Facebook and Instagram are bombarding young people with targeted alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food ads

Facebook and Instagram are bombarding young people with targeted ads for alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food, new data shows, prompting calls for reform to protect young people from harmful digital marketing.

Researchers at the University of Queensland and Monash University, in partnership with VicHealth, examined Facebook and Instagram ads shown to 16-to-25-year-olds and found their feeds are dominated by highly targeted marketing of unhealthy and harmful products.

"We analysed Facebook data downloaded by young Citizen Scientists from their Facebook accounts," Associate Professor and Director of Digital Cultures & Societies at the University of Queensland, Nicholas Carah said.

"We observed that alcohol, unhealthy food and gambling ads are common in young people's social media feeds, including children aged under 18, and these ads are specifically targeted to them based on the hundreds of data points collected about each child."

The study examined Facebook data provided by 83 young people aged 16-to-25-years-old, including 54 participants aged 16-to-17-years-old. It found they had each been assigned an average of 787 advertising interests by 194 advertisers, including alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food companies.

Alcohol ads appeared in the Facebook feeds of 93 per cent of 16-to-17-year-olds in the study, while 42 per cent of 16-to-25-year-old participants were assigned "alcohol" as an advertising interest in their Facebook profile and 21 per cent were assigned "gambling".

The average participant had 6.3 alcohol-related interests and 39 unhealthy food interests recorded as advertising keywords within their Facebook profile. There were 41 alcohol-related keywords attached to the accounts of five participants aged 17-years-old, including "alcohol", "alcoholic drink", "bars", "bartender", "beer", along with specific alcohol brands and retailers.

Of the 16-to-17-year-olds in the study, 58.6% reported seeing alcohol ads regularly or sometimes, and 62% reported seeing gambling ads regularly or sometimes.

"We found a significant association between alcohol-related keywords and alcohol use," Associate Professor Carah said.

"In their ad model, Facebook attached more alcohol-related keywords to young people who drank more alcohol."

Similarly, he said, participants who had more unhealthy food keywords consumed more highly processed, unhealthy foods.

"This suggests that Facebook is learning which young people have previously consumed the most alcohol and unhealthy foods just by monitoring their use of digital services, then targeting them with more of these ads without directly asking them about it."

Unhealthy food ads were the most common; participants aged 16 years captured 244 unhealthy food ads, 19 alcohol ads and 1 gambling ad, while 17-year-olds captured 493 unhealthy food ads, 85 alcohol ads and 49 gambling ads.

FARE CEO Caterina Giorgi said it was unacceptable that Facebook's algorithm was assigning alcohol-related advertising interests to children, and that urgent reform was needed to protect the community.

"We all want our children to be safe when they are online. But digital platforms and alcohol companies are using machine learning to build profiles of young people to sell them unhealthy and addictive products. Without intervention, these labels will follow them for life," Ms Giorgi said.

"Governments need to implement common sense reforms to protect children and young people from being bombarded with digital marketing of alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food.

"We also need to see protections enacted to ensure that companies are not targeting people who are alcohol dependent with more marketing."

Alliance for Gambling Reform CEO Carol Bennett said young people must be protected from gambling companies on social media, given the significant level of harm gambling caused in the community.

"Gambling companies want to get Australians hooked on gambling as young as possible and this research exposes their shameless efforts to target our young, including children," Ms Bennett said.

"Governments need to take this seriously and pass laws to stop gambling companies from targeting young people online."

Obesity Policy Coalition Executive Manager Jane Martin said processed food companies were targeting young people with social media advertising designed to drive demand for ultra-processed foods packed with salt, fat and sugar.

"Young people today are being tracked and targeted by processed food companies every time they go online, this research demonstrates it has a powerful impact on what they eat," Ms Martin said.

"We should not be allowing these companies to target young people with ads for highly processed foods that are packed with kilojoules but contain little nutrition, when our health system is grappling with more and more people with preventable chronic diseases linked to poor diets and unhealthy weight."

Media contact:
Dana Daniel
media@fare.org.au
0429 291 120