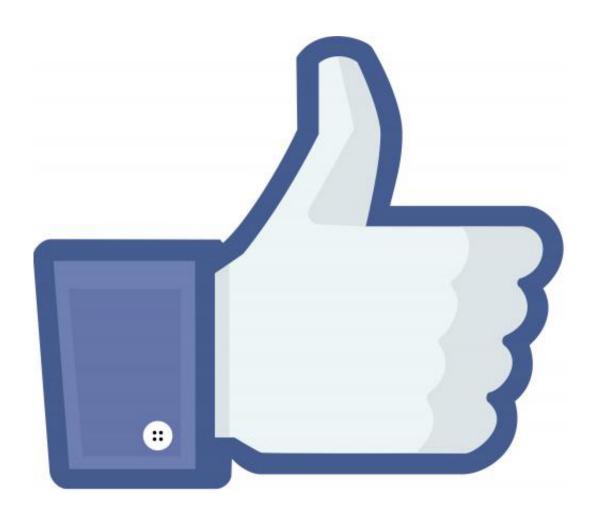# Unhealthy brands using Facebook to target young people

October 22 2014, by Kobi Print

World-first research by the University of Sydney reveals that junk food brands are engaging with young Facebook users to promote unhealthy

foods which can contribute to obesity and lifestyle diseases.

Published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, the new study sheds light on the digital marketing strategies of energy dense, nutrient-poor food (EDNP) brands to teens and young adults who are using Facebook.

"Our findings show that unhealthy food and beverage marketing is prolific and seamlessly integrated within online social networks," says lead author Dr Becky Freeman, from the University of Sydney's School of Public Health.

"Adolescents and young adults are engaging with brands like Dominos, Slurpee and Skittles on Facebook on a near-daily basis.

"Given the exponential growth in use of social media websites such as Facebook among young people, there is a need to understand the techniques and reach of this kind of marketing on these sites.

"Soft drinks and energy drink brand pages are hugely popular on Facebook, reflecting the high consumption of these products among adolescents and young adults.

"Drinking sugar sweetened beverages is a known contributor to rising obesity, and has been the focus of controversial tax policy reform."

The study used a sample of top-ranked Facebook pages of food manufacturers, food brands, retailers and restaurants. The resulting analysis reviewed 27 food and beverage brand Facebook pages on the basis of their marketing techniques, follower engagement and marketing reach of messages posted by the pages.

"Young Facebook users willingly spread marketing messages on behalf of food and beverage corporations with seemingly little incentive or

reward required," Dr Freeman says.

"Any activity that users engage with on brand pages can appear in the news feed of their friends, so marketing messages quickly amplify across social networks. This kind of consumer involvement and engagement is unique to social media communication."

Results further showed that competitions, giveaways and aligning with positive events such as Australia Day were found to be effective means of engagement between users and the food companies.

"The Facebook pages in our study were not simply low-budget fan pages, all were professionally moderated and appeared to be administered by either the company brand owner or an advertising agency," Dr Freeman says.

"In terms of health policy, much of the current work to limit exposure to EDNP advertising is focused on restricting advertisements during children's television programs and viewing hours. Our study shows that this narrow focus is likely to miss large amount of online advertising aimed at adolescents.

"As a minimal first step, increased monitoring of how EDNP food and beverages are marketed on social media is essential.

"Our study focused on Australian Facebook users, however our findings have international relevance given that many of the pages in our study were for global brands," Dr Freeman says.

Fast facts:

- This is the first study to systematically assess the nature of food and drink promotions on the globally popular social media site

Facebook.

- Social media use has reached near saturation among young Australians, with more than 85 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 years accessing the Internet for social networking or online gaming
- Australians are enthusiastic Facebook users, with 9 million people, or nearly 40 per cent of the entire population, visiting the site every day

Provided by University of Sydney