# Food corporations increase advertising spend ahead of new obesity regulations



Food corporations in the UK have notably ramped up their advertising expenditure in the lead-up to the implementation of new regulations aimed at addressing the nation's obesity crisis. According to findings from the Observer, big food brands collectively increased their advertising budgets by £420 million in 2024, representing a substantial 26% rise from the previous year. This surge coincided with a reported 12-month boom in snack food sales, during which consumers purchased an additional 45.4 million packs of chocolates, cakes, and crisps from leading brands.

The increase in advertising spend has raised concerns among health campaigners, who suggest that food companies are adapting their strategies to minimise the impact of forthcoming regulations. These new rules, which will introduce a 9pm watershed for television advertisements for unhealthy food products, are set to take effect on 1 October 2024 after a lengthy five-year delay. Furthermore, these regulations will impose a ban on junk food advertisements across online platforms.

Certain advertising channels, such as outdoor posters, audio advertising on popular streaming services like Spotify, and collaborations with social media influencers, remain outside the scope of these new regulations. This has prompted speculation that advertising tactics are shifting in ways to exploit these loopholes.

James McDonald, who serves as the director of data, intelligence, and forecasting at WARC Media, noted the correlation between the rise in advertising spending and an uptick in sales, remarking, “I think the timing is interesting, given the introduction of HFSS [high fat, sugar, and salt] regulation this year.”

However, newly analysed data from academics at University College London and the Pan American Health Organization, including NHS doctor and broadcaster Chris van Tulleken, indicates that the upcoming junk food advertising regulations will only cover less than two-thirds of products deemed unhealthy under official nutrition guidelines.

Health advocates have expressed alarm over the similarities between the strategies employed by food corporations and those historically associated with the tobacco industry, particularly the emphasis on brand recognition over product marketing. The advertising industry has countered, claiming that uncertainties surrounding the regulations pose a threat to its operations and advocating for legislative measures to exempt ads featuring brand names without identifiable products.

This has raised significant questions regarding the interpretative breadth of the new rules, particularly regarding advertisements that prominently display brand names but not products themselves. Consequently, it is conceivable that Cadbury could broadcast a nostalgic advertisement featuring its iconic drumming gorilla, provided it omits any visual representation of chocolate products.

As the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) prepares to publish guidelines addressing these issues, the fragmented dialogue among stakeholders continues. Archie Norman, chair of Marks and Spencer, expressed concern to the Financial Times, stating that the regulations could limit discussions around festive products such as mince pies and alter the landscape of Christmas advertising.

Bite Back 2030, a youth activist group dedicated to combating junk food advertising, conducted a survey revealing that nearly half of the advertisement placements in cities such as Liverpool, Birmingham, and London were for food and drink products. They reported a troubling trend where 44% of all HFSS food advertisements were concentrated in the most deprived areas, as opposed to a mere 4% in the least deprived regions.

Ashley Dalton, a junior health minister, offered a sympathetic stance towards the advertisers last week, suggesting that “pure brand advertising” should not be restricted, implying that merely associating a corporate brand with less healthy offerings should not categorically place it under regulatory control.

Recent investigations by the BMJ have uncovered that local councils are delaying the imposition of restrictions on junk food advertisement placements following threats from advertising companies about potential revenue losses.

Dr Van Tulleken outlined the pervasive nature of unhealthy food marketing across the UK, stressing that “the only foods that are marketed in this country, almost without exception, are high in fat, salt or sugar.” He articulated his scepticism about the potential efficacy of the upcoming regulations, arguing that marketing saturation in public spaces undermines their intended effects.

The obesity crisis in the UK has escalated significantly, with statistics revealing that, compared to 1980 when only 6% of men and 9% of women fell into the obese category, 28% of adults in England were classified as obese by 2022. This increase has coincided with a dramatic rise in the proportion of processed foods in diets, with research indicating that two-thirds of all calories consumed in the UK now derive from processed or ultra-processed foods.

The UK’s first formal restrictions on advertisements for unhealthy food products appeared in 2007, evolving significantly amidst growing advocacy from public health campaigners. Building upon these efforts, the Advertising (Less Healthy Food Definitions and Exemptions) Regulations 2024 were passed to take effect this October, with the hope of incentivising brands to reformulate their products or innovate healthier alternatives.

Rob Newman, director of public affairs at ISBA, has expressed deep concern regarding the ramifications of the new regulations, emphasising that the potential inclusion of brand advertisements could lead to hundreds of millions of pounds in lost revenue for companies. Meanwhile, Nicki Whiteman from Bite Back 2030 echoed similar sentiments, acknowledging that food corporations are manoeuvring in ways reminiscent of the tobacco industry to navigate the impending restrictions.

Katharine Jenner, director of the Obesity Health Alliance, underscored the sophisticated techniques employed by food companies to maintain unhealthy products in the public eye, stating that the current advertising landscape underscores the failures of previously attempted voluntary measures to curb junk food advertising targeted at children.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.warc.com/content/feed/uk-ad-spend-grows-97-to-reach-106bn-in-q3-2024/10253> - Further emphasizes how certain sectors like Financial and Consumables (including food) have shown increased advertising spend, aligning with strategies to counteract upcoming regulations.
3. <https://adassoc.org.uk/our-work/uk-advertising-spend-reached-9-2bn-in-q1-2024/> - Provides context on the broader UK advertising market growth in 2024, highlighting a strong start to the year with increased online ad spend, which likely includes food companies ramping up their advertising.
4. <https://www.creativebrief.com/bite/trend/ad-spend-exceeds-gbp10bn-barrier-q3-2024-first-time> - Supports the narrative of increased advertising spend by detailing the role of online formats and the growth in specific sectors like Consumables, which includes food products.
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