

Research highlights the influence social media marketing has on children's food intake

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New research from the University of Liverpool, presented at the European Congress on Obesity today (Wednesday, 23 May), highlights the negative influence that social media has on children's food intake.

Current research shows [celebrity endorsement](#) and television advertising of unhealthy foods increases [children's](#) intake of these foods. However, children are increasingly exposed to marketing through digital avenues, such as on [social media](#), and the impact of marketing by YouTube video bloggers (vloggers) on these outcomes has, until now, not been known.

According to a recent report by Ofcom children in the UK now have more access to social media than ever before with 21% of 3-4 year olds and 35% of 5-7-year-olds having their own tablet. In older children, 39% of 8-11-year-olds have their own smartphone and 52% have their own tablet; 83% of 12-15-year-olds have their own smartphone and 55% have their own tablet.

Vloggers' influence

Ph.D. student Anna Coates, from the University of Liverpool's Appetite and Obesity research group, conducted a study to examine the effect of social media marketing of snack foods (healthy and unhealthy), via vloggers' Instagram pages, on children's snack intake.

During the study 176 children, aged between 9 and 10 years, were randomly split into three equal groups and were shown artificially created, but realistic, Instagram pages of popular vloggers (each has millions of followers). One group was shown images of the vlogger with unhealthy snacks, the second group was shown images of the vlogger with healthy snacks and the third group was shown images of the vlogger with non-[food](#) products. The participants' subsequent intake of snacks (healthy and unhealthy options) were measured.

Children in the group that viewed the unhealthy snack images consumed 32% more kcals from unhealthy snacks specifically and 26% more kcals in total (from healthy and [unhealthy snacks](#)) compared with children who saw the non-food images. There was no significant difference in total kcal intake, or healthy [snack](#) kcal intake, between children who saw the Instagram profile with healthy images and those who saw the non-food images.

Impactful and exploitative

Of the study Anna Coates, said: "These findings suggest that the marketing of unhealthy foods, via vloggers' Instagram pages, increases children's immediate energy intake. The results are supported by celebrity endorsement data, which show unhealthy food endorsements increase children's unhealthy food intake, but healthy food endorsements have little or no effect on healthy food intake.

"Young people trust vloggers more than celebrities so their endorsements may be even more impactful and exploitative. Tighter restrictions are needed around the digital marketing of unhealthy foods that children are exposed to, and vloggers should not be permitted to promote [unhealthy foods](#) to vulnerable young people on social media."

Provided by University of Liverpool

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