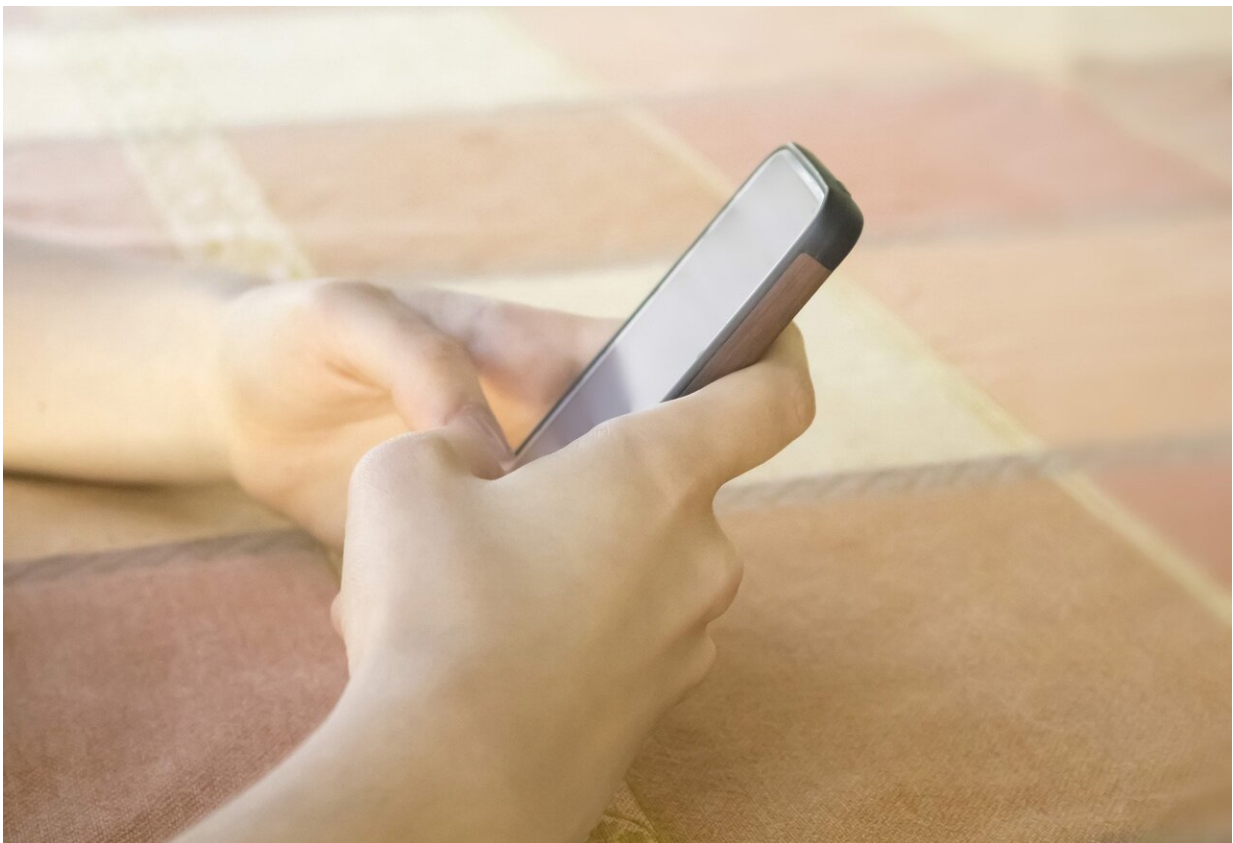


Unhealthy food and beverage brands are encouraging TikTok users to market their products for them

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Unhealthy food and beverage brands are encouraging TikTok users to

market their products for them—effectively turning them into "brand ambassadors"—as well as using their own accounts for promotional activity, finds an assessment of video content posted on the social media platform and published in the open access journal *BMJ Global Health*.

Given TikTok's popularity with children, the findings emphasize the need for policies that will protect them from the harmful impact of this type of marketing on social media, insist the researchers.

Children are exposed to a vast amount of unhealthy food—high in salt, sugar, and fat—marketing online, say the researchers. And the evidence shows that this exposure ultimately influences food preferences, purchasing, requests and consumption.

TikTok users create, post, watch and engage with short videos. Since its global release, TikTok's popularity has rapidly increased: Its global monthly active users reportedly rose from 55 million in January 2018 to one billion in September 2021.

And it is popular with children: Over a third of its daily users in the U.S. are reportedly aged 14 or younger.

Yet no study to date has looked at the impact of unhealthy [food marketing](#) on TikTok, despite calls for attention to be paid to the health implications of the platform, say the researchers.

In a bid to plug this knowledge gap, the researchers assessed the content of all videos posted on the accounts of 16 leading food and non-alcoholic beverage brands—based on global [brand](#) share as of 30 June 2021.

The content and sentiment of a sample of relevant [user-generated content](#), created in response to branded hashtag challenges instigated by these brands, was also assessed.

Some 539 videos had been posted on the 16 included accounts, with 3% (17) posted in 2019 (earliest year of posting), 37% (198) in 2020, and 60% (324) in the first 6 months of 2021. Four accounts had not posted any videos.

The number of followers of the included accounts ranged from 14 to 1.6 million. Videos received an average of 63,400 views, 5829 likes, 157 comments and 36 shares per video.

The most common marketing strategies were branding (87% of videos), product images (85%), engagement (31%), and celebrities/ [influencers](#) (25%).

Engagement included instigation of branded hashtag challenges that encouraged creation of user-generated content featuring brands' products, videos, and/or branded effects, such as stickers, filters, or special effects featuring branding.

The total collective views of user-generated content from single challenges ranged from 12.7 million to 107.9 billion. Among a sample of 626 brand-relevant videos generated in response to these challenges, 96% featured branding, 68% product images, and 41% branded effects.

Most portrayed a positive (73%) or neutral/unclear (25%) sentiment, with few portraying a negative (3%) sentiment.

This is an observational study, so it can't establish causality. The researchers acknowledge that the sampled user-generated content may not have been representative of a branded hashtag challenge, nor were they able to measure children's exposure to brands' promotional activities or to user-generated content.

But they note, "Brand activity has rapidly increased—with most videos

posted in the 6 months preceding data collection—and includes instigation of branded hashtag challenges that encourage user-generated content featuring brand products, brand-supplied videos or branded effects.

"Analysis of a sample of brand-relevant user-generated content created in response to these showed that branded hashtag challenges are effectively turning users into, in TikTok's words, 'unofficial brand ambassadors.'"

While fewer videos were posted by users who seem to have been paid (influencers, for example), these attracted nearly 10 times as many likes per video, on average, as those seemingly not paid for, and are therefore likely important in propagating branded hashtag challenges, they point out.

"The substantial reach of influencer marketing is concerning given that exposure to influencer marketing of unhealthy foods has been shown to increase energy intake (from unhealthy foods and overall)," they write.

They also highlight that proposed UK legislation will ban all "paid-for" online marketing of "less healthy food and drink" from January 2023. But it includes an exemption for brand-only advertising, and excludes marketing originating outside the UK, despite the fact that social networking platforms frequently operate across international borders.

They conclude, "Our study has shown that TikTok is an emerging source of [unhealthy food](#) marketing, including that created by users at the instigation of brands. Given TikTok's popularity among children, our findings support the need for policies that protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing, including that on social networking platforms.

"TikTok's rising popularity also calls for further research into its potential impact on public health and its role as a corporate political actor."

More information: Turning users into 'unofficial brand ambassadors': marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages on TikTok, *BMJ Global Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009112](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009112)

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