



INFLUENCERS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIGITAL MARKETING

BRIEF FOR THE STANDING
COMMITTEE ON CANADIAN
HERITAGE

FEBRUARY 2026

 **vital** collectif



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About Collectif Vital

At the heart of Collectif Vital’s mission is the desire to enable Quebecers to adopt healthy lifestyle habits on a daily basis. To achieve this, we focus on creating healthy, inclusive living environments, by working collectively with decision-makers. Collectif Vital counts on the commitment of more than 750 organizations and individuals working for a healthy Quebec.

Collectif Vital is an initiative of the Association pour la santé publique du Québec.

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Summary

Social networks and influencers can play a positive role in the lives of young people: they allow them to stay informed, share common interests and build social connections. However, some advertising practices and digital strategies raise significant concerns for the physical and mental health of children and adolescents.

As part of the *Commission spéciale sur les impacts des écrans et des réseaux sociaux sur la santé et le développement des jeunes* [IN FRENCH] conducted in Quebec, Collectif Vital, an initiative of the Association pour la santé publique du Québec, actively contributed to the work and fully supports the recommendations made in the final report. For these recommendations to be implemented effectively, we believe that close collaboration between the provincial and federal governments is essential.

This brief outlines our concerns about youth exposure to digital marketing and proposes a set of concrete measures to protect them.

As part of the work of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (CHPC) on the effects of influencers and social media content on children and youth, Collectif Vital recommends the following:

1. Prohibit foods and beverages high in sugar, salt and saturated fat from being marketed to children under the age of 13.
2. Regulate online influencer marketing.
3. Prohibit social networking platforms from offering addictive feeds to young people under 18 years of age.
4. Post prevention messages on social networks.
5. Define a status of “trusted flaggers” and require priority analysis of their online reports.

These recommendations aim to establish clear and consistent guidelines, protect young people from harmful content and encourage the use of digital platforms that is both balanced and safe.

Digital marketing to young people

Children and youth are particularly vulnerable to advertising that targets them. They understand the commercial nature of advertising only around the age of 12 and, even at that age, most struggle to recognize persuasive intent and exercise critical judgment.^{1,2,3,4}

“Commercial marketing of products that are harmful to children represents one of the **most underappreciated risks to their health and wellbeing.**”
*WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission (emphasis added)*⁵

Food marketing: A threat to health

In Canada, more than half of the calories consumed by young people come from ultra-**processed** foods. Moreover, their consumption is associated with an increased risk of type II diabetes, depression, obesity, cardiovascular disease and mortality.⁶ In 2019, non-compliance with healthy eating recommendations cost \$15.8 billion in Canada.⁷ The science is categorical: the food industry’s promotional **activities** influence children’s knowledge, attitudes, preferences and eating behaviours, while the vast majority of products

promoted are of low nutritional value.^{8,9} With the rise of technology and digital platforms, companies have increased the ways in which they reach young people. Advertising targeting them on social networks is a common practice.

On social media, children and teens in Canada are exposed to **1,500** and 9,000 food and beverage advertisements, respectively, **per year**.¹⁰

In Quebec, the *Consumer Protection Act* (CPA) has prohibited all commercial practices targeting children under the age of 13 since 1980. The province is one of the global pioneers. At the federal level, the Government of Canada has repeatedly stated its commitment to regulating advertising to children, including in its **Healthy Eating Strategy**, its electoral platform and several mandate letters.

Influencer marketing: A fast-growing strategy

At the heart of social networks, influencers play a key role in exposing young people to advertising strategies. Influencer marketing, **i.e., the promotion of goods or services through influencers**, is a fast-growing strategy. Young people are particularly vulnerable to influencer marketing, which, due to its perceived authenticity, elicits a sense of trust. Youths may have difficulty recognizing advertising content when it is hidden within the usual content of their favourite influencers.^{11,12}

In the United States, influencer marketing **spending** is projected to reach nearly **US\$14 billion** in 2027.¹³

The practices of some influencers may raise some concerns, especially when they **spread misinformation about** health, nutrition or physical activity. Often due to a lack of knowledge and with no intent to harm, these personalities can participate in health misinformation.

BOX 1. Influencer sponsorships

Sports sponsorship. Many athletes are sponsored by food companies, such as those for **sugary beverages** and **energy drinks**. On social networks, these sponsorships give a healthy glow to products of low nutritional value and minimize the role of nutrition in health.

Health misinformation. It is not uncommon to see some influencers promoting **weight-loss methods or products** associated with a high potential for danger (restrictive diets, combination of natural weight-loss health products, etc.).



The image shows three social media posts. The top one is from 'charleshamelin' (Maurice Richard Arena) featuring a Red Bull logo on a helmet. The bottom two are from influencers promoting weight-loss products, with one post mentioning 'Le brûleur de graisse est arrivé au Canada pour ceux qui demandent' and another showing a person exercising with text 'What's eating me today SKINNY LIPSERDIES I love it'.

Although the *Competition Act* and the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards* (self-regulation) set out certain guidelines, influencer marketing is still poorly regulated in Canada.

Addictive feeds: A captivating business model

Addictive feeds, i.e., **content recommended or prioritized based on data collected about users or their devices**, are among the mechanisms used by social networking platforms that promote cyberaddiction.¹⁴ Designed to capture attention and maximize time spent on platforms, they expose young people to a vicious and endless cycle of content that is potentially harmful to their health and well-being.

BOX 2. TikTok and the cult of thinness

Known for the power of its algorithm, TikTok has established itself as an essential platform among young people. In 2025, a **case study** by the ASPQ revealed its troubling role in promoting thinness at all costs. Slimming filters, viral trends and extreme challenges maintain a rigid and guilt-inducing culture of thinness, often promoted by people with no health expertise.



Addictive feeds amplify exposure to this content, with very real effects on the physical and mental health of young people who are in the midst of a period of physical and psychological change.

Since the mechanisms used by platforms, such as addictive feeds, are recent, they are still poorly regulated. International initiatives are emerging to strengthen their regulation, providing an inspiring model for Canada. In addition, social acceptability in favour of stricter supervision is important.

In Quebec, **more than 80% of the population** agrees with prohibiting social networking platforms from offering new content to minors based on their interests and preferences (algorithms) without having obtained parental consent.¹⁵

Recommendations for protecting young people online

Collectif Vital insists that the **regulatory route** is more likely to achieve the desired results in better protecting young people online than the self-regulatory measures of tech giants or industries. While some tech giants have recently demonstrated a willingness to adopt self-regulatory measures to enhance the safety of young people, their effectiveness is limited and is often a way for the industry to evade stricter rules.

In a context where the health and well-being of young people are at stake, intervention by the Canadian government becomes essential to establish clear and independent guidelines for conflicts of interest. With this in mind, Collectif Vital recommends the following:

1. Prohibit foods and beverages high in sugar, salt and saturated fat from being marketed to children under the age of 13.

Canadian children are exposed to nearly 40 food and beverage advertisements per day. The majority of these products do not contribute to healthy eating.¹⁶ The science is clear: food marketing influences their knowledge, preferences and behaviours.

[Bill C-252](#), which unfortunately did not see the light of day, was already moving in that direction. International experiences, such as the recent one in the United Kingdom,¹⁷ show that restricting food advertising to children reduces exposure to unhealthy products and supports a more balanced diet from childhood. Canada must now move forward to protect children.

2. Regulate online influencer marketing.

Influencer marketing is a particularly persuasive advertising strategy for young people, who tend to identify with and trust content creators. Its supervision is essential, particularly because of the possible promotion of products or behaviours that are harmful to health.

Following the example of France, which adopted a specific law¹⁸ in 2023, Canada could strengthen its existing levers, such as the [Competition Act](#), to integrate rules for the disclosure of commercial practices adapted to influencer marketing. A [detailed factsheet](#) on this recommendation is available for more information.

3. Prohibit social networking platforms from offering addictive feeds to young people under 18 years of age.

Addictive feeds, designed to capture attention and maximize screen time, are among the most harmful social media mechanisms for young people's physical and mental health.

Faced with these challenges, in June 2024, the state of New York passed the [SAFE for Kids Act](#), which prohibits social networking platforms from offering such feeds to people under the age of 18 without parental consent.¹⁹ This legislation includes age verification and parental consent mechanisms to strengthen the accountability of platforms while protecting young people.²⁰ Its implementation is to be monitored, and Canada could learn from it.

4. Post prevention messages on social networks.

Posting prevention and warning messages on social networks, notably proposed by the Chief Medical Officer of the United States,^{21,22} would inform users of the potential effects of the use of platforms on health. As a precautionary measure, these messages could raise awareness of the impacts of screen time, the risks of exposure to harmful content, and the available resources to help.

The Canadian experience with tobacco product warning messages,²³ which have been shown to be effective in reducing appeal and raising awareness among youth,^{24,25} provides a relevant precedent for digital platforms. A [detailed factsheet](#) on this recommendation is available for more information.

5. Define a status of “trusted flaggers” and require priority analysis of their online reports.

Young people are exposed to harmful content online, including the promotion of the cult of thinness and misinformation about health. While users can report this content to platforms, existing systems have several challenges that limit their effectiveness.

The European framework, [The Digital Services Act package \(DSA\)](#), provides that “trusted flaggers” benefit from a priority analysis of their reports, ensuring faster identification and processing of harmful content.²⁶ Canada could draw inspiration from this model by designating specialized agencies for priority processing of their reports. A [detailed factsheet](#) on this recommendation is available for more information.

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