

Fast-food companies' racial justice statements and targeted marketing practices

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Summary

Inequities in the U.S. food system leads to disproportionately high rates of diet-related diseases and premature death in communities of color.¹ One of those inequities, fast-food restaurant marketing that targets Black and Latinx youth, exacerbates diet-related health disparities.

Fast-food marketing is a powerful commercial determinant of health, defined as “strategies and approaches used by the private sector to promote products and choices that are detrimental to health.”² Targeting youth of color with high-calorie nutritionally poor products may contribute to fast-food restaurants' financial success, but it may come at the expense of contributing to equitable health outcomes. Yet alongside their extensive targeted marketing of unhealthy foods, many fast-food restaurants publicly have announced support for communities of color or specific actions to increase racial justice and equity.

This brief examines the nature and type of fast-food restaurants' public racial justice statements made in spring/summer 2020. It also discusses implications for public health advocacy to address the commercial determinants of health, including the negative impact of fast-food marketing on Black and Latinx youths' diets and health.



Background

The Rudd Center's [Fast Food FACTS 2021](#) report documented fast-food restaurant marketing targeted to Black and Latinx youth in 2019 and found extensive cause for public health concern. As in previous years, the vast majority of fast-food ads viewed by Black and Hispanic children and teens promoted regular high-calorie menu items or the restaurant brand. Black youth viewed approximately 75% more fast-food TV ads than their White peers in 2019, an increase compared to 60% more ads viewed by Black youth in 2012. Additional evidence of targeted marketing by fast-food restaurants included \$318 million spent to advertise on Spanish-language TV, a 33% increase from 2012, and the \$99 million spent on Black-targeted TV advertising. Restaurants also spent a higher proportion of their Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV advertising on low-priced value menu items and high-calorie meal bundle deals, compared to their total advertising.



Restaurants have promised to introduce healthier menu items and market responsibly to children, but advertising for healthier items represented 1% or less of their advertising budgets.

These increases in fast-food advertising targeting Hispanic and Black youth that almost exclusively promotes high-calorie nutrient-poor menu items raise additional concerns about the impact on health disparities. Black and Hispanic youth face greater risks for obesity and other diet-related diseases.³

Methods

In March 2021, Rudd Center researchers collected racial justice statements made between May 30-July 16, 2020 by the top 27 U.S. fast-food restaurant advertisers, which includes 20 parent companies and 27 restaurants.⁴ These statements were made in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. First, we reviewed parent company and/or restaurant websites for racial justice statements on the main page, in press releases, or within letters from the Chief Executive Officer. If a statement was not found on the company or restaurant website, we conducted an internet search to determine if a statement was provided elsewhere, such as on LinkedIn or a news agency site. In addition, we examined each company's and restaurant's Twitter feeds for racial justice statements made during this same time period.

The collected statements were categorized as either general statements, declarations of support for the Black community and/or denouncing racism, or commitment-to-action statements. The commitment-to-action statements were further categorized into internally and externally focused pledges. Internally focused pledges addressed racial justice and inequities within the company, including increasing diversity in employee and supplier representation, conducting employee trainings and conversations, and enhancing diversity and inclusion in hiring practices. Externally focused pledges included donations to social justice organizations, partnerships with Black communities and businesses, provision of community resources and educational materials, and efforts to amplify diverse representation in restaurant and/or company marketing. Of note, this research did not investigate the current status or fulfillment of these racial justice statements.





Results

Of the 27 U.S. fast-food restaurants analyzed, 25 issued racial justice statements during May 30-July 16, 2020. Only Zaxby's and CiCi's Pizza did not make a statement during this time. The restaurants varied on the communication platform used to issue the statement. Some only used the company/restaurant website or Twitter, while others used both. Of the 25 restaurants that issued statements, nine were general statements and 16 were commitment-to-action statements. The 16 restaurants with commitment-to-action statements all made externally focused pledges, while nine also made internally focused pledges (see *appendix A*).

The nine restaurants with **internally focused pledges** all committed to increase diversity, equity, or inclusion in employee hiring or trainings (see *appendix B*). For example, KFC, Dairy Queen, Starbucks, and Restaurant Brands International (Burger King and Popeyes) declared company actions to increase diverse representation among employees and suppliers.⁵⁻⁸ Pizza Hut, Panera Bread, and KFC promised to hire a lead employee to ensure diversity efforts were occurring within the company.^{5, 9, 10} Employee trainings and conversations, such as unconscious bias and diversity engagement exercises for all employees, were noted by McDonald's, KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Dairy Queen, Restaurant Brands International, and Starbucks.^{5-7, 9, 11-13}

Of the 16 restaurants that made **externally focused pledges**, 12 committed financial donations to social justice organizations such as the National Urban League, NAACP, and Black-led or Black-supportive nonprofits (see *appendix B*). For example, McDonald's pledged \$1 million to the National Urban League and NAACP;¹¹ Wendy's committed \$500k to support social justice, youth, and education in Black communities;¹⁴ and Chipotle pledged \$1 million to fight systemic racism.¹⁵ Other external pledges included partnerships with Black communities and businesses, such as McDonald's partnership with iHeartMedia's "Black Information Network" to support Black voices.¹⁶ In an externally directed effort to support community resources and provide educational materials, Pizza Hut stated they would expand their BOOK IT! Program with First Book to increase access to diverse and inclusive children's books.⁹

Four of the **externally focused pledges** committed to diversify representation in brand marketing and advertising (see *appendix B*). Subway promised to "[amplify] diverse voices and talent through our marketing campaigns."¹⁷ Restaurant Brands International (Burger King and Popeyes) planned to use their "advertising influence to reflect an accurate representation of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality in our marketing and advertising..."⁷ Similarly, KFC, a Yum! Brands restaurant, stated plans to evaluate "policies and brand communications to make sure they represent KFC's values and the customers we serve."^v These statements indicate restaurants' intention to increase the prevalence of Black individuals and other people of color in advertising campaigns as a way to represent the Black community. While this is a laudable goal, it may be used to increase the appeal of unhealthy products to youth of color.

Notably, none of the racial justice statements or pledges identified addressed the common practice of extensive targeted marketing of unhealthy products to Black communities.

Implications and Recommendations

The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the spring of 2020 prompted many fast-food restaurants and/or companies to publicly state their solidarity with the Black community and support for the racial justice movement in the United States.¹⁸ Most fast-food restaurants in this analysis made statements supporting racial justice initiatives including increased dialogue on racial discrimination. Some went further and pledged financial donations to racial justice and civil rights organizations, funding for equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives, and changes to internal practices to root out discrimination, hate, and intolerance.

A few restaurants promised to increase diverse representation in advertising. However, not one statement addressed companies' core business models, or the commercial determinants of health, that push primarily unhealthy, low-cost food and beverages to increase profits. This disproportionate marketing of high-calorie unhealthy products targeted to Black and Brown communities fuels health inequities.

Public health advocates call for "a deeper interrogation of how their [i.e., food and beverage companies and brands'] business models may inadvertently be fueling racial inequities that lead to adverse health outcomes in communities of color."¹⁹ Moreover, according to Dr. Marion Nestle, author of the Food Politics blog, "If COVID-19 teaches us anything, it's that this kind of marketing has to be stopped." The continued disproportionate, negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color in the United States highlights how public policies and corporate practices that push high-calorie options and limit access to affordable, culturally acceptable, healthy food are significant barriers to improved public health and health equity.²¹

Public health advocates and youth-led initiatives can address the commercial determinants of health by increasing public awareness of the vast amounts of fast-food marketing that primarily promotes unhealthy products and disproportionately targets communities of color. Advocates can also engage in countermarketing campaigns to expose industry marketing practices and call on fast-food companies to address their underlying discriminatory and harmful targeted marketing practices.

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"Advertising patterns imply that food companies view Black consumers as interested in candy, sugary drinks, fast food, and snacks with a lot of salt, fat, or sugar, but not in healthier foods."²²

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Appendix A:

Statements by Fast-food Restaurants

Parent company	Restaurant	General statement	Commitment to-action statement	Excerpt of company, restaurant or CEO statement	Twitter post
McDonald's Corp.	McDonald's		X	"In the past as a company, we tended to stay silent on issues that don't directly involve our business. But since stepping into this role, I have assured you that I would communicate openly and transparently because I believe that it is critical to address issues that are affecting us all..." (Erlinger, 2020)	"It's why we stand for them and any other victims of systemic oppression and violence. Today we stand with Black communities across America. Which is why we're donating to the National Urban League and the NAACP. We do not tolerate inequity, injustice, or racism. Black lives matter." (McDonald's, 2020)
Domino's Pizza	Domino's		X	"As your CEO, I am committed to living and leading Domino's through our strong set of values, where everyone is respected, mistreatment is met with zero tolerance, where everyone should be welcome to bring their whole, best self to work, and where everyone is provided a fair and equal opportunity to succeed. I also know that our Leadership Team joins me in this commitment..." (Allison, 2020)	"We unequivocally denounce all acts of racism, hatred and the unjust treatment of black people. Black Lives Matter" (Domino's Pizza, 2020)
Restaurant Brands Int'l	Burger King		X		"We stand with you in support of equality and justice for black lives and we will use our platform, our position, and our voice to do so. when it comes to people's lives, there's only one way to have it. without discrimination." (Burger King, 2020)
Restaurant Brands Int'l	Popeyes		X		"We are nothing without Black lives. There's no room for injustice. We commit to strengthening every facet of our culture and policies to foster an environment where equality for Black people is a priority. We'll use our platform to support this movement. #BlackLivesMatter" (Popeyes, 2020)
Yum! Brands	Taco Bell		X	"...While I don't have all the answers right now, I am committed to being part of the long-term solution. Let me be clear: we don't tolerate racism or violence against Black people. And we demand inclusivity. We have more work to do and Taco Bell will continue to lead and drive positive change amongst our communities and beyond..." (King, 2020)	"Sometimes silence speaks the loudest. And we won't let ours speak for us. So let us be clear: We don't tolerate racism or violence against Black people. We're committed to being part of long-term solutions. And we have more work to do. We're regrouping on the actions we take next. Because these words are not enough. More to come. We're listening." (Taco Bell, 2020)
Yum! Brands	KFC		X	"We support our Black team members, partners, and customers. We are committed to using our voice to speak up but more importantly, using this time to listen, learn, and act to create positive social change. We have to do more. We will do more." (KFC, 2020)	"Louisville is our home. Breonna Taylor and David McAtee were our neighbors. KFC rejects racism and brutality against Black communities everywhere. Black Lives Matter." (KFC, 2020)

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Yum! Brands	Pizza Hut		X	<p>"...Put simply, Pizza Hut stands against oppression, violence, hatred, racism and intolerance towards Black people... Here's what we're doing: "Listening to Black voices within our organization and creating a plan... Hiring a Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion... Pledging \$3 million to social justice efforts... Championing literacy for change..." (Pizza Hut, 2020)</p>	<p>"We're proud to be part of an organization taking a stand against inequality. See the additional actions Pizza Hut is taking..." (Pizza Hut, 2020)</p>
Roark Capital Group	Sonic, Arby's, Jimmy John's*	X		<p>"...As a company and a franchise system, it is especially important during times like these to look to our values to guide our behaviors. Two in particular are "Allies and Good Citizens. We must continue to be Allies supporting each other regardless of backgrounds or beliefs. Further, we need to be Good Citizens to our guests and our teammates as well as to people in the communities where we live and serve – without qualification." (Brown, 2020)</p>	
Roark Capital Group	Carl's Jr., Hardee's**	X		<p>"... We are taking this opportunity to listen, learn and act. We acknowledge that it is crucial we advance dialogue on how best to bring our communities together, embrace our differences, and together be agents of positive change. At CKE, we are in a unique position to make a difference and I am committed to ensuring that we continue to be a welcoming place that champions inclusion and diversity..." (Lyerly, 2020)</p>	
Little Caesars Enterprise (Ilitch Holdings)	Little Caesars*	X		<p>"Today, we stand together to champion equality, justice and respect for the African American community. And I'm proud to stand with those who support diversity and inclusion and condemn hatred and racism, prejudice and violence. "No doubt, these have been difficult days. We all mourn the tragic and all too common loss of African American lives. We are saddened, we are troubled, we are angry. But anger is not enough. We have a moral obligation to meet intolerance and injustice with action and resolve. We need to peacefully and productively channel our grief and shared sense of decency into lasting and positive change. The strength of this city lies in the spirit of this city, and in the grace and the goodwill of its people. It lies in our ability to rally, to rise and to demand better." (Ilitch, 2020)</p>	<p>"We stand for equality, justice and respect for all. We believe in diversity and inclusion, and condemn hatred, racism prejudice and violence. Working together we can drive meaningful, lasting, positive change." (Ilitch Companies, 2020)</p>

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Doctor's Associates	Subway		X	"... We are also committed to taking action, starting with how we operate – from amplifying diverse voices and talent through our marketing campaigns, to supporting and partnering with organizations that are committed to driving racial justice and equality, to fostering inclusion within our business and among our network of small business owners that serve you each and every day..." (Subway, 2020)	"Our doors are open to all, and we stand against racial injustice of any kind. There are a lot of important voices speaking right now that need to be heard, so we're stepping away from social media to ensure that happens. #blackout-tuesday" (Subway, 2020)
Wendy's	Wendy's		X		"We are committed to donating \$500k to support social justice, the youth and education in the Black community starting with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and we'll have receipts." (Wendy's, 2020)
Berkshire Hathaway	Dairy Queen		X	"At International Dairy Queen, I know there is more we can learn and more we can do to advocate for human rights and to fight injustice, inequality, racism and discrimination. Our team doesn't have all the answers; however, we are committed to spend more time learning, listening and understanding to implement meaningful change." (Bader, 2020)	
Papa John's Int'l	Papa John's		X	"...As a company, we have stated that we are committed to creating a culture that values diversity, equity and inclusion. We have stated that our core values include "People First" and "Everyone Belongs." Those statements mean more now than ever. They can't just be words on a page. They have to be how we truly feel, act and live... Moving forward, we will continue to work with our Employee Resource Groups to build the community, collaboration and communication that is necessary to drive change. Now more than ever, we need to support each other, especially our black community. They need to know that we care. That they matter." (Lynch, 2020)	"Our hearts go out to our black employees, communities, and friends. We stand with you against racism and injustice. We will continue to work to drive change." (Papa Johns Pizza, 2020)
Dunkin' Brands	Dunkin'		X	"...As our franchisees and employees deal with all that is happening, we want to make sure we are being as supportive as we can. The Employee Assistance Program, available both to employees and franchisees, continues to be a great resource for connecting with someone to listen and to offer support. In addition, through Dunkin' Brands employee resource groups (ERGs) and through associations like our long-standing NAACP relationship, we will be looking for ways to hear from more diverse voices so that we have a better understanding of what is taking place across the U.S. and to identify ways to help..." (Hoffmann, 2020)	

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JAB Holding Company	Panera Bread		X	<p>"...We will: Support and enable our internal Networking Groups, providing resources and the forum to educate, connect and lead the dialogue as a Panera Family. Actively support our current partners including the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis and The Trevor Project, to advance a unifying purpose of diversity and inclusion. Increase the diversity in our leadership teams. Dedicate a full-time leader to accelerate our diversity, equity and inclusion strategy and impact..." (Chaudhary, 2020)</p>	<p>"At Panera, we WILL continue to learn and grow as we take active steps to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion. We will continue to listen, hear and act as our actions speak to who we are as company and as a Panera Family." (Panera Bread, 2020)</p>
Chipotle Mexican Grill	Chipotle		X		<p>"It's time to open our purse. Today we are pledging \$1,000,000 throughout the year to fight systemic racism, starting with \$500,000 to the @NatUrbanLeague. Chipotle is rooted in diversity, inclusion, and integrity and we vow to be part of the solution." (Chipotle, 2020)</p>
Chick-fil-A	Chick-fil-A		X	<p>"I recognize that someone like me cannot fully appreciate and understand the gross injustices that are all around us. I also recognize that talking about the systemic inequality, bias, and injustices in our country will draw criticism. But neither of these reasons makes it ok for me to remain silent about the issues that now so publicly confront our nation. The killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and many others is horrifying and merits our outrage. We should also address the disparate impact of COVID-19 on black and brown communities, as well as the disparity in educational opportunities and access to opportunity..." (Cathy, 2020)</p>	<p>"Words are not enough, and they sometimes aren't the right words, but we want to say something. Racism should have no place in society. Not now, not ever. It cannot be tolerated. Our hearts are breaking, for our Black Team Members, Operators and Staff and all those in the Black community who are suffering and who have suffered for too long because of racism. At Chick-fil-A, we know we have a role in moving all of us forward. We will listen. We will be intentional. We will share. We will act to build bridges - to spread care and hope into our world - today and always." (ChickfilA, 2020)</p>
Starbucks Corp.	Starbucks		X	<p>"...While we may not have all the answers, we know the path forward requires these courageous conversations with one another. As I shared at the close of today's meeting it is, in part, our promise to one another as partners to live our mission and values daily. We are a family. We act with empathy and compassion. And we honor our differences, always. We uplift each other. Because that is what true Starbucks partners do..." (Johnson, 2020)</p>	<p>"Black lives matter. We are committed to being a part of change... We are committed to taking action, learning, and supporting our Black partners, customers and communities..." (Starbucks Coffee, 2020)</p>

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Parent company	Restaurant	General statement	Commitment to-action statement	Excerpt of company, restaurant or CEO statement	Twitter post
Jack in the Box	Jack in the Box	X			"...We are working to make our company and communities more equal and just. We will continually educate ourselves and team members across our organization to ensure that change happens. Actions speak louder than words, and this is just the beginning..." (Jack in the Box, 2020)
Oak Hill Capital Partners	Checkers/Rally's	X		"...We have always been proud to be a part of the communities we serve. Community is about relationships, shared dreams, and staying together in good times and challenging times. We believe that together we can work for real change which results in a society that values, respects, and cares for one another equally. To that end, we will be seeking input from our Checkers and Rally's family to create new avenues to ensure we are being supportive of our neighborhoods and communities, and also being part of the larger change we need to see happen in our country..." (Allen, 2020)	"...We have always been proud to be a part of the communities we serve. Community is about relationships, shared dreams, and staying together in good times and challenging times. We believe that together we can work for real change which results in a society that values, respects, and cares for one another equally. To that end, we will be seeking input from our Checkers and Rally's family to create new avenues to ensure we are being supportive of our neighborhoods and communities, and also being part of the larger change we need to see happen in our country..." (Checkers and Rally's, 2020)

Includes statements from the top fast-food advertisers in May, 2020 in no particular order. Cicis Pizza and Zaxby's did not make any statements during this time.

*Indicates statement made by parent company CEO; no post on individual restaurant websites

**Indicates same statement was made on multiple restaurant websites

Appendix B: Summary of Pledges

Parent company	Restaurant	Internal pledges					External pledges			
		Increase diverse employee and/or supplier representation	Host employee trainings & conversations	Change hiring practices to enhance diversity & inclusion	Donations to social justice organization(s)	Partnerships with Black communities & businesses	Community resources & educational materials	Diverse representation in marketing & advertising		
McDonald's Corp.	McDonald's		X			X	X			
Domino's Pizza	Domino's					X				
Restaurant Brands Int'l	Burger King*	X	X							X
Restaurant Brands Int'l	Popeyes*	X	X							X
Yum! Brands	Taco Bell		X			X		X		
Yum! Brands	KFC	X	X	X		X		X		X
Yum! Brands	Pizza Hut		X	X		X		X		
Doctor's Associates	Subway					X				X
Wendy's	Wendy's					X				
Berkshire Hathaway	Dairy Queen	X	X			X				
Papa John's Int'l	Papa John's					X			X	
Dunkin' Brands	Dunkin'							X		
JAB Holding Company	Panera Bread			X				X		
Chipotle Mexican Grill	Chipotle					X				
Chick-fil-A	Chick-fil-A					X				
Starbucks Corp.	Starbucks	X	X			X				

"X" indicates the type(s) of commitment-to-action pledge made

* indicates pledges made at parent company level

Additional references for Appendix B

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