Marketing unhealthy commodities on social media

Antonia C Lyons, Timothy McCreanor

The marketing of commodities on social media sites is increasing as these commercial platforms adapt to evolving mobile technologies. New Zealand marketing regulations are frequently ineffective in this environment, as they either do not apply to foreign-domiciled sites or are evaded as corporations make use of ‘under-the-radar’ techniques such as user-generated content, mimicry of online ‘friendship’ practices and networked sharing. Current ‘controls’ rely on industry self-regulation. This means that companies are not publicly accountable around their social media marketing activities, a business-world situation that parallels the political scandals involving social media currently occurring globally.1

The business models of social media platforms are structured around exploiting the warehoused personal data of the masses from which algorithms can identify highly specific group and individual profiles, allowing micro-targeted advertising, often via sophisticated psychological profiling tools.2 These algorithms draw on users’ values and meanings, embedding brands within people’s everyday practices and identities,3 catering for specific national contexts and cultural settings.4,5 This type of highly targeted marketing encourages peer-to-peer transmission of messages and content, enabling electronic ‘word-of-mouth’ viral marketing. Such sharing of ‘information’ blurs the boundaries between commercial messages and private activity, making it difficult for users to identify marketing content that often morphs as it travels through the network.

The massive audience reach of online networks means these approaches are highly effective and cheap, in part because they work with the free ‘immaterial labour’ of their numerous users, creating vast profit-streams from selling such data to interested businesses.6 Facebook has over 2.1 billion users, over half of whom access the platform on their phones daily,7 where every one of their keystrokes is recorded as data that is owned by the corporation. Social media marketing is also effective because algorithms can identify and recruit new generations of consumers, effectively grooming children to become consumers as they gather disposable income or cross key age-barriers such as those around alcohol and tobacco. Given such platform affordances, it is not surprising that a recent review concluded that digital marketing has significant detrimental effects on “the intended use and actual consumption of unhealthy commodities”.8

In this volume, Vandevijvere, Aitken and Swinburn9 provide much-needed insights into the marketing of common unhealthy (highly-processed, energy dense and nutrient poor) food and beverage products on Facebook and YouTube in New Zealand. Their study tracked Facebook activity over two months, and YouTube presence over two years, of snack food, beverage and fast food companies. It examined the nature and extent of promotional activities and their potential reach, estimating that 10% of adolescents in New Zealand could be exposed to these influences. Diverse marketing techniques were employed, with companies encouraging users to engage with posts and online content to ensure products were seen by users’ friends and online networks. In this way, online brands amplify the reach and relevance of marketing messages, appropriating users’ labour with little incentive or reward.10

According to a recent OECD report, obesity rates in New Zealand are third worst in the world,11 with one in three
adults and over 12% of children classified as obese. Overconsumption of unhealthy products is related to chronic non-communicable diseases and premature mortality. Evidence demonstrates that marketing such products is related to adverse health outcomes, and conversely, regulating food advertising to children is an effective strategy to tackle eating behaviours closely linked to obesity. Promoting unhealthy products on social media is an effective marketing strategy, but is ethically problematic, particularly when it is targeted at children and young people who are high users of social media platforms.

New Zealand children are over-exposed to unhealthy food marketing in everyday settings. A recent study of 11–13 year-olds using wearable cameras found that they were exposed to such marketing on average more than 27 times per day (twice the rate than for healthy foods) and that most products they saw were sugary drinks, fast food, confectionary and snack foods. The convergence with targeted, interactive marketing (often keyed to human neurological processes) within social media platforms means that children’s environments are potentially inundated with highly engaging promotions of a wide range of health-demoting products. The ubiquity of unhealthy food marketing within children’s environments, both offline and online, normalises brands and has detrimental health effects. Reducing children’s exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods is essential and must include consideration of social media.

Public health recommendations to protect young people within social media environments have been largely ignored by governments and corporations. The policy implications of marketing unhealthy commodities online have been viewed as too difficult. For example, the report of the New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship 2014 began: “As a forum we believe protecting the young from alcohol-related harm is paramount” (p1) but subsequently placed social media marketing outside the remit of the review. We need to grapple with marketing on social media if we want to safeguard our young people from the promotion of unhealthy products.

Extending existing regulatory codes to social media is not going to be effective as they do not take into account the particular characteristics of the social media environment, including its interactive, immersive and personal nature (aspects which appeal to children and young people particularly). Our exploratory research with young adults engaging with alcohol marketing on Facebook found that the alcohol industry embeds their marketing activities within online friendship activities. In this way the marketing became obscured, but also normalised, effectively hidden in plain sight as part of the routine flow of material on Facebook. We concluded that “social media marketing of alcohol is likely to encourage consumption through new forms of promotion (particularly through alcohol venues online), the exploitation of networked peer group friendship practices and [favourable] perceptions of the behaviour of others”. In this platform, algorithms target those users who are more likely to consume specific products such as alcohol or unhealthy foods; in other words, those who may be most vulnerable.

Social media platforms are now significant commercial institutions and as such should attend to the ethical responsibilities of constructive citizenship, including accountability for brand activity on their platforms. The vast databases that social media corporations have assembled could also be made available for public scrutiny and research for the public good, showing for instance the impact of marketing activities in terms of overconsumption of unhealthy foods and other commodities. The infrastructure itself—usurped as it is from the digital commons—could be defined and regulated, including making all use of personal data transparent so users can clearly see the flow of content, where their data goes, who receives it and how it is subsequently used.

Counter-marketing can also expose the motives and tactics of companies, and highlight the ways in which users are manipulated by industry and social media companies themselves. Social movements may help to demonstrate the invisible (and at times underhanded) corporate strategies and forces that are involved in encouraging
consumption of products that lead to poorer population health outcomes. Globally, research suggests that companies vary their online marketing techniques by country, marketing healthier products in wealthier countries, while showcasing their philanthropic activities in less wealthy countries.21

The recent disclosures around Cambridge Analytica and the unauthorised use of Facebook users’ data to influence democratic processes has brought the use of social media data into the public spotlight.1 Much attention is being given to the political dimensions of what Steve Bannon (previous executive chairman of the “alt-right” news network Breitbart) has referred to as the cultural warfare necessary to drive particular political agendas. Whistleblowers have discussed how Facebook routinely harvested data for political purposes, data that were “private and personally identifiable”, belonging to ‘friends’ of users of tens of thousands of apps operative on the platform.22 In contrast, very little attention or critique is directed towards the entrenched marketing on Facebook (and other social media platforms) that use the same tactics to build individuated consumer cultures, while making huge profits for corporations.

Social media are built on commercial imperatives that have nothing to do with public health. The marketing of unhealthy foods, alcohol, tobacco, gambling and other products is rife on social media platforms and has been linked to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for youth and adults. It is daunting but crucial to document what is occurring in this ephemeral and evolving persuasion space, to gather evidence that shows how marketing creates health-demoting perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, how they can be resisted and what public policy interventions are indicated.

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Nil.

Author information:
Antonia C Lyons, Professor of Health Psychology, School of Health, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington; Timothy McCreanor, Professor of Public Health, SHORE and Whariki Research Centre, Massey University, Auckland.

Corresponding author:
Professor Antonia Lyons, School of Health, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140.
antonia.lyons@vuw.ac.nz

URL:

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