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New Study Shows Unhealthy Food Advertising Continues to Disproportionately Target Consumers of Color

Candy, Sugary Drinks, Snacks, and Cereal Made Up 73% of Food and Beverage Ad Spending on Black-Targeted and Spanish-Language TV in 2021

Hartford, Conn. – U.S. food and beverage companies disproportionately target Black and Hispanic consumers with advertising for high-calorie, low-nutrient products, including candy, sugary drinks, and snacks, according to a [new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut](#). The millions they spend on this targeted marketing contributes to inequities in diet-related diseases heavily affecting communities of color, including heart disease, obesity, and diabetes.

“Our study shows that food companies continue to directly target Black and Hispanic consumers with TV advertising that primarily promotes unhealthy products,” said Jennifer L. Harris, senior research advisor at the Rudd Center and lead author of the study. “Companies say they value and are committed to supporting these communities, but the millions spent on targeted advertising for products like candy, sugary drinks, and snack foods exacerbate the health risks faced by youth of color and presents a significant barrier to improved public health and health equity.”

Key Findings

Food and beverage TV advertising was highly concentrated among a small number of companies.

For this report, the Rudd Center analyzed TV advertising by all food and beverage companies. However, 19 companies were responsible for 75% of all TV food and beverage advertising spending, 79% of Spanish-language TV advertising, and 82% of Black-targeted TV advertising. These companies included PepsiCo, Kellogg Company, The Coca-Cola Company, The Hershey Company, General Mills, Mondelez International, The Kraft Heinz Company, Mars, Ferrero USA, Nestle USA, Keurig Dr Pepper, Red Bull, Campbell Soup Company, Unilever United States, Tyson Foods, Danone North America, The Wonderful Company, Post Foods, and Conagra Brands, Inc.

The proportion of unhealthy products featured in food and beverage TV ads targeted to Black and Hispanic consumers increased from 2017 to 2021.

- Candy, sugary drinks, snacks, and cereals represented three-quarters of Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV ad spending in 2021, up from approximately one-half each in 2017.
- In 2021, Black youth and adults viewed 9% to 21% more food and beverage TV ads compared to their White peers.

- Companies also increased their focus on advertising to Spanish-speaking audiences, evidenced by an increase in the proportion of total TV ad dollars companies dedicated to Spanish-language TV from 2017 to 2021 (7.8% vs. 8.5%).

“Hispanics are a proud, diverse, culturally rich population that is now the largest racial/ethnic minority in the United States. Yet, food and beverage companies continue to bombard Hispanic families with targeted marketing for unhealthy food, which contributes to the health disparities that face this population. Hispanics deserve access to, and promotion of, healthier foods and drinks,” said Amelie G. Ramirez, DrPH, MPH, study co-author and director of *Salud America!*, a national program to promote health equity based at the Institute for Health Promotion Research at UT Health San Antonio.

There were reductions in total TV food and beverage advertising spending, and reductions in TV ad exposure, due to major shifts in TV viewing habits.

- Total TV food and beverage ad spending declined by 25% between 2017 and 2021, and children and teens viewed 58% to 62% fewer TV ads overall.
- TV ads viewed by Hispanic teens on Spanish-language TV declined at a lower rate, by 38%.
- Disparities in TV advertising exposure for Black versus White youth also decreased, due to greater declines in TV ads viewed by Black youth (66-70%) than by White youth (56-58%).
- However, reductions in TV food ad exposure mirrored declines in the amount of time spent watching TV, including by Black, White, and Hispanic youth, and do not appear to reflect a change in ethnically targeted marketing strategies by food companies.

“Food and beverage companies typically base, and justify, their marketing practice on what they perceive to be consumer demand. I challenge that view,” said Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, MPH, professor at Drexel University, Dornsife School of Public Health, and founding chair of the Council on Black Health. “More likely, racialized marketing of unhealthy products reflects a flawed business model in which leveraging the demographics of social disadvantage to maximize profits from unhealthy foods and beverages is acceptable.”

A review of companies’ public statements also found numerous examples of targeted marketing campaigns aimed at multicultural youth.

- Many campaigns incorporated hip-hop and Latinx music celebrities and other youth-oriented themes. Extensive cause-related marketing included donations and collaborations with nonprofits to benefit communities of color and foster goodwill for almost exclusively unhealthy food and beverage brands.

“Companies express how much they respect the culture and concerns of Black and Hispanic communities, but at the same time, they appear to ignore the negative health impacts of the products they promote to Black and Hispanic youth,” said Fran Fleming-Milici, PhD, study co-author and the Rudd Center’s director of Marketing Initiatives.

Methods

This report uses Nielsen syndicated market research data, which measured total TV and targeted TV advertising spending on Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV networks, as well as TV ads viewed by Hispanic, Black, and White children, teens, and adults. This report excludes targeted advertising by fast-food and other restaurants, which was previously reported in the Rudd Center’s [Fast Food FACTS 2021 report](#).

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut is a multidisciplinary center dedicated to promoting solutions to food insecurity, poor diet quality, 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.

About The Council on Black Health

The Council is a research and action network that provides thought leadership to develop and implement a national agenda for Black health. The Council drives the agenda to realize healthy Black communities by impacting policies, systems, environments, and practices that impact individual behaviors and chronic disease outcomes in Black communities. Our mission is to develop and promote solutions that achieve healthy Black communities. For more information, visit www.councilbh.org or contact us at info@councilbh.org.

About *Salud America!*

Salud America! is a national Latino health equity-focused organization that creates culturally relevant and research-based stories, videos, and tools to inspire people to start and support healthy changes to policies, systems, and environments where Latino and all children and families can equitably live, learn, work, and play. Latinos are a rising U.S. powerhouse, but they face barriers to be their healthiest and suffer high rates of obesity and other health disparities and inequities. *Salud America!*'s award-winning multimedia communications help our social and online network—more than 500,000 moms and dads, providers, and community and school leaders—push for equitable healthy changes in their neighborhoods, schools, clinics, and more. *Salud America!* is led by health disparities researcher Dr. Amelie G. Ramirez and supported by a passionate team of communicators at the Institute for Health Promotion Research at UT Health San Antonio, thanks to past funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and current funding from Genentech, CDC via the National Hispanic Medical Association, and others. Learn more at www.salud-america.org (@SaludAmerica on social).