

Child Social Media Influencers and Unhealthy Food Product Placement.

Amaal Alruwaily, Chelsea Mangold et al. PEDIATRICS Volume 146, number 5, November 2020 healthy Food Product Placement

Background: Exposure to food advertising is associated with poor diet, and food companies have increased online advertising in response to growing social media use. Young children have limited cognitive abilities to recognize advertising, which may be exacerbated by branded influencer posts.

Objectives: To determine the frequency with which kid influencers promote branded and unbranded food and drinks during their YouTube videos and assess the nutritional quality of food and drinks shown.

Methods: Socialbakers data was used to identify the 5 most-watched kid influencers (ages 3 to 14 years) on YouTube in 2019. Fifty of their most-watched videos and 50 of their videos that featured food and/or drinks on the thumbnail image of the video, were searched for. Whether kid influencers consumed or played with food or toys were coded. The number of minutes food and/or drinks appeared, was quantified, and names of branded food and/or drinks were recorded. We assessed the nutritional quality of foods using the Nutrient Profile Model, and the number of drinks with added sugar was identified.

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“Kid Influencers” : A new kid on the block!

Results: A sample of 418 YouTube videos met the search criteria, and 179 of those videos featured food and/or drinks. Food and/or drinks were featured in those videos 291 times. Kid influencers’ YouTube videos were collectively viewed > 48 billion times, and videos featuring food and/or drinks were viewed 1 billion times. Most food and/or drinks were unhealthy branded items (n = 263; 90.34%; eg, McDonald’s), followed by unhealthy unbranded items (n = 12; 4.1%; eg, hot dogs), healthy unbranded items (n = 9; 3.1%; eg, fruit), and healthy branded items (n = 7; 2.4%; eg, Yoplait yogurt).

Conclusion: Kid influencers generate millions of impressions for unhealthy food and drink brands through product placement. The Federal Trade Commission should strengthen regulations regarding product placement on YouTube videos featuring young children.

EXPERT COMMENT

According to this study Kid influencers on YouTube create lots of on-screen content promoting junk food. Watching advertisements for unhealthy foods is thought to increase the calories that kids eat by arousing cravings and unknowingly directs them to look for these food items. Poor dietary habits during childhood place youth at an increased risk for obesity and diet-related health conditions later in life. Food and beverage companies spend great amount of money on youth-targeted marketing. We should be concerned over this very influential yet largely under-regulated method of advertising. Children do not recognize the influencer as a paid promoter of products and also develops trust and credibility in a product brand being displayed because of a belief that the influencer would not endorse the product if they did not truly like it. We, as pediatricians, should make the parents and children understand this fact. There is an urgent need to pay attention to this issue at the government level too and find ways to rein in these practices and protect children.

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With warm regards,

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Reference

Alruwaily A, Mangold C, Greene T, Arshonsky J, Cassidy O, Pomeranz JL, Bragg M. Child Social Media Influencers and Unhealthy Food Product Placement. Pediatrics. 2020 Nov;146(5):e20194057. doi: 10.1542/peds.2019-4057.

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