



Coca-Cola marketing to children is “serious public health concern,” researchers warn

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Two major campaigns from Coca-Cola were targeted at teenagers and mothers and used social media influencers and celebrities—including Olympic athletes—to make products seem healthier, researchers have warned.

US Right to Know, a non-profit investigative group that campaigns for transparency in the food industry, issued the warning after it obtained documents from the University of Colorado relating to two of Coca-Cola’s public relations (PR) campaigns: the 2013-14 Movement is Happiness campaign and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games campaign.

The group said that, although the company was publicly pledging to reduce children’s exposure to advertisements for products high in fat, sugar, or salt, behind closed doors it was actively targeting young age groups.

US Right to Know called for government policy to “effectively restrict the exposure of children to the marketing of unhealthy foods” and said that PR agencies should “fall within the reach of such policy or regulatory action.”

On a global level, it called on bodies such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA to “play their part in addressing the issue at hand.” The investigative team found that the Rio campaign had directly set out to target teenagers (aged 13 to 20) and mothers, through social media influencers and celebrities. It reached 21 million teenagers (90% on mobile phone platforms), and the phase of the campaign during the games achieved a seven point “brand lift” (a measurement of the increase in brand interaction) among teenagers.

Perceived healthiness

The Movement is Happiness campaign also focused on teenagers, with an emphasis on increasing the perceived healthiness of the Coke brand. The report quoted the documents obtained as saying, “[Coke] recognizes the importance of leading in this [health and wellbeing] space to marginalize detractors and build support broadly in a host of categories, including consumers, women, government and political officials and personalities, and media.”

The report, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, said, “Coke’s intent and ability to use PR campaigns to market to children should cause serious public health concern, given that the exposure of children to the marketing of unhealthy foods is likely to be an important contributor to increased childhood obesity rates.

“This study highlights how PR campaigns by large food companies can be used as vehicles for marketing to children, and for corporate political activity. Given the potential threats posed to populations’ health, the use of PR agencies by food companies warrants heightened scrutiny from the public health community, and governments should explore policy action in this area.”

The paper said that, while Coca Cola had pledged not to directly target marketing at children under 12 (by not placing advertising in media where over 35% of the audience are under 12) and to reduce children’s exposure to advertising of any products high in fat, salt, or sugar, these campaigns showed that their actions were limited.

The researchers said, “To highlight this point, if the overall number of children and teenagers reached by an advertising campaign is 21 million (the number reached by the Rio campaign), then according to Coke’s policy it would be acceptable for more than seven million of these to be below the age of 12.

“Coke’s marketing strategy to directly target mothers—a tactic described as one way to sidestep the issue of advertising directly to young children—also demands further scrutiny from a public health perspective.”

Study limitations

A spokesperson for Coca-Cola said, “In 2017-18, we eliminated 425 000 tons of sugar from our global portfolio of products through innovations such as new recipes, smaller packs, and wider availability of low and zero sugar products. We are continuing those efforts to provide greater choice for our consumers.”

US Right to Know’s work is funded by multiple donors,¹ and the report’s lead author, Gary Sacks, who is the organisation’s co-director, also received funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the World Health Organization.

Limitations of the study included that it analysed only two campaigns and that its examination was superficial, as it looked at the campaigns’ intentions rather than how effective they were.

1 US Right to Know. Donors, IRS filings & governing documents. 2019. <https://usrtk.org/donors/>.

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