

How companies are selling you a sick future through harmful marketing

EXPLAINER



What is harmful marketing?

Marketing can hurt children and young people through advertisements and other commercial practices that encourage eating, drinking or using unhealthy products. Products such as alcohol, tobacco, vapes, sugary beverages and junk food, and other things that cause physical and mental health issues should not be promoted among children and young people. Harmful marketing also violates human rights because it interferes with our ability to make smart and healthy decisions.

“In the current state of commercial marketing, it’s twisted, it’s distorted... and it’s strategic. [Companies] are actively robbing individuals from making personal, informed and individualised choices”
Female, age 16, Hong Kong/United Kingdom

What is the problem?

Companies spend billions of dollars every year to market unhealthy products to children and young people in schools and sports stadiums, and on public transport, children’s television shows, online games and websites. **Companies have smart ways of getting children’s attention and convincing them to buy their products.** They also use specific ways of targeting children from low-income households, minority backgrounds, or in developing countries.

Some of the tactics used by companies to market to youth:

		
Toys with purchase	Use of bright colours	Flavoured products
		
Use of cartoons & characters	Contests & giveaways	Sponsorships & endorsements
		
Branded merchandise	Product placement	Partnerships with celebrities & athletes

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Examples of companies using marketing tactics to target children and young people:



McDonald's Happy Meal: toys with purchase & use of characters



Lay's and Pepsi: partnership with athletes



'SEXIBAR' vape: colours & flavours

ACTION IS NEEDED TO STOP MARKETING OF UNHEALTHY PRODUCTS



Across the world, health issues among children and young people are rising because of advertisements that encourage unhealthy behaviours. Action is needed to stop marketing of unhealthy products. One way to act is to create laws that restrict harmful marketing. **Politicians and lawmakers are required to protect children and young people's health and well-being, and their human rights, including by protecting them from harmful marketing.**

What are the challenges to stop harmful marketing?

There are many challenges to making good marketing laws. Some of these challenges are a) lack of information about the problem and support for solutions, b) marketing is hard to track and understand, c) policies do not always work the way they were intended to, and d) there is not enough dedication to monitoring marketing and enforcing laws.

How do companies avoid rules to limit marketing?

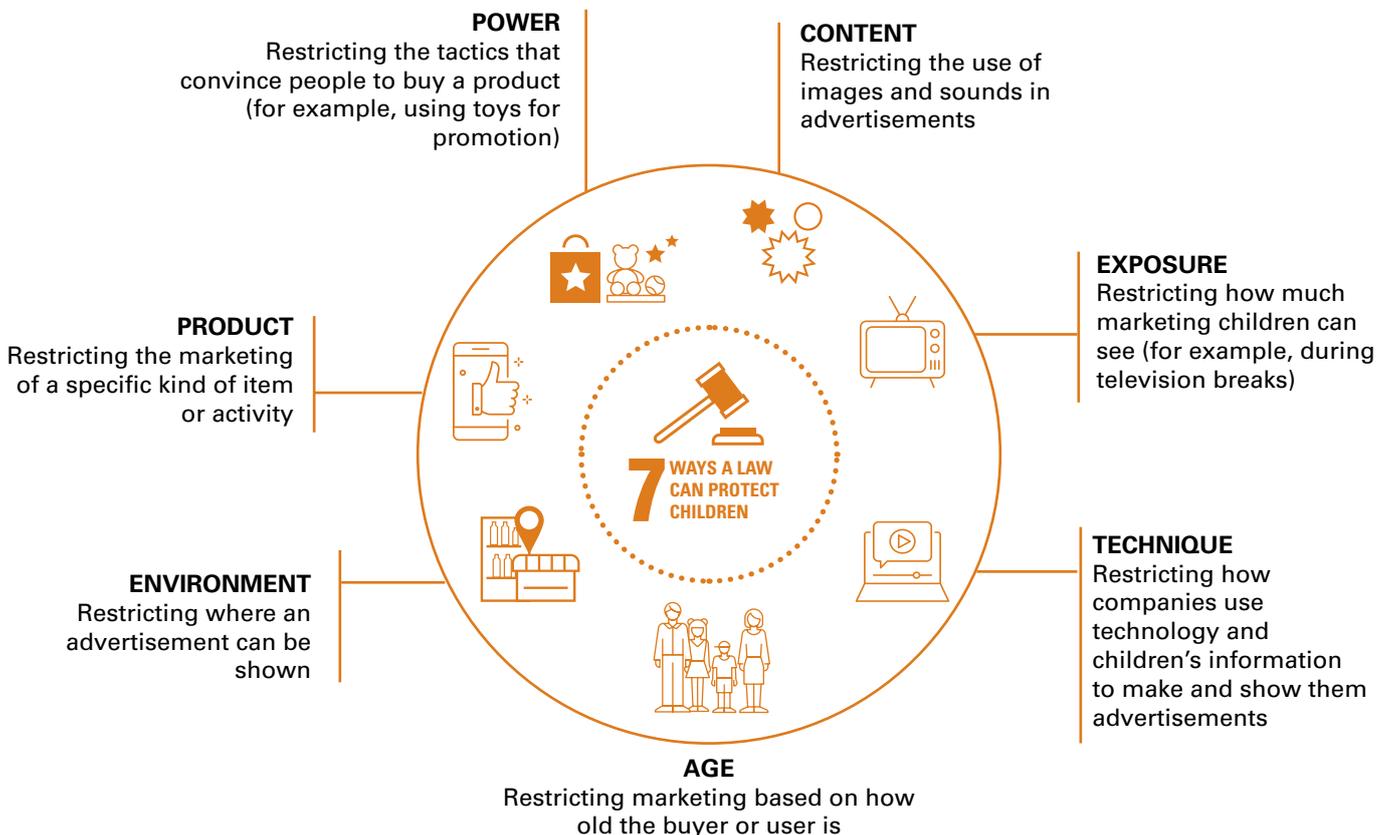
Companies selling unhealthy products try to stop or weaken laws and use tricks to keep marketing to children and young people. For example, one trick companies use is convincing politicians to make laws that benefit companies, not kids. Another trick is telling kids and adults that their unhealthy products don't cause health harms.

"We need to ... hold companies accountable for messages they are sending to young people."
Female, age 16, Vietnam

"The company currently has no obligation to the child and their wellbeing or best interests. I think that there should be significant constraints on the ways in which companies are allowed to exploit this power dynamic."
Female, age 17, United Kingdom

What makes a good marketing law?

Here are **seven ways a law can protect children** from harmful marketing:



What should countries specifically do to stop harmful marketing to children and young people?

1

Companies cannot be allowed to make up their own rules about marketing to children.

2

Laws need to be made so children do not see harmful marketing no matter their age; where they live, go to school or play; what television show they watch, or app, game or social media they use; or how the company makes and shows the advertisement.

3

Marketing of unhealthy products must be banned in and around schools, and at school events.

4

Companies must not use convincing tactics to market unhealthy products to children.

5

Laws need to be written clearly, with specific wording, so companies cannot escape them.

6

Laws need to be reviewed and updated when technology and marketing practices change.

7

Governments need to give time and money to make sure companies follow marketing laws.

8

Politicians need to use accurate information and data to make laws about marketing.

9

Children and young people's ideas and opinions must be included in laws.

10

Companies that sell unhealthy products cannot help to create laws or influence policymaking.

This document is based on the policy report "Selling a sick future: How to counter harmful commercial marketing towards children and young people across risk factors for noncommunicable diseases", explaining in brief how companies are selling you a sick future. It is important for young people like you to be aware of their harmful marketing tactics, and also engage in policy decisions to change this.

Read the report
and have your say!





PROMOTE HEALTH. PROTECT RIGHTS. SAVE LIVES.



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