



Irish Heart Foundation Opening Statement 2nd June 2021

We are here because Irish research shows that 85,000 children across this island will die prematurely because of childhood obesity.

We are here because of the growth in the obesogenic environment – but more specifically, the **digital obesogenic environment**.

We are concerned with junk food marketing to children and how it is harming children's health.

For the purposes of this Bill, we are concerned with how digital marketing, and the mechanisms that fuel it, are a real and significant threat to children.

We are members of the Children's Rights Alliance and support their submission to this Committee. But today specifically, we wish to address the need for

- 'online safety' and 'online harms' to include concerns related to digital marketing and data protection and privacy. Moreover, harmful digital marketing should be identified as a safety risk for children.

And that:

- Children should be effectively protected from exposure to all forms of digital commercial advertising and marketing which negatively affects many Convention on the Rights of the Child rights

Thumbs up, like, share, subscribe. Tag a friend. Comment below.

A chorus familiar to children across social media platforms.

Nudge. Nudge, Nudge.

With social media we see persuasive technology in action where psychological levers are nudged, often without our conscious awareness.

We don't click randomly.

We don't see posts at random.

Technology is shaping where we place our attention, influencing what we believe is true, our relationships, our social comparison, and the development of our children.

It is commercialising childhood and capitalising on their status as digital natives.

Far from being neutral spaces for social interaction, entertainment, and expression, digital platforms are structured to optimize engagement, foster habitual behaviours, and maximize the impact of marketing messages on brand loyalty and product sales.

Constant immersion in digital culture has exposed children to a steady flow of marketing for fast foods, soft drinks, and other unhealthy products, much of it under the radar of parents and teachers.

Digital media is now ground zero for these industries, employing a growing spectrum of new strategies and high-tech tools to penetrate every aspect of young peoples' lives.

Every child has the right to grow up free from the undue influence of advertising for products likely to be detrimental to their health and wellbeing.

But this is not happening.

[Canadian research](#) shows that Canadian kids are exposed to nearly 6,000 food adverts a year on apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube. That's 15 per day. 97% of those were for products high in fat, sugar or salt.

[Research from Cancer Research UK](#) proves that children who spend more than three hours online are three times more likely to pester their parents for junk food and four times more likely to spend their money on junk food.

This is only a small snapshot of the research.

For big consumer brands this advertising is not just about banner adverts, search terms or simple video ads – it's subtler, more integrated into content, significantly harder to define and monitor and it's innovating and evolving at an alarming pace.

Most digital marketing takes place completely under the radar of parents, policymakers, and health professionals. Unlike television, for example, where ads can be monitored and analysed, "native advertising," "influencer marketing," machine learning, and many other techniques enable brand promotion and marketing to be woven seamlessly into young peoples' digital ecologies and everyday experiences.

Big data driven digital food marketing relies on operations that make it impossible for a parent to control the processes, such as use of machine learning, AI, algorithmic decision making.

Personalised recommendations use data not just to predict but also to influence actions, turning children into easy prey for advertisers and marketers.

We often consider problems online as separate – fake news, cyberbullying, mental health and targeted marketing and advertising. They are not separate. They are part of an interconnected system of harms.

The threats posed to young people's health, privacy and autonomy are real and must be addressed.

These harms are being propagated by tech companies.

While legislation can't fix everything, it can bring about systemic change.

Tackling the marketing and advertising of junk food, of harmful products, is part of that.

It cannot be neglected in this Bill.

If we hope to significantly improve children's prospects for a healthy, safe, life, policy makers will need to assert responsibility to regulate these sectors.

We should be demanding a ban on junk food marketing.

We should dismantle the digital obesogenic environment.