Study finds children are exposed to a brand a minute
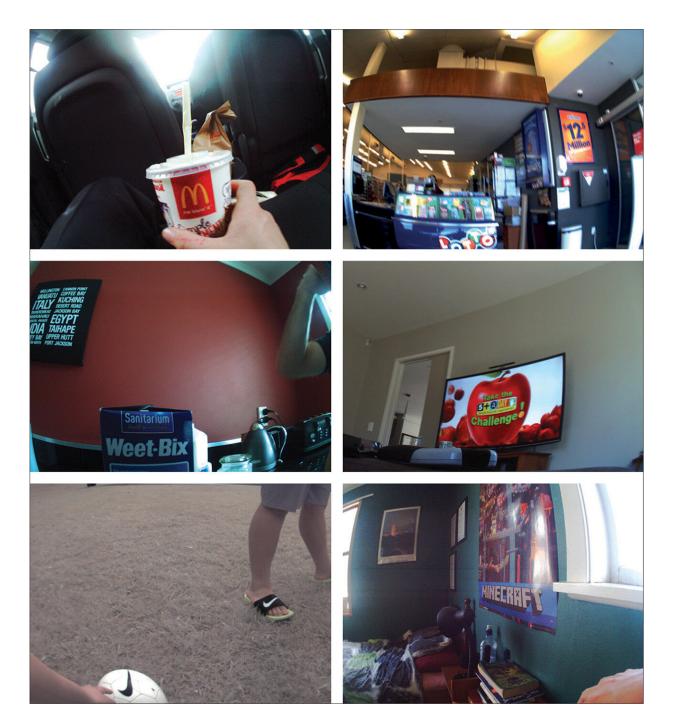
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Figure 1. Image examples of children's exposure to marketing (A) Harmful commodity: McDonald's food marketing. (B) Harmful commodity: Lotto gambling marketing. (C) Core food: Weet-bix food marketing. (D) Social marketing: five or more fruit or vegetables a day social marketing message. (E) Other: Nike sports equipment and clothing. (F) Other: Minecraft gaming poster. Credit: DOI: 10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00290-4

Attaching cameras to children has revealed they are exposed to 554 brands a day through marketing, a new study from the University of Otago has found.

Research co-lead Associate Professor Leah Watkins, from the Department of Marketing, says the results highlight an urgent need to reduce marketing for both personal and planetary health reasons.

Wearable, automatic cameras were given to 90 children, aged 11 to 13, to provide an unprecedented view of their daily exposure to marketing over two full days.

The study found children are exposed to 554 brands per 10-hour day, or nearly a brand a minute.

The majority of these exposures occurred in school (43 percent), at home (30 percent), and in-store (12 percent), most commonly on brand labels (46 percent), product packaging (22 percent) and commercial signage (13 percent).

Associate Professor Watkins says children live in a highly commercialized world, one that bombards them with consumption messages.

While she expected to see advertising for unhealthy products, she found the relative number of those messages, in comparison to social and healthy food messages, concerning.

Also concerning, is the finding that there are links between socio-economic status and exposure to harmful advertising, she says.

"This is alarming given the high rates of obesity, alcohol, and gambling harm in socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods.

"It suggests marketing messages may accentuate inequities and place further pressure on those who are already disadvantaged."

Associate Professor Watkins says not only do the results raise concerns about marketing's role in promoting products directly harmful to public health, but also its role in encouraging overconsumption.

"One of the major threats to planetary health is overconsumption, and the current and continued increases in consumption are unsustainable," she says.

The United Nations has called on member states to reduce the level of commercial marketing; to identify spaces which should be free of marketing, such as schools; and to ensure a wider diversity of pro-social message.

Associate Professor Watkins hopes the research will stimulate important discussions about the policies needed to achieve this for the next generation.

The study is co-authored by Research Fellow Ryan Gage, Professor Louise Signal and Senior Research Fellow Moira Smith, all from the Department of Public Health, Wellington, as well as Lecturer Christina McKerchar, from the Department of Population Health, Christchurch, and Professor Robert Aitken, from the Department of Marketing.

The team plans to further investigate children's exposure to marketing in schools through an audit of marketing activities, as schools were the site for a significant number of marketing exposures.

A [pilot study](#) using software to track children's online [exposure](#) to marketing is also underway.

More information: Leah Watkins et al, An objective assessment of children's exposure to brand marketing in New Zealand (Kids'Cam): a cross-sectional study, *The Lancet Planetary Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00290-4](#)

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