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70 Percent of Teens Surveyed Engaged with Food and Beverage Brands on Social Media in 2017

Among teens surveyed, nearly all of their engagement with food and beverage brands on social media was for unhealthy products.

Hartford, Conn.—Seventy percent of teens surveyed report engaging with food and beverage brands on social media and 35 percent engaged with at least five brands, according to a new study from the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity published in the journal *Appetite*. The study, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, found that 93 percent of the brands that teens reported engaging with on social media were fast food, unhealthy snack foods, candy, and sugary drinks, which are primarily the brands that target them with traditional forms of advertising.

The study surveyed 1,564 U.S. teens ages 13-17 about their engagement (liking, sharing, or following) with food and beverage brands on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, their time spent watching TV and on other screens (e.g., cell phones, computers), and demographic characteristics. The survey was conducted from March to May of 2017.

Study authors say the findings reflect how food and beverage companies use social media to reach teens. Almost 40 percent of teens surveyed for the study reported being on other screens (non-TV) 4 or more hours each day, where social media dominates their time. Social media marketing comes in the form of attention-getting videos and other posts on companies' social media accounts designed to create engagement (comments, likes, shares, follows) that encourages teens to essentially market these products to friends in their social networks.

"This study shows how successful companies are at using social media to reach teens and take advantage of teens' peer networks. Companies usually pay big bucks to market their brands, but with social media they are getting teens to do it for free. And, since teens' choices are heavily influenced by their peers, the payoff is huge," said Fran Fleming-Milici, PhD, lead study author and assistant research professor for the Rudd Center. "Parents don't realize that all of their efforts to create a healthy food environment at home are undermined when their kids are bombarded by unhealthy food marketing on their phones and computer screens."

The study also found that brand engagement was highest among Black teens, Spanish-speaking Hispanic teens, and teens whose parents have lower education levels. These findings raise public health concerns due to higher rates of diet-related diseases among communities of color. Authors say more research is needed to fully understand why brand engagement was higher among these groups, but another [Rudd Center report](#) found that food companies disproportionately target Black and Hispanic youth with

advertising for many of the same unhealthy brands that teens report engaging with the most on social media.

Other key findings:

- Of teens surveyed, those who watched 2 or more hours of TV a day were much more likely to engage with at least one fast food, sugary drink, candy, or snack brand on social media than teens who watched less than 2 hours per day.
- A few brands dominated teens' social media engagement, including Doritos, Coke, Pepsi, Hershey, Snickers, and McDonald's. More than one-third of teens who said they liked, shared, or followed fast food, sugary drink, candy, or snack brands engaged with these specific brands.
- Younger teens (age 13-14) in the study engaged with brands as frequently as older teens (age 15-17) on social media despite spending 30 minutes less each day using other screens (not TV) than older teens. TV viewing times did not differ between age groups.

"It's probably not a coincidence that the brands that teens engage with the most on social media are the same ones that spend the most to target them with advertising messages designed to make their products seem fun, cool, and daring," said Jennifer L. Harris, PhD, MBA, study author and director of Marketing Initiatives at the Rudd Center. "Unfortunately, those products also have high amounts of added sugars, fat, and calories that can lead to negative health consequences for a lifetime."

Researchers recommend that food and beverage manufacturers stop targeting teens with marketing for products that can harm their health. Currently, the food and beverage companies' voluntary self-regulatory program, the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, only limits unhealthy advertising to children up to 11 years old. Researchers say the program should cover children up to at least 14 years old.

Study authors also recommend that more states and localities enact excise taxes on sugary drinks to increase the cost of unhealthy beverages to help reduce teens' consumption. Companies must also stop disproportionately targeting marketing of their least healthy products to teens in communities of color.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multidisciplinary center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org and follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.