

The tempting screen – digital exposure to unhealthy foods and beverages, and alcohol, among Danish children and youth

See the full report in Danish here:

<https://www.cancer.dk/om-os/udgivelser-og-rapporter/forebyg-kraeft/naar-skaermen-frister/>

English summary

Background:

Overweight and alcohol increase the risk of a broad range of cancers. 18% of Danish children and adolescents are now living with either overweight or obesity, and the proportion has been increasing over the past decade. At the same time, most Danish children and adolescents have tried drinking alcohol before they complete 9th grade, even though the Danish National Board of Health recommends that children and adolescents under the age of 18 avoid drinking alcohol.

Research clearly shows that marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages,¹ and alcohol contributes to an increased consumption of the marketed products among children and adolescents. Danish children and adolescents' media consumption has shifted from traditional platforms, such as TV, to digital platforms, including social media, and studies show that almost all adolescents have a profile on social media and spend an average 2-3 hours a day on social media. The massive presence of children and young people on digital platforms, such as social media, has created new opportunities for the food and alcohol industries to target marketing of their products to the individual user through direct advertising, competitions and influencers. According to the Danish Marketing Act, it is prohibited to market alcohol products to children and young people under the age of 18 on all marketing channels, including digital media, while it does not cover the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and young people.

Several international studies have examined the extent to which children and young people are exposed to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol. However, only a few Danish studies cover this topic, and these are based on few subjects. Therefore, there is a need for more studies that uncover the extent to which children and young people are exposed to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol on digital media in a Danish context. Surveys show that most Danes want to limit the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol to children and young people under the age of 18 on digital media.

Aim:

The aim of this study was to uncover the extent to which children and young people aged 12-17 years are exposed to unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol on digital media, to shed light on which products they are exposed to, and the type of sender behind this type of marketing.

Method:

The study was based on a small survey and screenshots from 26 children and adolescents aged 12-17 years. The survey covers participants' use of social media, and the screenshots showed the food, beverage and alcohol content that the participants encountered during one day on digital media. Although the study is not representative of all Danish 12–17-year-olds, it can provide

¹ Unhealthy foods and beverages cover products with a high content of fat, salt or sugar.

valuable insight into how much Danish children and adolescents are exposed to unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol on digital media.

Results:

The 26 participants mainly had profiles on social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok. Participants were between 8 and 14 years old when they created their first social media profile, and the majority exaggerated their age on their first social media account. Most participants stated that they spend 1-2 hours (n=11) or 3-4 hours (n=10) daily online including on social media.

During one day, 10 out of 26 participants were exposed to alcohol content, while 23 were exposed to unhealthy foods and beverages. 2 participants were not exposed to any types of food, beverages or alcohol digital content. There was large variation in the number of screenshots submitted: 0-9 screenshots of alcohol were submitted per participant, while 0-268 screenshots of unhealthy foods and beverages were submitted. On average, the 26 participants were exposed to digital content with unhealthy foods and beverages 26 times and digital content with alcohol 1 time during a typical day of digital media usage. 69% of all food and beverage screenshots (n=973 images) were images of unhealthy foods and beverages (n=667 images).

Participants were exposed mostly to food products such as cakes and biscuits, fast food, ice cream and desserts, bread and cereals, sweets and chocolate, and sweetened beverages.

69% of the unhealthy food and beverage screenshots came from influencers or celebrities, while 20% were direct advertising from the food industry, retailers, supermarket chains, fast food chains, businesses and eateries. 71% of the alcohol screenshots also came from influencers or celebrities, while 17% were direct advertising from alcohol producers and eateries. There was content from both Danish and international companies and influencers/celebrities.

Conclusion:

This study shows that every day Danish children aged 12-17 years are highly exposed to unhealthy foods and beverages, and to some extent to alcohol on digital media.

The 26 participants were on average exposed to digital content with unhealthy food and beverages 26 times and alcohol 1 time during a normal day. The majority (69%) of all food and beverage screenshots showed unhealthy foods and beverages. 23 participants were exposed to unhealthy foods and beverages, and 10 participants were exposed to alcohol content even though it is illegal to market alcohol to children and young people under 18 years of age in Denmark.

Recommendation:

There is a great need to better protect Danish children and young people under the age of 18 from digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, and alcohol.

The Danish Cancer Society recommends that the current Danish Marketing Act is expanded to prohibit the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and young people under the age of 18 – just as it applies to alcohol. It is essential that manufacturers, brands, influencers and celebrities are held accountable for the health-damaging content they promote – both through Danish and international legislation.

In addition to stricter legislation, there is a need for better enforcement, because as seen with the marketing of alcohol, marketing to children and young

people under the age of 18 takes still takes place despite it being illegal. It is therefore necessary to support legislation with strong enforcement, including improved supervision of marketing on digital media.

Questions regarding the study, please contact:

Evaluation and analysis consultant Pernille Boukaidi Lundgaard at pebl@cancer.dk