

Children's health and privacy at risk from digital marketing

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For the first time, researchers and health experts have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the concerning situation in the World Health Organisation European Region regarding digital marketing to children of foods high in fats, salt and sugars.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has published the report, which calls for immediate action by policy makers to recognise and address the growing issue of targeted marketing to kids through digital media.

Dr Emma Boyland, from the University's Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, in collaboration with The Open University, WHO, University of Melbourne and Flinders University, produced the report which examines trends in media use among children, marketing methods in the new digital media landscape and children's engagement with such marketing.

In the absence of effective regulations for digital media in many countries, children are increasingly exposed to persuasive and individually-tailored marketing techniques through, for example, social media sites and advergames. This trend persists, despite the stubbornly high rates of childhood obesity found almost universally in the WHO European region.

Food marketing has been identified by the scientific community as an important contributor to the so-called 'obesogenic' environment, where foods high in fats, salt and sugars are promoted extensively, are more

visible, as well as cheaper and easier to obtain than healthy options. Food marketing has been consistently demonstrated to influence children's food preferences and choices, shaping their dietary habits and increasing the risk of becoming obese.

Digital marketing offers a loophole for marketers, as there is currently little or no effective regulation and minimal efforts to control it. Furthermore, due to the ability to tailor adverts online to a specific audience, marketing online is potentially much more powerful and targeted to the individual child and their social network.

Often, parents do not see the same advertisements, nor can they observe the online activities of children and many therefore underestimate the scale of the problem.

Dr Emma Boyland, said: "The food, marketing and digital industries have access to an enormous amount of information regarding young people's exposure to HFSS food marketing online and its influence on children's behaviour, yet external researchers are excluded from these privately held insights, which increases the power imbalances between industry and public health."

To address the challenges the report suggests a number of recommendations. These include States acknowledging their duty to protect children from HFSS [digital marketing](#) with statutory regulation, the extension of existing offline protection online and existing regulation of internet content being drawn on to compel private Internet platforms to remove marketing of HFSS foods.

Dr Boyland adds: "Children have the right to participate in [digital media](#); and, when they are participating, they have the right to protection of their health and privacy and to not be economically exploited."

More information: [www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics... ry-perspectives-2016](http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/diseases/infectious/diseases/antimicrobial-resistance/antimicrobial-resistance-perspectives-2016)

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