

# Healthy beverages placed in Instagram pictures don't influence sugary drink choices

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Credit: Flinders University

Subtly placing healthy beverages in Instagram photos is not an effective way to influence Australians towards consuming nutritious drinks in the fight against the negative health impacts of sugary options, according to

new research.

Psychology researchers at Flinders University say reducing sugar intake should be a priority, with the World Health Organization warning [sugar-sweetened beverages](#) are a primary source of excess sugar consumption globally, accounting for 50% of excess sugar intake in Australia.

The researchers developed two behavioral experiments to investigate the [potential benefits](#) of deploying images, containing water or [soft drinks](#), in non-drink related Instagram style advertising images.

"The experiments investigated whether subtly incorporating beverages into Instagram images could nudge choices from a vending machine-style visual display. In both experiments, glasses of water or cola, or no beverages were incorporated into a series of Instagram-style advertising images," says lead researcher and Ph.D. candidate Enola Kay in the College of Education, Psychology and Social work.

Nudging is a term which refers to a range of subtle and unobtrusive tools to gently guide behavior which are designed to work relatively unconsciously and aim to make the desired option the easiest or default choice.

"For example, placing healthy foods at checkout counters or rearranging supermarket shelves to make [healthier foods](#) more prominent have been found to increase healthy food purchases in some studies. The unhealthy options remain available, but the healthier options are more obvious and easier to access, therefore being more likely to be chosen."

The researchers found that placing healthy drink images into the background of Instagram photos is not an effective way to nudge positive consumption behaviors. However, when they made the drinks clearer and a little more obvious, they found that incorporating soft drink

images into the background of Instagram images can nudge drink choices over food choices but incorporating healthy water images still had little effect.

"The results of the studies show that incorporating drink primes into the background of Instagram-style images can be an effective means of nudging the choice of a drink over food from a visual display" but in the context of previous research, "nudging healthier drink choices appears to be more challenging than nudging healthier food consumption behaviors. Finding an effective means of encouraging healthier drink choices is important considering the adverse health consequences associated with consumption of sugary beverages."

More obvious approaches may instead be needed to overcome the habitual nature of our choices as a result.

"Food and drink choices are clearly habitual in nature, with participants in both experiments more likely to choose something they regularly consume and like. So nudging healthier drink and food choices may be made difficult by the need to override the habitual nature of dietary choices."

"In addition, [unhealthy foods](#) and drinks are much more available and frequently advertised than healthier alternatives, which consequently are less familiar to consumers."

"We know that people inherently gravitate towards high sugar and fat items because they are more rewarding."

**More information:** Enola Kay et al, Instagram-based priming to nudge drink choices: Subtlety is not the answer, *Appetite* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2022.106337](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2022.106337)

Provided by Flinders University

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