People of Color Disproportionately Targeted by Unhealthy Food Advertising

Unhealthy food and drink advertising on TV has increased in recent years.

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U.S. food and beverage companies spend millions to disproportionately target Black and Latino customers by advertising high-calorie, low-nutrient products, such as candy, sugary drinks, and snacks, according to a new study.

Researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut analyzed TV advertising created by all food and beverage companies. They discovered that 19 companies controlled 75% of all TV food and beverage advertising spending, 79% of Spanish-language advertising and 82% of Black-targeted advertising. Among these companies were PepsiCo, The Coca-Cola Company, General Mills and Campbell Soup Company.

“Our study shows that food companies continue to directly target Black and Hispanic consumers with TV advertising that primarily promotes unhealthy products,” said Jennifer L. Harris, MBA, PhD, senior research adviser at the Rudd Center and lead author of the study, in a UConn news release.

The study found that from 2017 to 2021 the rate of unhealthy products featured in food and beverage TV commercials targeting Black and Latino viewers increased. For example, in 2017, about half of Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV advertising dollars were spent promoting candy, sugary drinks, snack and cereals. By 2021, this spending represented three quarters of targeted advertising.

“Food and beverage companies continue to bombard Hispanic families with targeted marketing for unhealthy food, which contributes to the health disparities that face this population. Hispanics deserve access to, and promotion of, healthier foods and drinks,” said study coauthor Amelie G. Ramirez, DrPH, MPH, the director of Salud America!

Researchers also found examples of TV commercials for unhealthy foods and drinks seeking to appeal to multicultural youth by featuring hip-hop or Latino celebrities.

"Companies say they value and are committed to supporting these communities, but the millions

spent on targeted advertising for products like candy, sugary drinks and snack foods exacerbate the health risks faced by youth of color and present a significant barrier to improved public health and health equity," Harris said.

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