



A Bite Back 2030 exposé

Lifting the lid on the secretive online strategies global food giants are using to manipulate British children

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Foreword

Hi, I'm Dev, a 16 year old living in Leicester, and I feel like I'm being bombarded with junk food ads on my phone and on my computer. Not only that, but I'm pretty sure it's getting worse.

Online advertising works, otherwise why would junk food companies spend millions on it? So this advertising is definitely manipulating young people like me to crave more, pester our parents more, buy more, and ultimately eat more unhealthy food.

And that must be bad for our future chances, right? Because we know an unhealthy diet is linked with child obesity, type 2 diabetes, tooth decay, poor performance at school, bullying, mental health problems and much more.

So what's going on here? Am I actually right that young people like me are being bombarded with junk food ads? Why is this happening? Is it getting worse? What are the tools, techniques and tricks that advertisers are using to target us? Do adults even know this is going on? And most importantly of all, what can we do to protect young people's health?

I needed answers to these questions. So I asked experts in digital marketing and in the food system to research and write this exposé for me, lifting the lid on what's really going on.

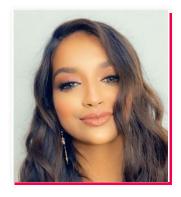
Dev Sharma

Executive summary

"My little three-year-old, type I diabetic sister has even been targeted. She frequently watches YouTube videos of popular child influencers playing with McDonald's toys and pretend to work at drive-throughs that have amassed millions of views. Such videos make her crave a McDonald's. Same thing goes for gaming apps; junk food advertising has found its place there too.

"Junk food advertising seems to reach her anywhere online. I don't feel her health is being protected. We need more regulations to protect her from this flood of advertising."

> Anisah Rahman, 17 Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Member



In this exposé we take up Dev's challenge by both examining existing evidence and carrying out our own new analysis. Dev is absolutely right that children are facing a bombardment of junk food adverts online. In fact, young people in Britain are exposed to 15 billion junk food ads a year online¹. That's nearly 500 adverts per second – and it's only increased during the COVID lockdowns².

An Advertising Standards Association study found adverts for products high in fat, sugar, or salt (HFSS) on 49% of children's websites and 71% of YouTube channels aimed at children³. And that's just the start of it. Advertisers have an extraordinary range of tools, techniques and tricks at their disposal when it comes to marketing junk food, including increasingly using social media influencers, a tool that is particularly impactful on children⁴.

Those from low-income communities are even more exposed to junk food marketing online. Our new analysis reveals how Facebook and Instagram (which Facebook owns) target children in low-income communities with junk food content. Plus, it supports findings from Cancer Research UK that found teens from the most deprived communities were 40% more likely to remember seeing junk food adverts⁵.

This bombardment of junk food adverts is a disaster for young people's health. Children's still-developing minds are more vulnerable to marketing techniques, and what they want, buy and consume is all influenced by marketing^{6,7,8}.

Online advertising is driven by algorithms that can hook young people into a junk food feedback loop, where they are fed more and more adverts.

Junk food marketing works, and is linked to people being overweight or having obesity, and a whole range of associated physical and mental health risks⁹. All this at a time when the COVID crisis has shone a fierce spotlight on the importance of a healthy weight for our resilience (people who catch COVID are 48% more likely to die if they have obesity¹⁰).

The world of online junk food marketing is secretive, hidden and unaccountable. It's really hard for parents, let alone children, to get the full picture. TikTok, a favourite of both junk food marketers and children, has a poor track record when it comes to harvesting children's data without consent. Meanwhile, Facebook and Instagram identify young people as having an interest in fast food, and serve them fast food content without their explicit consent. Of course the legal niceties of this practice are covered in the terms & conditions – but if adults don't read them¹², how can we expect children to?

The rapidly growing influencer marketing world is murky and ungovernable, particularly as junk food advertisers are increasingly working with a large number of small and micro influencers to tap into particular interest groups. Meanwhile, advertisers work hard to make their advertising more entertaining and socially 'native', so it blends in with other content in the social feed, making it harder for parents and children to spot when they're being manipulated. A final layer of secrecy comes from the computer algorithms that drive the whole process, the details of which are closely guarded intellectual property secrets.

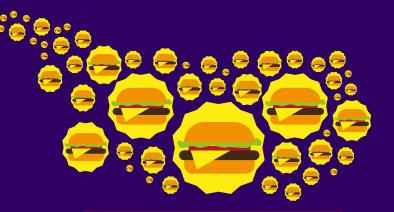


Lady Gaga on Instagram

Junk food marketing online is like the Wild West and it's growing fast. Marketers use so many tools, techniques and tricks, all of which are rapidly evolving — and the whole system is deeply untransparent. That's why we support the Government's proposal for a complete restriction of junk food marketing online as the only way to protect children and support parents.

This policy would provide 127,000 extra years of healthy life to children who are alive now or who will be born within 25 years¹³. That's surely worth fighting for, and that's why we support Dev and his friends in doing just that.

Our new analysis



Children in the UK see nearly 500 junk food adverts per second online.

+280,000

Facebook/Instagram has marked 280,000 13-17 year olds as having an interest in fast food, making them more likely to be targeted with fast-food advertising without their explicit consent.



More than twice as many 13-17 year olds in the 10 least affluent constituencies have been marked by Facebook/Instagram as having an interest in fast food than in the 10 richest constituencies.



Just one of the influencers used by McDonald's (Lewis Capaldi) has an estimated Instagram following of 243,000 13-17 year olds in the UK.



Of the top Instagram UK child influencers (those with the largest % of followers aged 13-17), more than half have posted with junk food in the last year.



Switching off online junk food ads would remove 12.5 billion calories from the diets of British children every year¹⁴ – the same as a pile of Big Macs that weighs the same as 470 double decker buses.

Children are facing a bombardment of online junk food adverts

"It's unbelievable how much junk food advertising floods our high streets and drowns young people with unhealthy options. We don't get a chance to breathe because we are constantly being targeted by fast-food companies everywhere we turn, whether we are walking down the street or scrolling through social media – it's not fair on young people!"

Rebecca, 16
Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Member



It's not surprising that Dev feels like he's being bombarded with junk food adverts – because he is. Young people in the UK are being exposed to **15 billion** junk food ads a year online¹⁵. That's nearly **500 adverts per second.** And right now children are being bombarded even more because they are on their screens more during lockdown¹⁶, particularly during the winter when days have been shorter and children haven't been able to get outside as much.

One of the most shocking examples was a "pre-programme" online ad for Pringles with the slogan "pop, skip and jump" that appeared to hundreds of thousands of children (and their parents) who took part in PE With Joe (Wicks) every weekday morning¹⁷.

An Advertising Standards Association study found adverts for products high in fat, sugar or salt on

49%

of children's websites, and on

of YouTube channels aimed at children

Sitting in their bedrooms on their screens, children are like sitting ducks for the junk food marketers. Despite existing rules that are supposed to stop junk food ads on purely children's channels, an Advertising Standards Association study found adverts for products high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) on 49% of children's websites and 71% of YouTube channels aimed at children¹⁸.

And that's just the start of it. Junk food marketers have an extraordinary array of tools, techniques and tricks at their disposal when it comes to manipulating children's young and still-developing minds (see Appendix 1).



USER-GENERATED CONTENT

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION



Just one advert for the KFC Dirty Louisiana Burger reached more than 1 in 3 internet users in the UK¹⁹. The burger has **735 calories and 36g of fat**, which exceeds the daily recommended allowance of saturated fat for a man, and that's before you add fries and drinks²⁰.

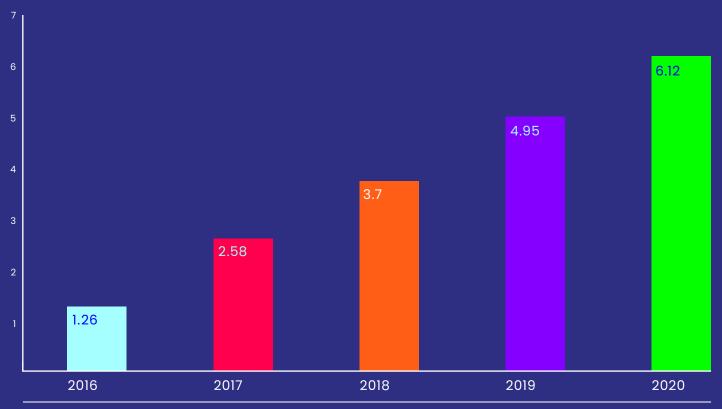
In recent years the use of influencers in marketing has exploded, increasing almost 500% between 2016 and 2020, with food being the second largest sector that influencers promote²¹. Research shows that influencer advertising has a particularly significant impact on children, with adverts featuring celebrities resulting in a 16% greater impact on brand awareness than those without. Plus, it seems Gen Z is especially receptive to content with celebrities and social media influencers²².

Our new analysis reveals that just one of the influencers used by McDonald's (Lewis Capaldi) has an estimated following of 243,000 13–17 year olds in the UK on just one platform (Instagram), while just one of the influencers used by Coca-Cola (Katy Perry) has an estimated following of 225,000 13–17 year olds in the UK on just one platform (Instagram)²³. So you begin to see why young people like Dev are seeing so many ads.



Louis Capaldi on Twitter

Number of brand-sponsored influencer posts on Instagram from 2016 to 2020 (in millions)²⁴



Children from low-income communities are even more exposed to junk food marketing online

Unfortunately, children from low-income communities are being bombarded with even more junk food ads than those from wealthier areas. Our new analysis reveals that more than twice as many 13-17 year olds in the 10 least affluent constituencies (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough; Bradford East; Boston and Skegness; Bolton South East; Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle; Nottingham North; Rhondda; Easington; Blackpool South and Mansfield) have been marked by Facebook/Instagram as having an interest in fast food than in the 10 richest constituencies²⁵. This means they are more likely to be targeted with content about junk food on Facebook/Instagram. Nine out of 10 of these constituencies have above average levels of obesity.

It's alarming to think young people in less privileged communities could be having junk food content targeted at them given that those growing up in low-income households are more than twice as likely to have obesity than those in higher income households²⁶. And given that we know junk food adverts have a greater impact on those children who are already overweight or obese²⁷.

Our new analysis backs up recent research from Cancer Research UK, which found that teens from the most deprived communities were 40% more likely to remember junk food advertisements compared to teens from more affluent families²⁸

"People become victims of junk food marketing's every-day flooding, especially people from lower-income communities and families. They should not be puppets, who are under continuous manipulation. Instead of exploiting them, we should be helping them gain access to healthy, nutritious food."

Emily, 16 Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Member



This bombardment of junk food adverts is a disaster for young people's health

"Long-term health should be prioritised over short-term profit."

Victoria, 17 Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Member



Dev is also right that the bombardment of junk food adverts is damaging young people's health. Children's still-developing minds are particularly vulnerable to marketing techniques, with academic evidence showing their food preferences, purchasing and consumption can all be influenced by advertising²⁹.

This can happen both in the short term, increasing the amount of food children eat immediately after being exposed to an HFSS advert, and in the long term by shaping children's food preferences from a young age³⁰.

And, of course, increased consumption of junk food by children is strongly linked to being overweight and having obesity, plus the associated health risks³¹. Children who are overweight or have obesity are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes in childhood, and are far more likely to go on to have obesity as adults, with a higher risk of developing life-threatening conditions such as some forms of cancer, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and liver disease³². Children's mental health is also at risk, with those who are overweight or have obesity more likely to experience bullying, stigmatisation and low self-esteem³³.

According to a 2018 Cancer Research UK study³⁴, children who use the internet for more than three hours per day are almost...

more likely to pester their parents for junk food

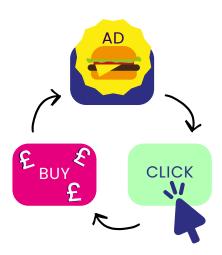
more likely to buy junk food

3X
less fruit

and vegetables

And will eat around

One of the ways online advertising is different from other forms is the way computer algorithms create a feedback loop that exaggerates our existing behaviour. For example, if we click on an advert for shoes we will be served more adverts for shoes. If we then buy some shoes, we will be served even more adverts for shoes, which will encourage us to buy more shoes, and so on.

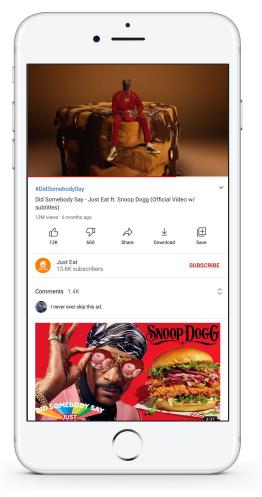


Not only that, but the algorithm fine tunes this process, so we are served the most impactful ads for shoes at the times and frequency that we are most likely to click on them. We all like to think we can resist these prompts, but often we can't and we don't.

Ending up with more shoes than we really wanted is not a huge problem. But young people risk being hooked into a more dangerous feedback loop when it comes to junk food. Young people struggling with their weight may unwittingly become part of an optimised automated process that aims to make them buy more and more frequently. Online delivery apps further tighten the feedback loop by allowing a craving to be satisfied in real time. And the delivery apps are working hard to attract a young audience – see Snoop Dogg's £5.3 million advert for Just Eat, which has been viewed 7 million times on social media³⁵.

All this at a time when the COVID crisis has shone a fierce spotlight on the importance of a healthy weight for our resilience (people who catch COVID are 48% more likely to die if they have obesity³⁶).





JustEat on YouTube

Olly's story

(example for illustration only)

Olly follows KFC and Burger King on Facebook and has engaged with a handful of their posts. He has ordered a McDonald's delivery from Just Eat. He likes one of his friend's Instagram posts, which is tagged at a McDonald's drive-through. Facebook has used all these signals to mark him as having an interest in 'fast food'.

In addition, Olly also has similar interests to those within the fast-food interest group. For example, he is interested in gaming, which this group also has a high affinity for. This shared passion further reinforces his interest profile.

Once a critical mass of signals has been detected by the Facebook algorithm, it begins to up-weight the prominence of content that matches his interest in this category. This content could be posted organically by friends or brands he follows, or it could be paid for by advertisers who are targeting the category.

If he continues to engage with this paid and organic content, it is served at a higher frequency. Every time Olly looks at his Facebook feed, he sees content that reinforces his interest in fast food, and as a result he begins using Just Eat more frequently.

Olly is now a high-value customer of Just Eat. As such, they retarget him with advertising promoting special offers on Facebook. His engagement with Just Eat advertising means Facebook deems him as a high-value target for its other fast-food advertisers.



The world of online junk food marketing is secretive, hidden and unaccountable

As Dev says, it's really hard for parents, let alone children, to get the full picture of what's going on with online junk food marketing. Parents cannot monitor what's on their children's screens 24 hours a day, especially as theyre often behind closed doors in their bedrooms. And the world of junk food marketing is secretive, hidden and unaccountable.

TikTok is currently the most popular platform with young people in the UK, and is becoming increasingly important for junk food advertisers. The **#junkfood** hashtag on TikTok has 197 million views. But TikTok is also arguably one of the least transparent platforms. In February 2019, the Federal Trade Commission in the US fined the company £4.2 million for collecting the personal data of children under 13 without parental consent³⁷.

By reverse-engineering the process by which advertisers buy audiences for their adverts on Facebook/Instagram, we can also reveal the largely hidden practice whereby Facebook/Instagram marks children as having an interest in fast food without giving their explicit consent.

Of course the legal niceties of this practice are covered in the terms and conditions. But if adults don't read them³⁸, how can we expect children to? Facebook/Instagram has marked more than a quarter of a million 13-17 year olds in the UK as having an interest in fast food. This means they are more likely to be targeted with content about junk food on both Facebook and Instagram³⁹.

These numbers are a significant underestimate given children often lie about their age when setting up profiles⁴⁰.

The influencer marketing industry is particularly "murky", which is exactly how 73% of brand executives described it in a YouGov poll⁴¹. One in four complaints about online advertising submitted to the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in 2019 took issue with sponsored influencer posts⁴². As well as the big name celebrities with huge followings, brands are increasingly flying under the radar using smaller scale influencers to target particular interest groups and online communities.



"If popular influencers in today's society are endorsing junk food, then it's going to allow our young people to fall into the trap of well known fast-food chains. We need our influencers to be marketing healthy, nutritious food for our young people."

Alex, 16 <u>Bite Back 2030 Youth B</u>oard Member Our new analysis shows that junk food companies are keen to work with influencers with smaller numbers of followers overall, but with large numbers of children following them. We found that six of the top 10 'UK child influencers' (those with >20% of their audience in the UK and >25% who are 13-17 years old) have posted with junk food on Instagram or YouTube in the last year⁴³.



Joey Essex on Instagram



Gigi Hadid on Instagram



Ovie Soko on Instagram

Advertisers also use smaller influencers to tap into particular interest groups such as gamers in the case of Cadbury and KFC. KFC have also promoted a story about the KFC games console which apparently can keep your junk food warm while you play⁴⁴.



Cadbury UK on Facebook

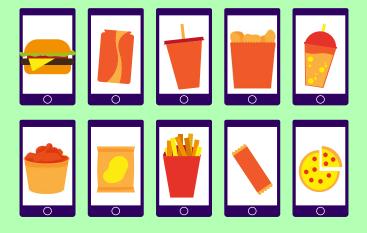


Coolermaster's KFConsole, promoted by KFCGaming on Instagram

The five most-watched children YouTubers have made videos featuring unhealthy branded items, such as fast food, that have been viewed more than

1 billion

times.



Micro influencers, those with fewer than 30,000 followers, now make up the highest percentage of influencers used by marketers globally at 36% of influencer partnerships⁴⁵. The proliferation of the use of small and micro influencers makes this a very hard area to regulate.

Most shocking of all is the use of influencers who are children themselves to promote junk food to their peers. Some children now have very large followings. Recent research into the five most-watched influencers globally between the ages of three and 14 on YouTube found that 179 out of 418 videos featured food or drinks, 90% of which showed unhealthy branded items, such as fast food. **Those specific YouTube videos were viewed more than a billion times**⁴⁶.



Ryan's World on YouTube

The ability of parents and children to see the full picture is made harder by the efforts of both platforms and advertisers to make paid-for editorial blend seamlessly into 'native' content by matching the form and function of the platform on which it appears. Advertisers do this because they know people are more responsive to advertising when they don't think they are being advertised to.

A final layer of secrecy relates to the computer algorithms that now deliver most junk food advertising, the details of which are closely guarded intellectual property secrets.

Conclusion:

Why we need a complete restriction of online junk food marketing

"By restricting the promotion of junk food and the money to be made from it, we will start this process and encourage the food conglomerates to invest in healthier options that can maintain their profits. No one is against profit; however, we should all be against profit that doesn't profit society as a whole⁴⁷."

> Sir John Heggerty, Founder of Advertising Agency BBH

Now we've demonstrated that Dev is right – young people like him are being bombarded with junk food adverts, and that it's seriously bad for their health – what should be done about it?

Online junk food marketing is like the Wild West – and it's growing fast. Marketers are using so many tools, techniques and tricks that are all evolving at breakneck speed. The whole system is secretive, hidden and unaccountable. That's why we support the Government's proposal for a complete restriction of online junk food marketing as the only way to protect children and give parents the peace of mind they need.

A restriction can easily be introduced in a common-sense way, focusing on the junk food products that most contribute to child obesity⁴⁸ and with an exclusion for small businesses⁴⁹.

Alternative solutions that rely on only targeting adults or on time restrictions would be inadequate. Sharing content is the whole point of social media, which makes it very hard to control when content is viewed and by whom. And children often lie about their age when setting up profiles, access content via parents' accounts, or watch without being signed in. Ofcom indicates that around 20% of 8-11 year olds report having social media accounts, despite the minimum age for such accounts being 13⁵⁰. And Facebook has previously reported it has more 18-year-old male users than there are on Earth⁵¹.

The Government estimates that switching off the bombardment of junk food adverts would remove an incredible 12.5 billion calories from the diets of British children every year⁵². Our new analysis reveals this is the equivalent of a tower of coke cans 12 times taller than Big Ben every hour⁵³, or a pile of Big Macs with the weight of 470 double-decker buses every year.



The health benefits to children who are alive now, or who will be born within 25 years of the introduction of the policy, will be an estimated 127,000 Quality Adjusted Life Years⁵⁴.



That's

127,000

extra years of healthy life.

Surely that's something worth fighting for, and why we support Dev and his friends in doing just that.

Appendix 1

Types of online marketing

Paid advertising

Display advertising

- Banner ads appearing across websites, apps and social media.
- Around 80% of display advertising is bought programmatically (automatically based on algorithms). Various targeting options are available, depending on the display network or publisher who owns the inventory. Retargeting can be used via first- and third-party cookies.

Desktop and mobile video

- Can consist of either in-stream or in-banner inventory.
- Video can play before, during or after content, with pre-roll being most common.
 Around 80% of video advertising is bought programmatically. Some inventory can be bought directly through premium publishers.
- Retargeting can be used via first- and third-party cookies.

Digital Out Of Home (DOOH)

- Digital advertising placed on digital screens in public spaces, such as bus shelters and on prominent digital billboards. Generally bought on impressions basis, with geographic and demographic targeting.
- Can be bought both programmatically and direct.

Connected TV advertising

- Video ads play at full resolution on app load across smart TVs, gaming consoles equipped with internet-streaming capabilities and standalone devices, such as Roku and Apple TV.
- Generally bought programmatically.

Paid search (PPC)

 Paid-for placement on search engine results page, based on target keywords. Keywords may include brand terms, and intent-based generic terms. May also support marketing campaigns and PR activity.

Native advertising:

Branded Content/Publisher Partnerships

- Content that has been co-created with the publisher who will host the ad. Generally a service offered by premium publishers.
 Different publishers offer various formats, including articles, videos, podcasts, whitepapers, etc.
- Most often bought direct from the publisher.

Native advertising:

Content Recommendation/ Discovery

- Promoted stories that sit at the bottom of an article, most often on a news-type website.
- Generally bought programmatically.

Appendix 1 cont'd...

Types of online marketing

Paid/earned advertising

In-game

 Paid-for placement using programmatic display within connected game environment, or direct partnership between brand and game developers. Can include interactive elements within gameplay, and even ability to order real-world takeaway. This can result in significant buzz within online gamer communities.

Affiliates

 Affiliates sell/promote a brand's products in return for an agreed commission. They can use any marketing channel they or the brand deems fit. They will either be engaged directly by the brand, by the brand's media agency, or via an affiliate network.

Paid social media

- Paid social content that fits seamlessly into a social news feed through native social formats. Native ad units include stories, video, carousels.
- Facebook also offers Messenger ads, which appear on the messaging app between chat messages.
- A vast array of targeting options are available to ensure posts reach the right audience. This includes age and demographics.

Influencers

- Brand endorsement deals often involve number/reach of social posts, either produced by the influencer directly, or in collaboration with the brand. Posts are released by influencers on their own social feeds, and can also be reposted/repurposed by the brand.
- Influencers can be selected based on demographic profile of their follower base.
- Can be bought direct from influencer or via a specialist broker. Can also be bought directly through TikTok.
- Influencers should state their content is an ad, but this practice is poorly regulated.

User Generated Content (UGC)

- Brands may actively or passively encourage fans on social media to share content they have created related to their brand.
- Brands often use hashtags, UGC competitions and reposting to encourage creation of UGC.
 UGC can generate higher engagement and organic social reach than brand-created content.
- Brands increasingly feature UGC in paid media channels.

Appendix 1 cont'd...

Types of online marketing

Owned/earned advertising

Owned website/blog

- Virtually all brands have a website and many also invest in blog content.
- Both paid and organic media may be used to drive traffic to these properties.
- Publishing of on-site content ensures website appears in search results pages.
- Many sites also integrate social sharing functionality into their content, extending reach beyond the website, and driving more traffic back to the page.
- Once a user has visited the site, they can be retargeted through paid media.
- Brands often use their websites to capture user details, so they can be marketed to via email, SMS or direct mail.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

- Brands optimise their websites to appear in organic search listings for targeted keywords.
 An SEO strategy will include ongoing schemes of content creation to build search authority across a given subject matter.
- Content marketing and PR activity may also be used to generate links to on-site content from other publishers. This practice, known as 'link building', is used to create site authority with the search engines.

 Social content is also an important element of a brand's SEO strategy. A brand's social content can appear in search results, and traffic referred to a website from social media can generate strong search signals.

Email

 Brands send email to customers who have opted-in for communication. Dependent on data collected by the brand, the audience can be segmented by factors like demographics and behaviours.

Organic social

- Organic social media is characterised by posts published by a brand without any paid support. Organic posts are served to followers/fans of the brand profile. The aim is to generate fan engagement, which will then extend reach of the posts into and beyond follower base.
- Reach of organic brand social posts is generally very limited. However most brands continue to use organic as well as paid social, especially if they already have a large social follower base

Appendix 2

Footnotes

- 1 https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss/introducing-a-total-online-advertising-restriction-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss
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Appendix 2 cont'd...

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About Bite Back 2030

Bite Back is a youth-led movement that wants healthy, nutritious food to be an option for every family. Our young people collaborate with parents, industry representatives and policy makers to achieve their vision of a fair world, where good food is available to everyone, no matter where they live.

To learn more about us, please visit www.biteback2030.com





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