Evidence-Based Recommendations to Mitigate Harms from Digital Food Marketing to Children Ages 2-17

Healthy Eating Research

Executive Summary, October 2024

Overview

Healthy Eating Research (HER) convened an expert panel to develop evidence-based recommendations for actions to mitigate harms from digital food marketing to children ages 2 to 17. The multidisciplinary expert panel chaired by Jennifer Harris, PhD, MBA, was composed of 12 researchers, advocates, and practitioners in the areas of digital and food marketing, racial and ethnic disparities, children's privacy, community engagement, children's media usage, communications, psychology, pediatrics, and digital technology. The panel was charged with examining the research on digital marketing and reviewing current policy options to develop recommendations for:

- Government policies to protect children from harmful and unfair digital food marketing practices;
- The food industry, online media, and digital providers that accept food advertisements; and
- Future research to address key gaps in the literature.

The panel also sought to identify opportunities to inform healthcare providers, educators, parents, and caregivers about the issues of digital marketing to children, and strategies to protect children from its negative impact.

Introduction

In the past 15 years, the amount of time children and adolescents spend on digital devices (e.g., computers, tablets, mobile devices) has increased rapidly, resulting in digital media largely displacing traditional media.¹ Food companies have capitalized on this shift by innovating digital marketing techniques with enormous youth appeal across a variety of platforms, including websites, mobile apps, social media, video sharing, gaming platforms, and streaming TV.^{2,3} The unique and salient characteristics of digital food marketing raise concerns about negative effects on the health and well-being of children and adolescents.3-5 For example, digital marketing for foods and beverages is often embedded within entertainment content (e.g., influencer videos, gaming platforms, and social media posts), making it difficult to recognize and distracting from its persuasive intent, and messages are often shared virally on social media through peer networks, exploiting developmental vulnerabilities of adolescents. Moreover, the use of young people's online behaviors and personal data to tailor marketing messages raises serious issues of privacy and exploitation.

The majority of food marketing to children and adolescents (both for traditional media and digital media) promotes unhealthy foods and beverages, such as sugary drinks, fast food, candy, sugar cereals, and sweet/salty snacks. ^{6,7} Food marketing shapes the availability and normative beliefs about these unhealthy products, making them the easiest, least expensive, and most desirable choices for consumers. ^{8,9} However, parents, educators, health professionals, and others who care about young people's health and wellbeing currently have few options to protect them from harmful and unfair digital food marketing.

To address this gap, Healthy Eating Research convened a panel of experts to develop evidence-based recommendations for actions to mitigate harms from digital food marketing to children ages 2-17. This summary presents the expert panel's recommendations and highlights the evidence reviewed; for additional details, see the full report.

Methodology

HER convened a multidisciplinary expert panel chaired by Dr. Jennifer L. Harris, PhD, MBA and composed of 12 researchers, advocates, and practitioners with expertise in the areas of digital and food marketing, racial and ethnic disparities, children's privacy, community engagement, children's media usage, communications, psychology, pediatrics, and digital technology. The expert panel met virtually nine times from September 2023 to May 2024.

A multi-step process was used to develop the evidence-based recommendations:

- Conduct literature reviews on digital food marketing to children, including the media and creative strategies used and the types of foods marketed, children's exposure, and impacts of exposure.
- **2.** Identify and evaluate policies and other potential systemslevel solutions.
- **3.** Conduct interviews with key thought leaders to identify barriers to enacting mandatory policies and potential solutions to address those barriers.

The expert panel used a consensus process to agree upon recommendations that should be taken by key actors to reduce children's exposure to digital food marketing and/or its power to negatively affect them. The recommendations span policies, additional research priorities, and resources for healthcare providers, educators, parents, and caregivers. The final recommendations were reviewed by all members of the expert panel, with refinements made as needed to achieve consensus. For additional details on the methodology, please reference the technical report; a complete list of expert panel members is provided in the **Acknowledgements** section at the end of this report.

The Evidence

Current Literature on Digital Food Marketing to Children

Research Question

What is the current research that describes digital food marketing, where and how are children exposed, and what are the diet-related and other impacts of exposure?

Literature reviews were conducted to examine the current evidence base on digital food marketing to children (<18 years of age). The literature review identified 102 papers in the English language published between 2013-2023. The majority of studies were conducted in high-income countries (89%), including 21 studies from the United States. The pace of this research has accelerated in recent years, with 59 of the 102 studies published since 2020. Of the 102 studies: 35 were descriptive studies analyzing the content of different types of digital food marketing, 18 studies quantified children's exposure to digital marketing, and 49 studies investigated the impact of marketing exposures (including six studies that also included self-reported exposures to digital marketing). Complete details on the search criteria and other methods can be found in the Expert Panel Process and Methods section and Appendix A of the full report [link].

Key findings from this review include:

- Across all digital media, food marketers promote unhealthy products that do not contribute to a healthy diet.
- Digital marketing of all forms has similar negative effects on children's dietary behavioral outcomes as traditional marketing, including increased calorie intake, unhealthy food choices, requests to parents to purchase these products, and a decrease in longer-term diet quality. Intermediate outcomes, such as positive attitudes toward the ads and advertised products and intent to purchase or request the products, have also been demonstrated.



- These negative effects occur with adolescents, as well as younger children.
- Digital marketing is often difficult for children and adolescents to notice and to recognize as advertising.
- Initiatives to increase children's recognition of digital marketing and understanding of its persuasive intent (e.g., ad disclosures, digital literacy training) do not reduce the power of this marketing to increase children's positive attitudes and desires to consume advertised products.
- Interventions to promote healthy foods in digital media rarely increase children's consumption of or preferences for fruits and vegetables and do not reduce their preferences for unhealthy foods.

Evaluation of Existing and Proposed Policy Actions

Research Question

What existing and proposed policy actions have the potential to reduce children's exposure to and/or the impact of unhealthy digital food marketing?

The expert panel conducted targeted literature searches to examine the effectiveness of existing and proposed policies addressing digital marketing to children. From these reviews, six criteria for effective policy design elements that would reduce children's exposure to and/or the power of digital food marketing were identified:

- **1.** Protect children of all ages (2-17 years);
- **2.** Apply science-based nutrition criteria to advertised foods and beverages;
- **3.** Minimize the risk of marketing migration (i.e., replacing marketing that is covered by policies to other non-covered media platforms or venues, including from individual product marketing to brand marketing);
- **4.** Restrict the use of unfair and deceptive practices;
- **5.** Address the effects of digital food marketing on health disparities (e.g., targeted marketing by race, ethnicity, socio-economic status); and
- **6.** Provide mechanisms for independent monitoring and evaluation.

The panel also identified existing and proposed policies with the potential to reduce harm from children's exposure to digital media, including five existing industry self-regulatory policies and 22 existing and proposed government policies. The panel then evaluated the policies according to the six stated criteria. This evaluation supports the need for mandatory government policies to effectively limit unhealthy food marketing to children, including in digital media.

Key findings from this evaluation include:

- Industry-wide self-regulatory policies (e.g., Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU)) did not meet the panel's criteria for effective policies.
- Individual media-company policies (e.g., the Disney Company, Google) are somewhat more restrictive than industry-wide policies, but necessarily limited to the digital media they own.
- Although existing and proposed government policies tend to be more restrictive and would address some concerns about digital marketing to children (especially protecting children's data and limiting unfair design practices), they are primarily designed to address other harms to children (e.g., online safety), not marketing specifically.
- None of the industry-led or government policies examined are comprehensive enough to limit food companies from migrating to other common forms of marketing not covered by these policies, such as marketing the brand rather than individual products not meeting nutrition criteria. In addition, all fail to address the full range of unfair and deceptive creative techniques commonly used in marketing to children online.
- Current policy solutions to protect children from unfair digital marketing call for transparency (e.g., advertising disclosures) and teaching digital literacy skills, but these information-based solutions do not reduce the effects of the marketing.
- No policies directly address the effects of digital food marketing on health disparities.
- Few policies include independent monitoring mechanisms that would allow researchers to evaluate their implementation and effectiveness.

Interviews to Identify Barriers and Solutions to Enacting Digital Food Marketing Policies

Research Questions

- 1. What are the barriers to digital food marketing policy implementation?
- 2. What are the potential solutions to overcome the identified barriers to policy implementation?

To understand barriers to enacting policies that regulate digital food marketing to children in the U.S., as well as potential solutions, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with researchers, advocates, policymakers, and government officials with expertise in digital privacy, public health law, industry self-regulation policies, and racial justice. The goal of the interviews was to better understand the power dynamics at play and what stands in the way of making policy changes to protect children from harmful marketing practices.

Barriers to Policy Implementation

Key informant interviewees reported several barriers to digital food marketing policy implementation:

- The industry holds strong political power, putting external pressures on policy makers.
- Targeted marketing strategies specifically aim at children of color and further reinforce systemic inequalities.
- Recent decisions of the Supreme Court found that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects some forms of corporate speech, including advertising, complicating regulatory efforts.
- Widely held public perception that this is an issue of personal responsibility hinders political will to develop and pass government policies.
- Competing public health priorities posing more immediate population-wide health threats (e.g., gun violence, drug use) often overshadow food marketing issues in the development of policy agendas and issue prioritization.

Potential Solutions and Opportunities to Overcome the Barriers

To overcome the barriers in regulating digital food marketing, interviewees put forth several solutions to address both regulatory and advocacy needs:

- Enhance regulatory authority to update existing regulations as technologies advance.
- Increase public health and community alliances to support more successful advocacy efforts.
- Incorporate story-telling of those impacted by digital food marketing into advocacy efforts.
- Build a robust evidence base on the prevalence and impacts of digital marketing and effectively communicate research findings to decision-makers.
- Explore litigation as a tool for challenging unfair marketing practices.
- Look to the success of other countries to help tailor effective strategies for the U.S. context.
- Frame the issue of digital food marketing as part of a broader strategy to address inequality, social justice, and health equity.



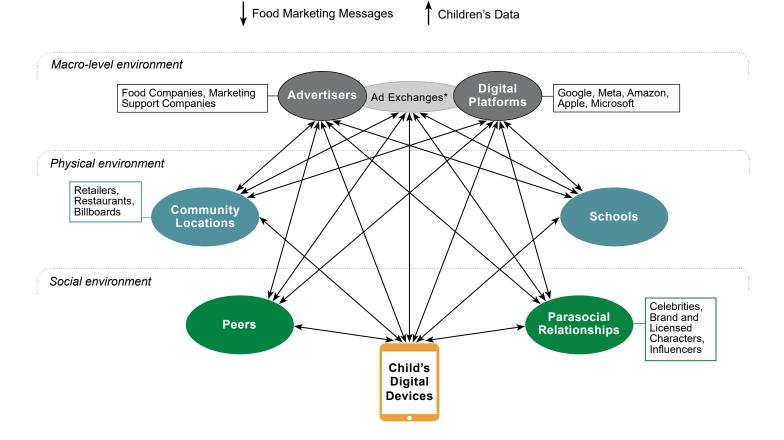
Expert Panel Recommendations

Upon reviewing the evidence, the expert panel developed a conceptual model to identify key actors in children's digital environments and possible pathways of influence (see **Figure 1**). The expert panel approach was guided by the socioecological model to describe how children's macro-level, physical, and social environments shape children's food-related beliefs and behaviors. The panel also applied the context of commercial determinants of health, which describes how widespread commercial sector practices at the macro-level create an environment that prioritizes commercial profits and drives ill health and health inequities. These models provide a framework to understand how commercial actions in children's macro-level environment, including digital food marketing,

shape their physical and social environments and impact diet-related outcomes, as well as their health and wellbeing more broadly. Based on these pathways of influence, the panel then identified key actors affecting the digital marketing that children are exposed to in their physical and social environments.

Using this framework, the expert panel agreed upon the following recommendations for policies to reduce children's exposure to and/or the power of unhealthy digital food marketing in five key areas: 1) industry-led policies, 2) school-based policies, 3) other physical food environment policies, 4) social environment policies, and 5) government policies.

Figure 1. Key actors in children's digital environments and pathways of influence



^{*} Digital marketplaces that facilitate the buying and selling of digital advertising space.

Recommendations for Industry-Led Policies

To effectively limit children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing to children, industry-led policies must:

- Protect children up to 18 years old.
- Address all forms of digital marketing to children, including:
 - All forms of paid and owned marketing (e.g., influencer content, product/brand placements or integration, food company apps/websites/social media accounts); and
 - Brand marketing, as well as marketing for unhealthy products.
- Address all marketing to which children are exposed, regardless of audience composition and method of targeting.
- Apply nutrition criteria that adhere to the <u>Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Chidren</u> (IWG) nutrition principles designed to identify foods that make a meaningful contribution to a healthful diet and minimize consumption of foods with significant amounts of nutrients to limit.
 - Alternatively, policies should limit all food marketing, regardless of nutritional content.
- Include a provision to release data for independent evaluations of policy effects on exposure and/or power of marketing to children.

To prevent further contribution to racial, ethnic, and other inequities (directly or indirectly), companies must:

- Examine and disclose how their business models and practices (e.g., marketing, philanthropy, lobbying) contribute to racial, ethnic, and other inequities (directly or indirectly).
- Marketers and digital platforms must implement actions to ensure that their marketing practices do not contribute to health disparities affecting low-income persons and communities of color.

To prevent unfair and deceptive practices in food marketing to children, industry-led policies must:

- Restrict all branded food content (paid or not) embedded within any entertainment content viewed by children, including (but not limited to) influencer, cartoon, TV shows/movies, music, virtual reality, and gaming content (also known as blurred or stealth marketing).
- Comply with privacy by design and default practices to safeguard children's data, including:
 - Not collect personal information about children that is not needed to deliver the service, including any activity related to individual-specific advertising;
 - Not share or sell children's personal information;
 - Not track children's location;
 - Not profile children unless profiling can be shown to be in children's best interests for noncommercial reasons;
 - Not use children's data in ways for which companies have not obtained explicit permission from the child's parent or the child (depending on the child's age); and
 - Conduct a risk assessment of how they use children's data.
- Comply with privacy by design and default practices to safeguard children's privacy, including:
 - Set all default settings to the most private;
 - Make it easy for children to report privacy concerns;
 - Let children know whenever they are being monitored or tracked; and
 - Provide privacy notices in clear language that young users can understand.
- Comply with age-appropriate design features to prevent manipulative and unfair techniques in digital marketing to which children are exposed, including:
 - Not use design features that may be detrimental to children's well-being;
 - Not use manipulative design to get children to sign away their information or view marketing; and
 - Design age-appropriate experiences for children based on set age ranges.
- Companies that conduct research with children must require human subjects protections for all research participants under age 18.
- Food, marketing, and digital companies must disclose any studies that they or their affiliated foundations sponsor or conduct on the health, psychological, purchasing practices, or other effects of their marketing on children. Such disclosures should include the amount (dollars and in-kind), purposes, and recipients of such support and the published and unpublished findings.

Recommendations for School-Based Policies

- School-based digital networks and school-issued devices should install robust ad-blocking technology and filters.
- School districts should have a robust student privacy policy that does not allow collection of online student data, unless required for the school's own use, and does not allow the sale or use of student data by any other entity.
- In their local school wellness policies, school districts should specify that digital instructional materials can not include unhealthy food marketing.
- Edtech companies that sell technology to schools must offer ad blocking and filter capabilities and comply with privacy by design and default. Schools should only purchase services and equipment from edtech companies that offer these protections.

Recommendations for Other Physical Food Environment Policies

- Retailers, restaurants, and food ordering services (e.g., Uber Eats, Door Dash) with apps and/or websites accessed by children must comply with age-appropriate design features.
 - In particular, they should not utilize geo-location data or otherwise target children with marketing, including push notifications and sales promotions.
- Digital billboards located near schools and other places where children gather must not be used to market unhealthy foods.

Recommendations for Social Environment Policies

- Influencers, celebrities, and licensed characters must not promote unhealthy food brands to children online (whether or not they are directly compensated by the brand), including speaking positively about the brand or encouraging its consumption in any way.
- Brand characters must not be used to promote unhealthy food brands in digital media, including on company websites, social media, and apps.

Recommendations for Government Policies

- Government policies should mandate that industry (including food, marketing and media companies, and/or digital
 providers) reduce children's exposure to and/or the power of unhealthy digital food marketing. Industry players are unlikely
 to enact effective policies unless mandated to do so, and existing evidence warrants immediate government regulatory
 and legislative actions.
- Current enacted and proposed U.S. and state government policies to protect children's data and privacy, and to require
 age-appropriate design features in digital media to which children are exposed, are important first steps (including KOSPA
 and Age-appropriate Design Codes). However, a wide range of new and innovative government policy options will be
 required to protect children from the harmful impact of unhealthy digital food marketing.

Potential government policies

Expert panel members identified a number of additional government policies that would directly address digital food marketing, including: 1) policies that could be implemented and enforced under existing U.S. regulatory policies, and 2) new and innovative policies that would require substantial changes to current U.S. government practices and priorities.

The described potential government policies and approaches below were discussed by panel members and other experts but did not undergo the consensus-building process described in Step 4 of the Expert Panel Process and Methods section of the Technical Report. Therefore, they are presented below as "potential" policies or approaches rather than recommendations. The methodology used to develop the potential policies and approaches is described in Step 5 of the Expert Panel Process and Methods section of the Technical Report.

Potential Government Policies That Could Be Implemented in the Short-term

Governmental agencies should implement and enforce policies under existing U.S. regulatory policies.

- The Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG) should publish its final nutrition principles for foods marketed to children and update its marketing definitions to incorporate current digital marketing practices.
- The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) should update its "Review of Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents", last published in 2012, and implement regularly scheduled updates. To obtain data for this report, the FTC should subpoena documents from food companies and digital platforms to assess digital food marketing practices. The FTC has the authority to do so under Section 6(b) of the FTC Act (15 USC 45).
- The FTC should utilize its powers under Section 5 of the FTC Act that prohibits "unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce" to address digital marketing to children, including civil law enforcement actions against advertisers and digital platforms.
- The FTC can file anti-trust actions against the large digital platforms, which currently monopolize the digital marketplace.
- The FTC should exercise its authority around unfair and deceptive advertising to address stealth advertising online and bring enforcement actions against companies that are running improperly disclosed advertising content. It should hold digital providers and advertisers responsible for ensuring that content providers comply.
- The USDA should require school districts to incorporate digital food marketing in Local School Wellness Policies and provide guidance for schools on effective actions.

The U.S. Congress should allocate funding and other resources to implement actions to address unhealthy digital food marketing to children.

- Designate a responsible agency and provide adequate and appropriate resources to formally monitor and regularly report on progress in restricting children's exposure to and/or the power of digital food marketing.
- Assign dedicated personnel at the FTC to enforce the prohibition of unfair and deceptive digital marketing to children.
- Expand the federal research capacity, including through FTC, USDA, Health and Human Services (HHS), and the National Science Foundation (NSF), to support digital food marketing research
- Develop and test solutions at the state and local levels.

State and local governments can also take action to address the harms of digital food marketing to children.

- Attorneys General can make claims against food advertisers and digital platforms under the authority of state unfair and deceptive acts and practices.
 - Require companies and industry organizations with policies addressing digital and/or food marketing to children to release data for independent evaluations of their claims that policies protect children.
- States can require school districts to develop "Screen Use in Schools" policies and mandate use of ad blocking and filter technology, age-appropriate design features, and student privacy protections.

Potential New and Innovative Government Policy Approaches

Mandatory comprehensive government policies

- Establish one government entity responsible for protecting children's health and well-being, monitoring all digital marketing to children and enforcing restrictions.
- Comprehensive legislation that effectively protects children from exposure to and the harms of digital food marketing by:
 - Restricting all forms of digital food marketing (paid, owned, and earned) that children under age 18 are exposed to, including brand marketing;
 - Utilizing the IWG nutrition principles to identify healthful foods that can be marketed to children:
 - Prohibiting all unfair and deceptive digital marketing to children, regardless of the type of product, including the collection and sale of children's data; and
 - Establishing regular monitoring by an independent third-party and enforcement to ensure compliance.
- Food marketers and digital providers are held accountable for their harmful practices through transparency, monitoring and enforcement – including unhealthy marketing to children and structural inequities that contribute to health disparities affecting persons with low income and communities of color:
 - Establish an independent board to set standards for advertising to children and evaluate compliance in a manner that is not subject to industry influence;
 - Provide a public forum for consumers, civil society organizations, and competitors to file complaints about harmful digital marketing to children;
 - Require companies to prove that their content and platforms are safe for children (as FDA requires of drug companies);
 - Require advertisers and digital platforms to disclose all marketing that children could be exposed to, maintain complete Ad Libraries with open access to independent researchers, and provide access to data for independent monitoring and evaluation;
 - Require all research conducted with children by commercial entities to follow human subjects protocols for research with vulnerable populations, as set out in the Belmont Report, and report findings of all studies conducted with children; and
 - Use supply-side controls, such as licensing requirements or liability measures, to require companies to comply in order to do business.

Attractive commercial-free alternatives

A free, child-friendly, high-quality commercial-free digital space where companies cannot interact with children is necessary to provide an appealing alternative to current profit-driven platforms.

- Content created by non-commercial entities to support children's health and wellbeing.
- Independently funded by government or non-profit organizations.

Convincing, coordinated and well-funded advocacy campaign

A convincing narrative and extensive outreach are required to increase public and policymaker awareness and understanding of the harms of digital food marketing on children.

- A major media campaign, developed by experienced advertisers, and funded at levels comparable to the Truth anti-tobacco campaign.
- Readily available resources for educators, health care providers, and parents to increase awareness of digital food marketing and the harms it poses to children's health.
- Research to inform and evaluate potential effective policy actions, quantify children's widespread exposure to unhealthy digital food marketing, and clearly demonstrate the harms from this exposure.
- A forum for researchers, advocates and policymakers to educate and inform each other's efforts.

Funding

Food companies and digital platforms should be required to allocate a small portion of their profits to fund these actions.

- Congress could impose a tax on advertisers and digital platforms that market to children and earmark it for free, commercial-free, high-quality child-friendly content.
- Penalties imposed on companies for violating regulations and unfair and deceptive marketing practices (e.g., through FTC and AG complaints), could be earmarked for these purposes.

Research Recommendations

The expert panel identified key priorities for additional research to inform and support effective policies to mitigate the negative impact of unhealthy digital food marketing on children:

- Understand and address the impact of digital food marketing on health disparities affecting Black, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income children.
- Examine common forms of digital food marketing that have not been well-documented, including gaming sites and platforms, mobile apps, esports platforms, virtual worlds, and the metaverse.
- Utilize standard protocols for researchers to code features of digital marketing in a consistent way that will inform policy actions and allow for comparisons between populations and types of marketing, including brand marketing studies.
- Document children's total exposure to digital food marketing across multiple platforms and monitor exposure over time.
- Conduct cross-platform and longitudinal studies to assess the cumulative and synergistic impact of digital food marketing exposure.
- Demonstrate the power of potentially unfair and deceptive digital food marketing techniques on recognition and awareness of marketing, as well as impact on diet-related and broader outcomes.
- Assess the effectiveness of existing and proposed solutions on reducing children's exposure to and/or the power of unhealthy digital food marketing.
- Understand the parental role in mediating, protecting, or enabling children to reduce exposure to marketing and/or selective use of digital media.
- Identify potential policy actions and opportunities to increase public and policymaker support for policies to address all forms of unhealthy food marketing, including digital marketing, to children.

Conclusion

Digital food marketing to children negatively affects children's diets, food attitudes, and preferences. The food industry has been able to embed their unhealthy brands into children's social networks in a digital world that largely falls under the radar of parents, healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers. The dearth of policies that specifically focus on reducing children's exposure to and the impact of marketing that promotes harmful products, including unhealthy food, to children in digital media presents a major policy challenge. New and innovative government policy options will be required to protect children from the harmful impact of unhealthy digital food marketing.

The panel's vision for a digital media environment is one that prioritizes children's health and well-being and equity over commercial interests. Achieving this vision will require new and innovative approaches to legislation, regulation, monitoring, and enforcement of restrictions on unhealthy digital food marketing to children, including mandatory comprehensive government policies, attractive commercial-free digital content alternatives, a convincing and coordinated public narrative to support these policies, and sufficient funding. Research and public policy must also address the cumulative and synergistic impact of children's exposure to all forms of unhealthy food marketing. Coordinated action by advocates, researchers, communities, and others who care about children (e.g., parents, caregivers, educators) will be necessary to increase awareness and generate demands for industry to amend their unhealthy and unfair marketing practices.

Suggested Citation

Harris J, Reed L, Maksi S, Ananthan S, Chenault G, Story M, Lott M. Evidence-Based Recommendations to Mitigate Harms from Digital Food Marketing to Children Ages 2-17. Durham, NC: Healthy Eating Research; 2024. Available at: https:// healthyeatingresearch.org.

Acknowledgements

This expert panel was supported by Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to our panel chair, Jennifer L. Harris, PhD, MBA, as well as the expert panel members who provided input to the methodology, reviewed the evidence, actively engaged in deliberations each month, and responded promptly and efficiently to queries. We would also like to thank the following experts who advised on specific areas throughout the project, including Haley Hinkle, Jeff Chester, and Katharina Kopp. Finally, we would also like to thank the many individuals listed under panel support for their assistance throughout the project.

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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 @HEResearch.

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