

“Big Food” and “Big Data” Online Platforms Fueling Youth Obesity Crisis as Coronavirus Pandemic Rages

New Report Calls for Action to Address Saturation of Social Media, Gaming Platforms, and Streaming Video with Unhealthy Food and Beverage Products

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For Immediate Release

Washington, DC, May 12, 2021

A report released today calls for federal and global action to check the growth of digital marketing of food and beverage products that target children and teens online. Tech platforms especially popular with young people—including Facebook’s Instagram, Amazon’s Twitch, ByteDance’s TikTok, and Google’s YouTube – are working with giant food and beverage companies, such as Coca Cola, KFC, Pepsi and McDonald’s, to promote sugar-sweetened soda, energy drinks, candy, fast food, and other unhealthy products across social media, gaming, and streaming video. The report offers fresh new analysis and insight into the most recent industry practices, documenting how “Big Food” and “Big Tech” are using AI, machine learning, and other data-driven techniques to ensure that food marketing permeates all of the online cultural spaces where children and teenagers congregate. The pandemic has dramatically increased exposure to these aggressive new forms of marketing, further increasing young people’s risks of becoming obese. Black and Brown youth are particularly vulnerable to new online promotional strategies. Noting that concerns about youth obesity have recently fallen off the public radar in the U.S., the report calls for both international and domestic policies to rein in the power of the global technology and food industries. The report and an executive summary are [available](#) at the Center for Digital Democracy’s (CDD) website, along with other background material.

“Our investigation found that there is a huge amount of marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages all throughout the youth digital media landscape, and it has been allowed to flourish with no government oversight,” explained Kathryn C. Montgomery, PhD, the report’s lead author, Professor Emerita at American University and CDD’s Senior Strategist. “We know from decades of research that marketing of these products contributes to childhood obesity and related illnesses. And we’ve witnessed how so many children, teens, and young adults suffering from these conditions have been particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus. Both the technology industry and the food and beverage industry need to be held accountable for creating an online environment that undermines young people’s health.”

The report examines an array of Big Data strategies and AdTech tools used by the food industry, focusing on three major sectors of digital culture that attract large numbers of young people -- the so-called “influencer economy,” gaming and esports platforms, and the rapidly expanding streaming and online video industry.

Dozens of digital campaigns by major food and beverage companies, many of which have won prestigious ad industry awards, illustrate some of the latest trends and techniques in digital marketing:

The use of influencers is one of the primary ways that marketers reach and engage children and teens. Campaigns are designed to weave branded material “seamlessly into the daily narratives” shared on social media. Children and teens are particularly susceptible to influencer marketing, which taps into their psycho-social development. Marketing researchers closely study how young people become emotionally attached to celebrities and other influencers through “parasocial” relationships.

- McDonald’s enlisted rapper Travis Scott, to promote the “Travis Scott Meal” to young people, featuring “a medium Sprite, a quarter pounder with bacon, and fries with barbecue sauce.” The campaign was so successful that some restaurants in the chain sold out of supplies within days of its launch. This and other celebrity endorsements have helped boost McDonald’s stock price, generated a trove of valuable consumer data, and triggered enormous publicity across social media.
- Food and beverage brands have flocked to Facebook-owned Instagram, which is considered one of the best ways to reach and engage teens. According to industry research, nearly all influencer campaigns (93%) are conducted on Instagram. Cheetos’ Chester Cheetah is now an “Instagram creator,” telling his own “stories” along with millions of other users on the platform.
- One Facebook report, “Quenching Today’s Thirsts: How Consumers Find and Choose Drinks,” found that “64% of people who drink carbonated beverages use Instagram for drinks-related activities, such as sharing or liking posts and commenting on drinks content,” and more than a third of them report following or “liking” soft drink “brands, hashtags, or influencer posts.”

The online gaming space generates more revenue than TV, film or music, and attracts viewers and players – including many young people -- who are “highly engaged for a considerable length of time.” Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) and first-person shooter games are considered one of the best marketing environments, offering a wide range of techniques for “monetization,” including in-game advertising, sponsorship, product placement, use of influencers, and even “branded games” created by advertisers. Twitch, the leading gaming platform, owned by Amazon, has become an especially important venue for food and beverage marketers. Online gamers and fans are considered prime targets for snack, soft drink, and fast food brands, all products that lend themselves to uninterrupted game play and spectatorship.

- PepsiCo’s energy drink, MTN DEW Amp Game Fuel, is specifically “designed with gamers in mind.” To attract influencers, it was featured on Twitch’s “Bounty Board,” a one-stop-shopping tool for “streamers,” enabling them to accept paid sponsorship (or “bounties”) from brands that want to reach the millions of gamers and their followers.

- Red Bull recently partnered with Tyler “Ninja” Blevins, who is recognized as “the most popular gaming influencer in the world with over 13 million followers on Twitch, over 21 million YouTube subscribers, and another 13 million followers on Instagram.”
- Dr. Pepper featured the faces of players of the popular *Fortnite* game on its bottles, with an announcement on Twitter that this campaign resulted in “the most engaged tweet” the soft-drink company had ever experienced.
- Wendy’s partnered with “five of the biggest Twitch streamers,” as well as food delivery app Uber Eats, to launch its “Never Stop Gaming” menu, with the promise of “five days of non-stop gaming, delicious meal combos and exclusive prizes.” Branded meals were created for each of the five streamers, who offered their fans the opportunity to order directly through their Twitch channels and have the food delivered to their doors.

One of the newest marketing frontiers is streaming and online video, which have experienced a boost in viewership during the pandemic. Young people are avid users, accessing video on their mobile devices, gaming consoles, personal computers, and online connections to their TV sets.

- Concerned that teens “are drinking less soda,” Coca-Cola’s Fanta brand developed a comprehensive media campaign to trigger “an ongoing conversation with teen consumers through digital platforms” by creating four videos based on the brand’s most popular flavors, and targeting youth on YouTube, Hulu, Roku, Crackle, and other online video platforms. “From a convenience store dripping with orange flavor and its own DJ cat, to an 8-bit videogame-ified pizza parlor, the digital films transport fans to parallel universes of their favorite hangout spots, made more extraordinary and fantastic once a Fanta is opened.”
- New video ad formats allow virtual brand images to be inserted into the content and tailored to specific viewers. “Where one customer sees a Coca-Cola on the table,” explained a marketing executive, “the other sees green tea. Where one customer sees a bag of chips, another sees a muesli bar... in the exact same scene.”

The major technology platforms are facilitating and profiting from the marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products.

- Facebook’s internal “creative shop” has helped Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Unilever, Nestle and hundreds of other brands develop global marketing initiatives to promote their products across its platform. The division specializes in “building data-driven advertising campaigns, branded content, branded entertainment, content creation, brand management, social design,” and similar efforts.
- Google regularly provides a showcase for companies such as Pepsi, McDonald’s and Mondelez to tout their joint success promoting their respective products throughout the world. For example, Pepsi explained in a “Think with Google” post that it used Google’s “Director’s Mix” personalization video advertising technology to further what it calls its

ability to “understand the consumer’s DNA,” meaning their “needs, context, and location in the shopping journey.” Pepsi could leverage Google’s marketing tools to help its goal of combining “insights with storytelling and drive personalized experiences at scale.”

- Hershey’s has been working closely with Amazon to market its candy products via streaming video, as well as through its own ecommerce marketplace. In a case study published online, Amazon explained that “...as viewing consumption began to fragment, the brand [Hershey’s] realized it was no longer able to reach its audience with linear TV alone.” Amazon gave Hershey’s access to its storehouse of data so the candy company could market its products on Amazon’s streaming services, such as IMDbTV. Amazon allowed Hershey’s to use Amazon’s data to ensure the candy brands would “be positioned to essentially ‘win’ search in that category on Amazon and end up as the first result....” Hershey’s also made use of “impulse buy” strategies on the Amazon platform, including “cart intercepts,” which prompt a customer to “add in snacks as the last step in their online shopping trip, mimicking the way someone might browse for candy during the checkout at a physical store.”

Some of the largest food and beverage corporations—including Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Pepsi—have, in effect, transformed themselves into Big Data businesses.

- Coca-Cola operates over 40 interconnected social media monitoring facilities worldwide, which use AI to follow customers, analyze their online conversations, and track their behaviors.
- PepsiCo has developed a “fully addressable consumer database” (called “Consumer DNA”) that enables it to “see a full 360 degree view of our consumers.”
- McDonald’s made a significant investment in Plexure, a “mobile engagement” company specializing in giving fast food restaurants the ability “to build rich consumer profiles” and leverage the data “to provide deeply personalized offers and content that increase average transaction value” and help generate other revenues. One of its specialties is designing personalized messaging that triggers the release of the brain chemical, dopamine.

The report raises particularly strong concerns about the impact of all these practices on youth of color, noting that food and beverage marketers “are appropriating some of the most powerful ‘multicultural’ icons of youth pop culture and enlisting these celebrities in marketing campaigns for sodas, ‘branded’ fast-food meals, and caffeine-infused energy drinks.” These promotions can “compound health risks for young Blacks and Hispanics,” subjecting them to “multiple layers of vulnerability, reinforcing existing patterns of health disparity that many of them experience.”

“U.S. companies are infecting the world’s young people with invasive, stealth, and incessant digital marketing for junk food,” commented Lori Dorfman, DrPH, director, Berkeley Media Studies Group, one of CDD’s partners on the project. “And they are targeting Black and Brown

youth because they know kids of color are cultural trendsetters,” she explained. “Big Food and Big Tech run away with the profits after trampling the health of children, youth, and families.”

The Center for Digital Democracy and its allies are calling for a comprehensive and ambitious set of policies for limiting the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to young people, arguing that U.S. policymakers must work with international health and youth advocacy organizations to develop a coordinated agenda for regulating these two powerful global industries. As the report explains, other governments in the UK, Europe, Canada, and Latin America have already developed policies for limiting or banning the promotion of foods that are high in fat, sugar, and salt, including on digital platforms. Yet, the United States has continued to rely on an outdated self-regulatory model that does not take into account the full spectrum of Big Data and AdTech practices in today’s contemporary digital marketplace, places too much responsibility on parents, and offers only minimal protections for the youngest children.

“Industry practices have become so sophisticated, widespread, and entangled that only a comprehensive public policy approach will be able to produce a healthier digital environment for young people,” explained Katharina Kopp, PhD, CDD’s Deputy Director and Director of Research.

The report lays out an eight-point research-based policy framework:

1. Protections for adolescents as well as young children.
2. Uniform, global, science-based nutritional criteria.
3. Restrictions on brand promotion.
4. Limits on the collection and use of data.
5. Prohibition of manipulative and unfair marketing techniques and design features.
6. Market research protections for children and teens.
7. Elimination of digital racial discrimination.
8. Transparency, accountability, and enforcement.

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