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Study finds most young children frequently see messages promoting food and beverage brands while watching YouTube and YouTube Kids

Children as young as age 3 are exposed to unhealthy food brand promotions when viewing videos on mobile devices

Hartford, Conn. – Messages promoting candy, sugar-sweetened drinks, fast food, and sweet or salty snacks brands frequently appear during videos viewed by 3- to 8-year-olds on YouTube and YouTube Kids, according to a new paper from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health at the University of Connecticut.

This is the first study to measure young children's (3-8y) actual exposure to food brands while watching YouTube or YouTube Kids videos of their own choice on their own mobile devices. To mimic their typical video viewing habits, 101 children (3-8y) used their own mobile devices to watch videos on the YouTube platform of their choice (YouTube or YouTube Kids) for 30 minutes in their own homes.

The study's findings, published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, found that 75% of 6- to 8-year-olds and 36% of 3- to 5-year-olds viewed promotions for unhealthy food and beverage brands, averaging 7 such messages during 30 minutes of video watching. Moreover, some 6- to 8-year-olds saw alcohol ads while watching YouTube videos.

The majority of food brand appearances (73%) promoted candy, sugar-sweetened drinks, fast food or other restaurants, and sweet or salty snacks. Healthy products (including water, plain milk, 100% juice) made up just 3% of appearances. Food and beverage brands appeared more often when children watched YouTube (60%) compared to YouTube Kids (36%).

"More than half of food brands in these videos came from companies that participate in the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, a U.S. food industry self-regulatory program" said Jennifer Harris, Ph.D., Senior Research Advisor at the Rudd Center. "Despite these companies' pledges to only advertise healthier choices to children, child-influencers frequently promoted their brands, including candy, sugary drinks and sweet and salty snacks."

Children viewed food brand promotions while watching YouTube videos during video previews (i.e., thumbnails) (23% of brand appearances) and ads (17%). However, more than 60% of food brand appearances were embedded within the video content. Lifestyle videos (primarily influencer videos) contributed 77% of these appearances and most (71%) showed the influencer or another character consuming or preparing to consume the product. The FTC has called on companies and social media influencers to discontinue these common stealth marketing practices that blur the line between entertainment and advertising, especially when aimed at young children.

“Very young children are being bombarded with unhealthy product promotion on YouTube and YouTube Kids, frequently embedded in their favorite videos as props or part of the storyline which disguises persuasive intent,” said Frances Fleming-Milici, Ph.D., the study’s lead author and Director of Marketing Initiatives at the Rudd Center. “As children as young as age 3 spend more and more time on these platforms, policies must be enacted to protect them from this stealth marketing of products that harm their health.”

Currently, Google bans food and beverage advertising on YouTube Kids and during “made-for-kids” videos (a subset of videos designated for children under age 13). However, over one-third of 3- to 8-year-olds who watched YouTube Kids, a channel specifically created for children, viewed food brand appearances embedded in videos and thumbnail images. Moreover, brand appearances in “made-for-kids” videos on the main YouTube platform contributed most of 3- to 5-year-olds’ total branded food exposures. Therefore, watching YouTube Kids or “made-for-kids” videos does not protect children from exposure to stealth marketing promoting unhealthy food brands. In addition, not one video embedded with a food or beverage brand disclosed food company-sponsored content, as required by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission.

Google (YouTube’s parent company), food companies that participate in CFBAI, and the US government must establish policies to protect children who are a large and vulnerable part of the online viewing community.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

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