



Junk food marketing on school buses

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Key findings and solutions

Exposure to junk food marketing influences children's food preferences, encourages purchase requests and ultimately influences the food children eat.¹⁻³ The majority of foods promoted are energy-dense and nutrient-poor.² Previous Cancer Council New South Wales (NSW) research found that 82% of advertising on buses and at train stations promoted junk food and drinks.⁴

Our audit of 90 buses on designated school bus routes found 72% of food and drink advertisements were promoting unhealthy products and only one food advertisement featured fresh fruit.

Most common junk food advertisements were for fast food meals and sugary drinks.

This repeated exposure to junk food ads is contradicting the healthy messages being taught at school and home.

The NSW government has an opportunity to remove junk food advertising from state-owned property including buses, trains and train stations to improve the food environment and help protect children from the influence of junk food marketing when they travel to and from school.

Background

Childhood obesity is a major issue in New South Wales (NSW) with one in five school-aged children overweight or obese.⁵ An overweight child is more likely to become an overweight adult, increasing the risk of 12 different cancers.^{6, 7}

The NSW government has committed to reducing obesity rates in children by 5% by 2025.⁸ Research commissioned by the NSW Ministry of Health has identified restrictions on junk food marketing to children as one of the most cost-effective, wide reaching obesity prevention interventions.⁹ Despite this, the NSW government continues to gather revenue from advertising junk food on state-owned property such as trains and buses sending mixed messages and contradicting the healthy eating messages children receive within the school gate.

Research has shown that children are particularly vulnerable to marketing messages, and that advertising influences food preferences, encourages pester power and ultimately effects food intake.^{2, 3} Currently, half of NSW children eat an unhealthy snack every day and around 45% regularly consume sugary drinks, whereas only 1 in 20 eat the recommended amount of vegetables daily.¹⁰

Aim

To investigate the amount of food and drink advertising on a sample of Sydney buses designated as school buses.

Method

A sample of eight government schools (Table 1) located in Sydney were chosen based on having a minimum of four designated school buses per school. Effort was made to include a geographic spread (Figure 1).

Table 1 - Schools selected for study

School	Type of school
North Sydney Girls High School	Secondary
Killara High School	Secondary
Rozelle Public School	Primary
Darcy Road Public School	Primary
Epping Boys High School	Secondary
Concord High School	Secondary
Liverpool Boys High School	Secondary
NBSC Mackellar Girls Campus	Secondary

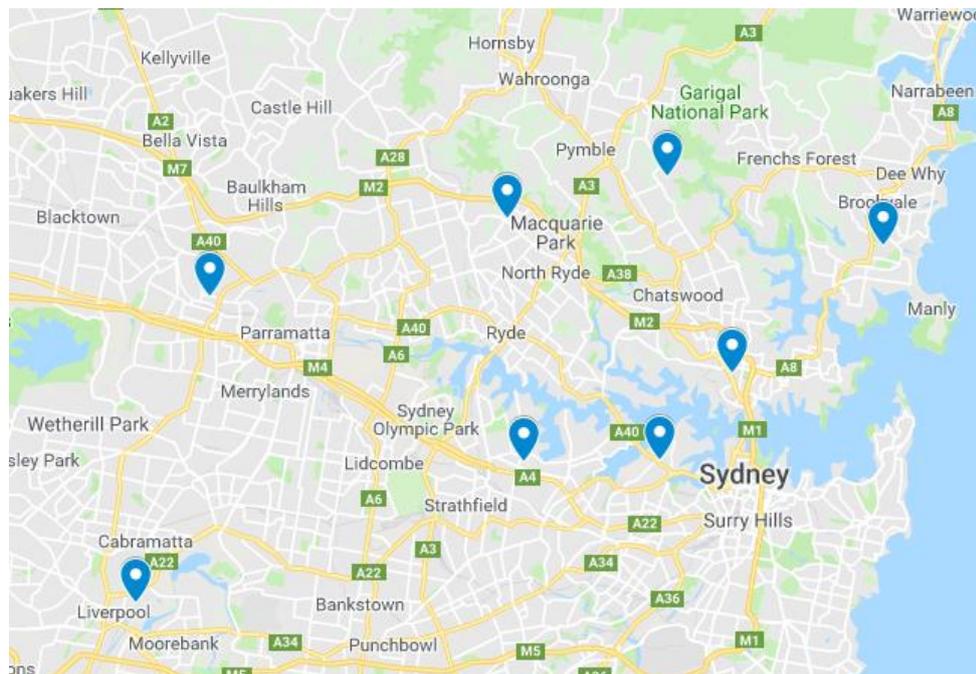


Figure 1 – Location of eight schools audited

‘School’ buses were identified using the ‘NextThere’ app¹⁶ and audits were carried out in the afternoon. Two researchers conducted data collection. All advertisements observed on both sides and the back of the bus were recorded and photo taken on a smartphone where possible. Data was collected over a two-week period in October and November 2018.

A survey tool was developed to record information on all advertisements observed and was adapted from a previous study by Kelly et al¹⁴ to include new food advertising categories,

namely, meal delivery apps, local restaurants, meal box delivery service and food expos. The survey tool included data on location, mode of transport, type and format of advertisement, brand and product details.

The advertisements were coded as either food (including beverages) or non-food advertisements. The food advertisements were classified into either core, discretionary or miscellaneous groups using the modified criteria, based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines.^{14, 15} These categories were further divided into 32 sub-categories. Advertisements that included multiple food items were categorised by the item that was most forefront or the largest. Advertisements that included both core and discretionary foods were classified as discretionary.

Results

A total of 195 advertisements were found across the 90 designated school buses assessed. 16% of advertisements were for food and drink (Table 2).

The vast majority of food and drink advertisements were promoting unhealthy products (72%). Alcohol ads made up 6% of food ads. Only one core food advertisement featuring fresh fruit was observed over the 90 buses assessed. All miscellaneous ads were for vitamin supplements.

Most common food advertisements were for sugary drinks (19%) such as Crème Soda soft drink and fast food meals (19%) such as Pizza Hut.

Table 2 – Number and percentage of food advertisements seen on school buses

Advertisements	Number of advertisements	Percentage of total ads (%)	Percentage of food ads (%)
Total advertisements	195		
Non-food advertisements	163	84	
Food advertisements	32	16	
Core food	1	0.5	3
Discretionary food	23	12	72
Miscellaneous	8	4	25

Acknowledgments

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Examples of advertisements observed



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