# UK food brands significantly increase advertising spend as regulations loom



In a notable surge, major food brands in the UK significantly increased their advertising expenditures in 2024, investing an additional £420 million, marking a 26% rise from the previous year. This spike coincides with a robust year for snack food sales, where consumers purchased an extra 45.4 million packs of high-calorie items such as chocolate, cakes, and crisps from leading brands.

The surge in advertising spending comes mere months before the implementation of new regulations designed to combat the rising obesity crisis in Britain. Due to take effect on 1 October 2024, these regulations will introduce a 9pm watershed for television commercials promoting unhealthy foods and will ban online advertising for such products, following five years of delays. However, there are concerns among health campaigners that these regulations may not adequately cover a wide range of unhealthy foods, as new data from academics at University College London and the Pan American Health Organization indicates they will apply to less than two-thirds of foods deemed unhealthy according to government nutrition guidelines.

James McDonald, director of data, intelligence and forecasting at WARC Media, remarked on the linkage between increased advertising spend and sales, stating, “I think the timing is interesting, given the introduction of HFSS [foods high in fat, salt or sugar] regulation this year.” Critics argue that food companies are adopting techniques reminiscent of those used by the tobacco industry, focusing more on brand recognition rather than specific products in their advertising strategies. This has raised questions regarding the legality of advertisements that showcase only brand names, such as McDonald’s or Cadbury, without direct images of the associated products.

Meanwhile, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is preparing to release guidelines to clarify the regulation of advertising, suggesting a case-by-case examination of ads that may solely feature brand names without depicting unhealthy products. This has set off a contentious debate about whether such brand-centric advertisements should be exempt from the same regulations.

Archie Norman, chair of Marks and Spencer, expressed concerns to the Financial Times that the regulations may stifle discussions around certain food items, stating that they could “stop people talking about mince pies” and hinder future holiday advertising.

Furthermore, a survey conducted by the youth activist group Bite Back 2030 found that nearly half of the surveyed advertising space in cities such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Newcastle, and Southwark in London was dedicated to food and drink, raising alarm over the concentration of HFSS food ads in deprived areas. Chris van Tulleken, a broadcast NHS doctor involved in the research, questioned the effectiveness of the forthcoming regulations, noting a “saturation” of unhealthy food brands throughout the country with minimal market restrictions for children regarding unhealthy foods.

As the government appears to favour advertisers, Ashley Dalton, junior health minister, stated last week that “pure brand advertising” should remain unregulated and emphasised that mere brand association with less healthy products should not automatically classify an advertisement under the new rules.

Recent investigations by the BMJ have disclosed that local councils are reportedly deferring the implementation of junk food advertising restrictions following warnings from advertising companies about potential revenue losses.

The planned restrictions on unhealthy food advertising represent a significant aspect of the ongoing strategy to combat obesity in the UK. The National Heights and Weights Survey noted that in 1980, the obesity rates stood at 6% for men and 9% for women, a figure that escalated to 28% for adults by 2022, highlighting the shifting dietary landscape over the decades. Public health measures such as the introduction of the soft drinks levy in the UK aim to encourage food brands toward healthier product reformulations.

Rob Newman, director of public affairs at the ISBA, representing brands engaged in UK advertising, articulated significant concerns regarding the potential financial repercussions of the new restrictions, asserting that their implementation may redirect advertising revenues abroad or jeopardize pre-planned campaigns.

In response to the critical health landscape, Katharine Jenner, director of the Obesity Health Alliance, posited that the current surge in less healthy food advertising underscores the failures of past voluntary measures and advocates for the enforcement of the new regulations as vital for the protection of children’s health.

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

## Bibliography

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