals who have built an online following through creating content on social media, and influencer marketing is a strategic collaboration between a brand and an influencer to promote a product or service. There is concern that because marketing of this kind is embedded in the digital content itself it is more difficult for children to recognise as commercial and may not be covered by regulation designed to cover more traditional ‘spot’ advertising approaches 2. Although social media influencer marketing is a relatively new tactic it has quickly become a widely implemented one, but few studies have specifically examined the marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt (HFSS) by influencers.

In a new US study, Alruwaily and colleagues quantified the frequency and nutritional quality of food and drinks featured by child social media influencers (‘kid influencers’) in their YouTube videos 3. The researchers used data from SocialBakers to select the five most-watched kid influencers (﻿3 to 14 years) on YouTube in 2019, who collectively have generated ~48 billion views to date. A sample of videos was then selected for study based on recency of upload to YouTube, and whether a food or beverage was featured in the video’s thumbnail (the still image that accompanies a video’s title). Food and beverage appearances in these videos were coded in accordance with predefined coding criteria (e.g. branded or unbranded), and healthfulness in line with the UK nutrient profile model (e.g. healthy or unhealthy). From a total sample of 418 videos, just over 40% featured food and/or drinks which were calculated to have made approximately 16.5 million advertising impressions. Around 90% of the advertised products were unhealthy branded items (e.g. McDonald’s fries), ~4% unhealthy unbranded items (e.g. a hot dog), ~3% healthy unbranded items (e.g. an apple), and ~2% healthy branded items (e.g. Yoplait yogurt).

The study is the first to quantify food and drink product/brand messages that children receive from child YouTube stars, and it paints an alarming picture, but one that is consistent with the outcomes of previous studies analysing the food and beverage cues in young adult influencers’ social media content 4. Exposure to young adult influencer marketing of unhealthy foods ﻿on Instagram has been shown to increase children’s (9-11y) food consumption by 100 kcal relative to a control group 5. Alruwaily and colleagues rightly note that following their study, a crucial next step is to examine the impact of exposure to kid influencer marketing on children’s appetitive response (e.g. brand preference, food intake). Given that similarity between an endorser and a consumer (i.e. in relation to age and interests) is believed to be critical to marketing impact 6 this research would be of importance to public health researchers and policymakers worldwide.

The content of marketing messages is also important to its persuasive power. A UK study showed that young adult influencers’ presentation of foods differed according to nutritional profile and that compared with healthy foods, less healthy foods were more often featured in appealing contexts (e.g. consumed out of the home, described positively) and as part of explicit influencer marketing campaigns 4. The present study found that in over 50% of cases the child influencer consumed the product on screen, but the paper does not describe the context or whether this is accompanied by positive feedback on the taste or other product attributes. Such contextual details in influencers’ promotion of food are also important as they are likely to have implications for children’s food-related norms and behaviour, such as shifting the cultural values underpinning food consumption 7.

﻿ The authors suggest that the findings of the present study have implications for paediatricians who should be encouraged to advise parents and carers to monitor their children’s digital usage and to talk to them about the persuasive techniques harnessed by the food and advertising industries. However, given that digital marketing is delivered straight to children’s devices (e.g. tablets), and as influencer marketing is typically experienced in an uninterrupted and immersive manner tailored to the user’s broader digital consumption 8, the level of monitoring required from a parent would simply be unfeasible. Children also need the motivation to resist marketing, as well as awareness and recognition of when it is occurring 9, so it is questionable what effect such individual-level responses would have on reducing the detrimental impact of unhealthy digital food marketing relative to stronger state-level intervention to reduce exposure and power 2.

Children have the right to participate in digital media and not be subjected to commercial practices that can have a negative effect on health. Many countries have adopted self-regulatory efforts to restrict food marketing to children but these are mostly proven to be ineffective 10. The World Health Organization advises that member states implement statutory regulation, with robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and tough sanctions for those who do not comply 2. Such measures are a crucial piece of a complex puzzle as we seek effective ways to improve the food environment and tackle the global problem of childhood obesity**.**

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