Young people’s perceptions of what influences their food choices and what changes they want to see
July 2019
Executive Summary

In the UK, overweight and obesity is the second leading cause of cancer after smoking. Overweight and obesity causes 13 different types of cancer and over 22,000 cancer cases each year in the UK.[1] It is estimated that each year, obesity costs the NHS in England £6.1bn and the wider UK economy £27bn.[2]

Childhood obesity rates in the UK are among the highest in Western Europe, with a third of children leaving primary school with obesity[3]. A child who is obese is five times more likely to be so as an adult[4], so acting early can protect them from a lifetime of avoidable ill-health and disease.

Exposure to marketing for food and drink high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) negatively influences dietary knowledge and behaviours and is associated with obesity-relevant outcomes such as consuming HFSS products.

Three years on

This study builds on a previous qualitative study conducted in 2016[5], which found that young people are influenced in a variety of ways and that TV marketing (both linear and on-demand) was particularly influential. While TV advertising continues to have an impact on young people’s lives and on their health, digital marketing has also become prominent.

The food and drink industry has embraced digital media and put it at the centre of their marketing strategies. Food and drink producers use a sophisticated range of digital marketing strategies, ranging from smartphone apps to social media. Within each activity, they also use a wide variety of creative and stimulating marketing activities to create engaging and attractive content.

As digital marketing becomes more widespread, there is a need to further build the evidence base on what impact this may have on young people’s behaviours, attitudes and health outcomes.

To reflect changes in marketing environment and media habits, this study looks at young people’s interaction with media and their perceptions of HFSS products and marketing, in particular digital marketing and its impact.

Nine focus groups were conducted with 60 11-19 year olds across Great Britain. From those conversations, three key themes were identified in this study:

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**Young people feel HFSS marketing is pervasive and targeted at them.**

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**Young people are also influenced to consume HFSS products by cost, convenience, family habits and age.**

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**Young people are concerned about the impact of HFSS marketing and are supportive of protective measures.**

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Not only does this study help to build the evidence base, it has also fed into the development of a UK-wide survey which will further build the evidence on the impact of HFSS marketing and other influencing factors on young people’s dietary choices.
Young people feel HFSS marketing is pervasive and targeted at them

HFSS marketing, particularly digital, is prevalent in young people’s lives. Immersion in marketing and brand reinforcement was demonstrated through young people’s recognition of products on social media and across multiple other platforms.

Young people feel targeted by HFSS marketing
Young people felt that HFSS marketing targeted them by using spaces associated with younger audiences such as social media, and through appealing content.

The tactics used in HFSS marketing make it easy to recall
Young people knew they had seen HFSS ads, even if they couldn’t always recall them in full. Marketing tactics such as humour, deals and slogans cut through and were the most remembered, highlighting the power of such tactics in brand recognition and recall.

HFSS marketing influences purchasing of HFSS products
Young people were able to recall specific examples of when HFSS marketing had directly influenced their purchasing behaviours such as buying HFSS products or pestering parents to buy these products.

Young people perceive themselves as immune to HFSS marketing
Young people perceived that it was even younger children who were susceptible, rather than their peers or adults.

“I saw them on the side of a bus, and then I bought some, and then they were really good.”

Other factors also influence young people to consume HFSS products

HFSS food and drinks are appealing, despite awareness of being unhealthy
Young people perceive HFSS products to be very unhealthy, but also find these products appealing and enjoyable to consume.

Food and drink choice is influenced by the cost and convenience of HFSS products
Health is an influence on food preferences, with young people reporting they would prefer to eat healthily. However, dietary choice is also influenced by cost, time, convenience (with HFSS choices perceived as cheaper and more convenient) and family.

Young people are more influenced by some factors, and less by others, as they get older
Age was cited as a factor influencing diet. Young people described how awareness of
the importance of healthy eating increases with age. However, participants also felt that during a young person’s transition to independence, HFSS products may become more appealing due to their cost, convenience and availability.

Young people recognise the link of an HFSS diet with many health conditions, but awareness of the link with cancer was low
Young people linked a HFSS diet to health conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity and mental health issues. But young people’s knowledge of the impact a HFSS diet could have on cancer risk indirectly through obesity was limited.

Young people are concerned about HFSS marketing and supportive of protective measures
Young people expressed concerns about the marketing of HFSS products
HFSS marketing was seen to be misleading and to glamourise HFSS products. The active and widespread promotion of HFSS products, especially compared to the lack of marketing of non-HFSS food and drink, was felt to be wrong. Product labelling was seen as inadequate.

Young people were supportive of measures to reduce their exposure to HFSS marketing and consumption
Young people called for HFSS marketing to stop targeting them as an audience. They were supportive of measures such as bans/time restrictions, restrictions on billboard and poster placement and for ads to be more truthful in their depiction of products and their adverse health impacts. Plain packaging, restricting displays, and clearer product information labels were highlighted as having the potential to be effective.

The Soft Drinks Industry Levy and product reformulation was perceived to have reduced personal consumption and popularity of HFSS products
A key concern amongst young people was the perceived lower cost of HFSS products compared to healthier options. Among those who were aware of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, young people were broadly supportive and felt that it had reduced popularity and consumption of HFSS drinks.

What should government do?
Policy action across the UK so far has been insufficient in making it easier for young people to be healthy. The UK Government must swiftly implement a comprehensive 9pm watershed for HFSS ads on all media. In addition, the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments should each introduce restrictions on price and location based promotions on HFSS products in all retail settings. Furthermore, evidence on how fiscal measures can improve public health should be built upon, to explore how these polices can be used to boost reformulation and change consumer behaviour.
Policy Recommendations

In 2016 Cancer Research UK ran focus groups with 11 to 19 year olds discussing factors impacting their diets and weight. Yet, three years – and two chapters of the UK Government’s Childhood Obesity Plan – later, young people’s experiences tell a disappointingly similar story. Children are still widely exposed to marketing for unhealthy food and drink, feel targeted by this marketing, and report that this influences their purchasing and consumption habits.

This reflects the lack of concrete policy progress, except on sugary drinks, made in recent years. Both the UK Government and Scottish Government committed to a shared ambition to halve childhood obesity rates by 2030. Yet, this will not be achievable without ensuring that the intentions set out in their respective national obesity strategies are delivered fully and without further delay.

We are calling for all UK governments to prioritise implementing policies that will modify the food environment, reducing pressure on children at all points at which they are exposed to cues or nudges towards unhealthy food.

Restricting junk food marketing

One vital measure to reduce children’s exposure to HFSS marketing is the introduction of a comprehensive 9pm watershed on TV and online. The success of the marketing mix relies on reaching consumers at multiple points. With children recalling adverts across traditional and digital media, and on multiple platforms, any measures to reduce exposure must encompass all media which young people access. Children themselves support this policy, and favour even broader restrictions, including on outdoor advertising. Both the Scottish and Welsh governments have also sought to ensure that the UK Government acts with urgency.

Protecting children from the subtle tactics we have previously identified in HFSS food marketing is particularly important given that children see themselves as immune to it.

Ending price and location-based promotions on unhealthy foods

Children report that their food and drink choices are influenced by traits of food and drink choice such as cost and convenience – unsurprising as the current retail environment is skewed heavily towards the promotion of unhealthy foods.

We are calling for mandatory measures to restrict the promotion and marketing of food and drink high in fat, salt and sugar to be implemented across retail and out of home settings. This will be an important step in reshaping the obesogenic environment to one that is more conducive to healthy living.

Ensuring that the UK, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments reach consensus on how regulations will work in each nation will allow for a UK-wide impact, while also creating a level playing field for industry. Previous voluntary measures have not achieved the desired impacts and, given the scale of excess weight in the UK, we must introduce regulatory measures if we are to tackle the obesity crisis.

We are also supportive of restricting various other forms of promotion, such as location-
based promotions (end of aisle, checkouts, etc.). These restrictions will further tackle the obesogenic environment and re-stack the odds of eating healthily back in favour of the consumer.

**Further measures**

In Chapter Two of its Childhood Obesity Plan, the UK Government said it may consider further use of the tax system to promote healthy food across the UK if the voluntary sugar reduction programme does not deliver sufficient progress.

Fiscal and pricing policies have been shown to be effective in promoting healthy behaviours, as tobacco and alcohol taxes have shown, and more recently the sugary drinks tax. These policies also have a pro-equity impact. A report from Public Health England on tax and fiscal measures to promote better health outcomes concluded that there is merit in pursuing such measures[^16].

Those at the coalface of the childhood obesity epidemic – children and young people themselves – support measures that will go further to tackle childhood obesity. This group view the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) positively and support its extension to other products, such as confectionary and chocolate and other products high in fat, salt and sugar.

When SDIL is reviewed in 2020, the UK Government should commit to extending the levy to sugar-sweetened milk-based drinks and consider tightening current sugar thresholds to encourage further reformulation. The UK Government should also work with devolved administrations to continue to build the evidence on fiscal measures and explore how these policies can aid reformulation and change business and consumer behaviour.

**Recommendations**

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**Introduce a comprehensive 9pm watershed on HFSS food and drink products on all media which children are exposed to, in and out of the home. This includes restrictions on TV and similar measures online.**

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**Introduce restrictions on price and location-based promotions on HFSS food and drink products in all retail settings, in-store and online.**

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**Build the evidence on fiscal measures and explore how these policies can aid reformulation and change business and consumer behaviour.**
Report

This report should be referred to as follows:
“Still Under Pressure; But Pressing for Change: Young people’s perceptions of what influences their food choices and what changes they want to see.” Andy MacGregor, Kaushal Attygalle, Jessica Shields, Jessica Newberry Le Vay, Emily Whiteside, Malcolm Clark, Jyotsna Vohra. 2019

Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world’s largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2017/2018, we spent £423 million on research institutes, hospitals and universities across the UK. We receive no funding from Government for our research.

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References