

Saving our children from the food they eat

Balancing social responsibility with promoting healthier food choices is essential for fostering public health and well-being



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Marketing strategies of ultra-processed food and beverage products (UPPs) represent a key driver of unhealthy food environments. It is a complex political, social, historical, cultural, and economic process that is associated with people's preferences, beliefs and eating behaviours, and is therefore a modifiable factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The sponsorship of consumers' favourite sports teams, covert product placements in their kids' educational programming, and free giveaways at events are all examples of how food marketing sneaks up on consumers. What is frequently perceived as innocent commercialism is actually corporate deception that encourages unhealthy diets and has detrimental effects on the health of both people and the planet.

The jeopardies are even more evident when UPPs are directed at children and adolescents, who lack the developmental maturity to separate advertisements from entertaining or educational content. The attractive packaging, mouth-watering visuals, popular celebrities or characters, and enticing promotional offers showcased in these advertisements create a strong desire for such foods among impressionable adolescents.

The advertisements often depict popular cartoon characters or children enjoying processed foods (crisps, sausage rolls, pasties, etc), carbonated drinks, fruit juices, or flavored beverages, creating a strong emotional connection, sense of desirability, and fun associated with these products.

Additionally, these UPPs industries often use persuasive techniques to attract children's attention. This includes advertising during children's television programs or using online platforms and mobile apps that are popular among young audiences.

By leveraging children's love for toys and their desire to collect them, UPP chains create a strong incentive for children to choose their meals over healthier options. Furthermore, the industries also employ cross-promotional strategies, partnering with popular movies or TV shows that have a strong appeal to adolescents.

Through featuring characters from these media properties in their

advertising campaigns and associating them with their food offerings, companies tap into adolescents' emotional connection with beloved characters, effectively influencing their food choices.

The repeated exposure to such advertisements on TV channels contributes to a preference for UPPs among this group, leading to increased consumption of such products and potentially negative health consequences such as obesity, dental issues, and a higher risk of developing chronic diseases later in life.

It is important for parents, educators, and policymakers to be aware of the impact of these marketing strategies and work together to promote healthier food choices

However, the advertisements for unhealthy foods are more prevalent later in the evening due to higher viewership during prime time, associating indulgence with relaxation, and taking advantage of impulsive decision-making tendencies.

Advertisers strategically schedule these ads to capitalize on their snacking habits, emotional state, and competition for attention. By featuring limited-time offers, they aim to trigger cravings and impulsive purchasing decisions. When observed, it can be seen that channels that target children show more unhealthy food ads than channels that target adults.

Interestingly, these giant UPP industries also engage in charity activities to create a positive image and offset criticism regarding the health impact of their products. They sponsor local community events, donate a portion of their profits to charitable organizations, or run campaigns

supporting causes like children's education or hunger relief.

This dual approach allows them to maintain a positive public perception by associating themselves with philanthropic efforts while still promoting their unhealthy food offerings. It can create a perception that they are socially responsible and giving back to the community, potentially mitigating some of the negative criticism associated with their product offerings.

By transferring the blame to consumers, they also reduce their role in health threats. Making individuals liable for the increasing burden of diseases, they systematically lead consumers to trust that it is their duty to make healthy choices. This conceals their part in creating obesogenic situations where it is more difficult to discover healthy options.

Such a marketing strategy not only promotes UPPs consumption among children but also establishes brand loyalty from an early age, potentially influencing their long-term dietary habits and preferences. It is important to note that while charitable activities can have positive impacts, it is crucial to critically evaluate the overall health implications of the products and marketing practices of these industries. Balancing social responsibility with promoting healthier food choices is essential for fostering public health and well-being.

However, interventions to address and prevent the harmful effects of marketing practices from the UPP industry have not been successfully implemented in Bangladesh due to industry influence, lack of government intervention, and their inherent complexity.

By focusing its marketing practices on the youth, the UPP industry is shaping social norms, displacing cultural diets, creating life-long eating preferences for its products, and damaging the health of children.

It is important for parents, educators, and policymakers to be aware of the impact of these marketing strategies and work together to promote healthier food choices for children and adolescents, providing education and alternatives that prioritize their overall well-being. ●

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