

# Almost all food and beverage products marketed by music stars are unhealthy

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Credit: Peter Häger/Public Domain

Recording artists are frequently the face of commercial products—and children and adolescents are frequently their target audience. Now, a new study by researchers at NYU Langone Medical Center finds that the vast majority of the food and beverage products marketed by some of the most popular music stars are unhealthy.

And this type of advertising is contributing to the alarming rise in childhood and teen obesity, the authors warn.

Soda and other sugary drinks, fast [food](#) and sweets are among the most common food and beverage products endorsed by famous music personalities, according to the descriptive study, which publishes June 6 in *Pediatrics*. Equally alarming, none of the music stars identified in the study endorsed fruits, vegetables, or whole grains. Only one endorsed a natural food deemed healthy—pistachios.

This is believed to be the first study to use a rigorous nutritional analysis to evaluate healthfulness of food and drinks marketed by music stars, reviewing dozens of advertisements that were disseminated over a 14-year period. Lead author Marie Bragg, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Population Health at NYU Langone, conducted a study three years ago of celebrity athlete endorsements using similar methods.

"Because of our nation's childhood and teenage obesity public health crises, it is important to raise awareness about how companies are using celebrities popular with these audiences to market their unhealthy products," said Dr. Bragg, who is also a faculty member at the NYU College of Global Public Health. "Research has already shown that food advertising leads to overeating, and the food industry spends \$1.8 billion per year marketing to youth alone."

## **Study Methods: Identifying Pop Stars and their Endorsements**

To identify popular music stars, the investigators went through Billboard Magazine's "Hot 100" song charts from 2013 and 2014. The researchers also verified their popularity and marketing appeal with teens by reviewing Teen Choice Award winners, and quantified the number of

YouTube video views associated with the celebrities' food and nonalcoholic beverage brand endorsements.

The investigators then catalogued every endorsement between 2000 and 2014 using AdScope, an advertisement database that contains all forms of ads, including television, magazine, and radio. They also searched for official commercials or endorsements on YouTube and in media sources. Endorsements were defined to include a celebrity's participation in a concert sponsored by a product.

After sorting the endorsements into different marketing categories, the authors found that 65 of 163 identified [pop stars](#) were associated with 57 different food and beverage brands. Food and nonalcoholic beverages were the second-largest endorsement category, comprising 18 percent of endorsements and ranking after consumer goods at 26 percent and ahead of retail at 11 percent.

To assess nutritional value of the endorsed food products, the investigators analyzed nutrition information on food labels using the Nutrient Profile Model (NPM), which has been used in other food marketing research studies and provides a score that represents nutrient content. Twenty-one out of 26 food products—or 81 percent—were deemed "nutrient poor."

The investigators determined a beverage's healthfulness by looking at calories from added sugar. Of 69 beverages endorsed, 49 or 71 percent were sugar-sweetened. Full-calorie soft drinks were the most commonly endorsed in the category. In contrast, water-related endorsements appeared only three times.

## **Unhealthy Food Marketing and Youth Obesity**

Food & beverage companies spend \$2 billion a year on youth-targeted

ads, with American children seeing approximately 4,700 ads each year and teens viewing 5,900 ads per year, according to Institute of Medicine research. There were about 313 million views of the YouTube video versions for food and beverage endorsements associated with celebrities in this study's sample, although unique views could not be counted. Celebrity food endorsements promote higher product preference, and exposure to any kind of food advertising is linked to "excessive consumption," according to research.

"These celebrity endorsement deals are often worth millions of dollars each, suggesting companies find them critical for promoting products," said Dr. Bragg.

Food and beverage marketing has been identified in a variety of epidemiologic and psychology studies as a significant environmental contributor to childhood obesity. In 2012, over one-third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Public Health Service.

Although many food and beverage companies have taken voluntary pledges not to target children under 12 years old with certain marketing, teens are not included.

"Given the heavy targeting of adolescents and the amount of money they spend on foods and beverages, voluntary food marketing reduction pledges should expand to include teens," said Dr. Bragg. "This also would be consistent with American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations, which encourages pediatricians to support local and national efforts to reduce food marketing while also counseling patients to limit screen time."

Celebrities also should use their influence to promote more healthful marketing and encourage consumption of healthy foods, the authors

suggest.

"The popularity of music celebrities among adolescents makes them uniquely poised to serve as positive role models," said Alysia N. Miller, MPH, study co-author and research coordinator in the Department of Population Health. "Celebrities should be aware that their endorsements could exacerbate society's struggle with obesity—and they should endorse healthy products instead."

**More information:** *Pediatrics*, [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2015-3977](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-3977)

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