

Kid Influencer Marketing: Gaps in Current Policies and Research

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Introduction

Healthy eating during childhood sets children on a path to wellness and can prevent diet-related chronic diseases later in life.¹ Most of the foods and beverages children see in advertisements, however, are energy-dense, nutrient-poor products. As of 2012, the food industry spent \$1.8 billion dollars each year on marketing to youth,² which can make it difficult for children to maintain healthy eating habits.³ Since then, many companies have increased their investment in the digital media and marketing landscape, with companies such as Domino's dedicating 27% of their nearly \$500 million advertising budget to promote its website and mobile ordering app on social media.⁴

During the past 10 years, food and beverage companies have expanded their marketing efforts to include digital marketing on platforms such as social media.⁵⁻⁷ One study reported that 200 food brands managed more than 500 official brand accounts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Vine (now defunct) as of 2016; those brands posted more than 12 million times on their social media accounts, demonstrating companies' shift to social media food marketing.⁸ Since then, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch have become some of the most popular social media platforms, and 25% of TikTok users are between 10 and 19 years old.⁹ Although the popularity of social media sites changes over time, one of the most consistently popular social media sites is YouTube,¹⁰ a video-sharing platform that allows users to post self-created videos on their personal channels.

In 2015, YouTube created the YouTube Kids App to provide more child-friendly content in a safer environment with fewer ads than the main platform. YouTube Kids prohibits advertising that promotes food and beverages. As of January 2020, the main YouTube platform does not allow food and beverage ads on or around "made-for-kids" channels.¹¹ The Federal Trade Commission has issued guidelines on how influencers should disclose sponsorships,¹² but, aside from YouTube Kids and "made-for-kids" channels on YouTube, social media sites do not prohibit food marketing.

As social media use grows,^{13,14} companies continue to harness these platforms to directly engage consumers in new and creative ways. One new tool involves paying influencers—



online celebrities with large social media fan bases, or "followers," who can shape fans' opinions by discreetly or openly endorsing products on their social media accounts.^{15,16} Companies can pay kid influencers—children whose parents film videos of the child playing with toys or engaging in family-friendly activities, which the parents post for other children and parents to watch for entertainment.¹⁷ This content is incredibly popular among children and families and, in turn, helps them attract a larger fan base. Companies are increasingly seeing the value of hiring these persuasive spokespersons to promote their products.¹⁸ Influencer marketing alone reached nearly \$10 billion in 2020, though not all influencers were kid influencers (sometimes called "kidfluencers").¹⁹ Engaging kid influencers has the added bonus of reaching younger audiences either directly or through their parents' social media accounts.¹⁷ Using an arsenal of big data tools, influencers, and sophisticated algorithms, companies can target youth across the digital marketplace.²⁰

This brief presents the current evidence on influencer marketing and the impact on behavior, as well as policy recommendations to address this new marketing practice. The brief is based on a recent publication that examined kid influencer marketing of food and beverage products on YouTube.²¹

The Evidence

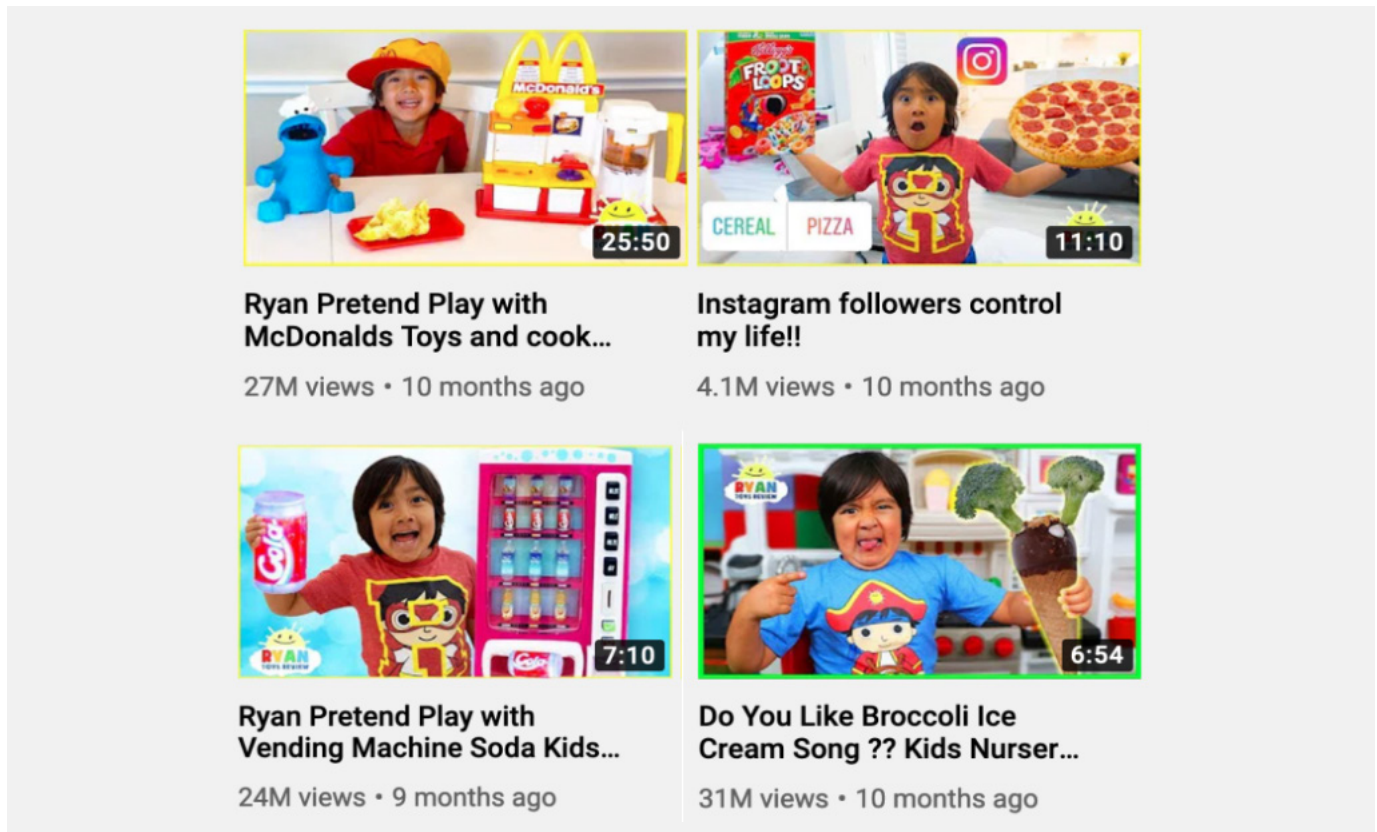
Understanding the Appeal and Reach of Kid Influencers

- Consumers view influencers as more relatable and trustworthy than mainstream celebrities because they are “everyday people.”²² Among young people, such relatability may lead the viewer to generate a one-sided emotional connection with the influencer that feels like a friendship—also known as a para-social relationship.²³ For children and adolescents, perceived attractiveness of and similarity to the influencer strengthens para-social relationships and increases purchase intentions.²⁴
- In 2019, the highest paid influencer on social media was 8-year-old Ryan Kaji, who reportedly earned \$26 million (see Figure 1), and the third highest paid influencer was a 5-year-old who earned \$18 million.²⁵ This newer form of celebrity may be powerful because young adults²⁶ and adults²⁷ trust celebrity endorsements; and celebrities increase purchase intentions for endorsed products.²⁸

Kid Influencers and Food and Beverage Product Placement

- A recent study examined videos from the five most popular YouTube channels featuring kid influencers. Kid influencer channels in the sample collectively generated 48.2 billion views and 38.6 million subscribers through 10,058 videos posted on YouTube, as of July 2019.
- The study found that 40% of kid influencer videos featured a food or drink placement and 94% of food/drink placements were for foods/drinks deemed unhealthy according to the Nutrient Profile Model and recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics.²¹
- Videos featuring foods/drinks collectively generated over 1 billion views and generated 2.6 million likes on YouTube. Food and/or drink product placements in those kid influencer videos generated approximately 16.5 million impressions for items that were mostly unhealthy, branded products.

Figure 1.
Screenscaped images of kid influencer videos from YouTube



Using Kid Influencers to Market Foods Works

Food marketing among kid influencers is common and is growing in popularity. Research on this topic has shown that it is most common for unhealthy products and that the use of influencers to market products is successful in altering preferences for marketed items. Moreover, it can be difficult for adults and children to distinguish between program content and advertising. A summary of evidence on how food marketing influences children and adults follows.

- A recent study found that among the five most popular YouTube channels featuring kid influencers, 40% of the videos featured a food or beverage placement and 94% of those placements were for unhealthy products.²¹
- Food marketing influences children's purchase requests, preferences for, and consumption of marketed foods.^{3,29} Product placements (i.e., products that are intentionally placed within digital content, such as social media posts or videos) can also build brand awareness for the advertised food.^{30–32}
- Adolescents may be uniquely susceptible to social media advertising.³³ Studies show, for example, that adolescents would rather “like” social media posts with many versus few “likes,” that gaining “likes” from other users can fulfill adolescents' desire for popularity, and sometimes their interactions with companies “go viral,” generating momentary fame.^{34,35}
- In one study, 9- to 11-year-old children who saw a YouTube influencer holding unhealthy foods consumed more calories than children who saw a YouTube influencer holding non-food products.³⁶ Even adults' intention to purchase a product was higher for products promoted by an influencer compared to a celebrity.²²
- Companies design advertising campaigns to “induce children to nag their parents to buy the advertised product,”³⁷ a strategy called “pester power” that has been found to influence children to successfully encourage parents to purchase products that they would not otherwise buy. Parental denials of purchase requests have been found to lead to significant parent-child conflict,³⁸ and because digital marketing is so pervasive and often disguised as educational or entertainment, parents cannot monitor ads or simply turn off the television, as was previously recommended.
- For more traditional forms of advertising, young children cannot discriminate between television program and commercial content until approximately age 5.^{39,40} Moreover, children do not effectively comprehend the persuasive intent of marketing and tend to accept commercial claims as truthful and accurate information through age 7 or 8.^{39–41}
- Modern forms of marketing are specifically engineered to bypass the division between content and advertising, making it more difficult to identify advertising; research indicates that even adults have difficulty identifying sponsored content online.³⁸ These forms of marketing circumvent children's (and adult's) ability to actively process advertising information or engage in skeptical reasoning because they cannot identify marketing as such.³⁵
- The use of “influencers” and characters for food marketing leverages children's more trusting nature, making children even more vulnerable to advertising disguised as content. Thus, even if sponsored videos are identified as advertising, young children are unable to comprehend the implications of such sponsorships.³⁸

The growing spectrum of new strategies and high-tech tools (e.g., use of big data and algorithms)²⁰—combined with the persuasive ability of influencers—has created an unprecedented combination for marketing success.



Conclusions

The social media tools used to promote foods and beverages in kid influencer videos raise concerns regarding children's exposure to energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Kid influencers may generate feelings of trust among parents and children who watch the videos, and kid influencers' subtle or overt endorsements may lead caretakers to increase purchases of those types of products. Social media tools (e.g., autoplay, the setting that prompts a similar video to play after the current video) may also increase exposure to these product placements. Unlike television commercials that typically air for less than two minutes, kid influencer videos may showcase foods and beverages for long durations.

Although the YouTube Kids app prohibits advertising that promotes any kind of food or beverage, the main YouTube platform has several gaps in policies that allow for promotion of sugar-sweetened beverages and junk foods, especially in videos created by kid influencers. Even though YouTube now prohibits food and beverage ads in or around "made-for-kids" channels, children may be exposed to food ads when they watch videos that are intended for adults. More research is needed to determine the percent of children that use the YouTube Kids app as opposed to the main platform and to identify methods to encourage parents to use the kids app for children instead of the main platform.

Policy Implications

The use of kid influencers is one of several modern marketing practices engineered to bypass the division between content and advertising. Practices such as branded advertising, online host-selling, native advertising, and influencer promotions take unfair advantage of children's trusting nature and make it more difficult for them to identify food advertising directed to them.

Federal regulations have not kept pace with children's online activities. Although the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires influencers and other paid spokespeople to include disclosures (e.g., #ad) in their marketing,¹² children are not likely capable of understanding such disclosures due to their developmental stage or inability to read. Potential policy changes at the federal level include:

- Congress should designate a federal agency—likely the FTC, although the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) may play a role—to engage in rulemaking to administer the law. The FTC, for example, should monitor influencers' adherence to placing disclosures on their social media posts and consider implementing consequences for repeated failure to disclose (e.g., temporarily suspending the social media account).

- Federal agencies such as the FTC and FCC could also consider adjusting their disclosure policies if a critical mass of research demonstrates that disclosures have unintended consequences—some research suggests disclosures may backfire and have the opposite of the intended effect.^{42,43}
- Given the urgency of the issues, Congress should permit the FTC to use standard Administrative Procedure Act rulemaking procedures and repeal the FTC Improvement Act of 1980, which withdrew the FTC's authority to regulate child-directed advertising as an unfair act or practice.⁴⁴
- The federal government should extend child-advertising restrictions that apply on television to online marketing (e.g., "host-selling," which is "the use of program characters or show hosts to sell products in commercials during or adjacent to the shows in which the character or host appears").⁴⁵ Such restrictions would reduce children's exposure to sugar-sweetened beverages and energy-dense, nutrient-poor products that are currently promoted by kid influencers.

Social media companies can also strengthen their policies that pertain to children's exposure to unhealthy social media content. Policy changes include:

- YouTube has already prohibited food ads on their YouTube Kids app and could extend the spirit of this policy to prohibit kid influencers from posting videos that promote foods and beverages on both YouTube apps.
- Social media companies could adjust "autoplay" (i.e., where videos automatically play one after another) algorithms to prevent children from being repeatedly exposed to videos from kid influencers and instead offer videos from pre-approved educational videos.

Such policy changes are critical given disclosures may not work as intended because of children's limited cognitive abilities,³³ and even adults have difficulty identifying sponsored content.³⁸

Acknowledgments

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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University under the direction of Mary Story PhD, RD, program director, and Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic minority population groups that are at highest risk for poor health and well-being and nutrition related health disparities. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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