

Brand Advertising Directed at Children and Teenagers

The Case of Fast Food Restaurants



Children and teenagers are among the greatest consumers of fast food in Canada¹.

Fast food restaurants such as Burger King, McDonald's, A&W, Tim Hortons, Dairy Queen, and Subway are everywhere in Canada, with over 10 fast food restaurants for every 10,000 inhabitants².

In 2019, **65% of children aged 1 to 5, 71% of children aged 6 to 12, and 75% of teenagers** reported having consumed at least one meal at a restaurant, including fast food restaurants, in the preceding week³.

For young people, eating in fast food restaurants is associated with a **decrease in the quality of their diet**⁴. Like other heavily processed products, the foods and beverages served in fast food restaurants are associated with various **health problems**, such as cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, type 2 diabetes, obesity, gastrointestinal disorders, and certain types of cancer⁵.

A Brand Advertising Strategy that Starts Early!



Children and teenagers are choice targets for fast food restaurants. Brand advertising is one of the numerous marketing strategies used by these companies. It focuses on attractive and distinctive features of a brand, such as logos, slogans, colours, and mascots.

From a very young age, fast food restaurant brands are used as a powerful marketing tool to reach children.

- Among all brand categories, **fast food restaurants** are the most recognizable to children⁶.
- More than **9 out of 10 food chain brands** are recognized by children⁶.
- McDonald's is the most recognizable food brand by Canadian children, according to their parents⁷.

Associating Play with the Brand... and Children's Vulnerability

Fun Toys

With the purchase of items from their kids' menu, many fast food restaurants offer toys sporting the brand's colours, logo or mascot. The strategy influences children's **food choices**, since they prefer meals that come with a toy⁸.

Toys that are part of a collection are even more attractive to children, who are then encouraged to collect them⁸.



In Canada, approximately **6 out of 10 parents** report that their children have **at least one promotional object** featuring a **fast food restaurant's mascot** or **logo**⁷.



In addition to toys given with food purchases, a wide variety of toys and items featuring fast food brands are sold in Canada.

Toy Packaging

Packaging is an effective marketing tool to capture children's attention. Fun, child-friendly packaging can often be used as a toy due to its **shape** or **games printed on it**. This packaging **products whose packaging features amusing characters,**



especially when they recognize these characters⁹.

Furthermore, they tend to identify foods served in attractive McDonald's packaging as tasting better than if these same food items are served in neutral packaging¹⁰.

Activities Targeted at Children

Fast food restaurants offer **fun activities for children**, such as activity books and colouring pages. Through these activities, children are invited to interact with the brand's distinctive features, like its mascot. Brand mascots develop an **emotional attachment with the brand**, reinforce **brand loyalty** and influence children's **preferences**¹¹.

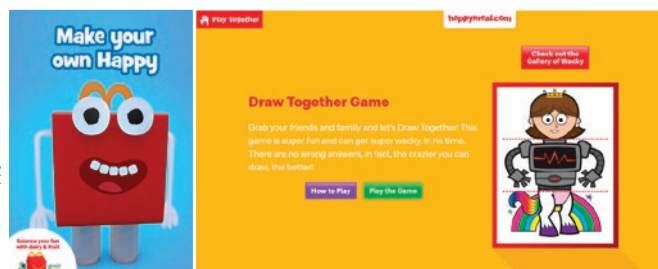
Source: Collectif Vital, 2019



universe aimed at children: colouring, activities, and interactive games.

Repeated exposure to the brand in advertising games reinforces brand awareness and recognition among

Source: happymeals.com Website, 2022



Source: Google Play Website, 2022



Source: dqcanada Instagram page, 2020

Source: St-Hubert.com Website, 2021



children¹².

Brand Exposure in Amateur and Professional Sports

Sports Sponsorships

Many fast food restaurants sponsor **children's and teenagers' sports teams**. This strategy creates a positive brand image and increases its social legitimacy, in addition to attracting and retaining new clients^{13,14}. Sports sponsorships can be seen notably with the **presence of logos on equipment and articles** given to children and teenagers, such as shirts, balls, medals, and trophies.

Two thirds of adults in Quebec believe that sponsorships of sports teams for children under 13 by companies promoting foods and beverages high in sugar, sodium and/or fat should be banned¹⁵.

Source: atoMc Website, 2022



Source: cheztimhortons Instagram page, 2022 Source: dqhighschoolhockey.org Website, 2021

In Canada, children's sports teams' sponsorships are common practice. An Ottawa-based study found that almost half of sports teams covered in the study were sponsored by fast food chains¹⁶.

- McDonald's Canada sponsor over **53,000 children under 15** through its hockey teams¹⁷.
- Tim Hortons sponsors over **360,000 children aged 4 to 8** through its Timbits Sports program¹⁸.

Source: A&W Chicoutimi Facebook page, 2015



Source: Rachel Prose, 2017

Sports Facilities

Recreational sports facilities are not exempt from brand advertising. Far from discrete, fast food brand logos are featured on large displays and scoreboards. Mascots also sometimes make appearances.

Professional Sports

Fast food companies also sponsor professional sports. McDonald's, Tim Hortons, Subway, and Pizza Pizza logos can be seen on the ice and boards of the Canadian Hockey League's Canadian teams' rinks. Professional sports stadiums are sometimes named after fast food restaurants, like the Tim Hortons Football Stadium.

Source: Google map street view, 2021



Source: SPORTSNET YouTube channel, 2022



Source: mcdonaldscanada Instagram page, 2022



Source: Google map street view, 2021

Wearing the Brand: A Powerful Tool to Create Loyalty

Clothing and Promotional Items

Contests to win fast food branded clothing are common on social media. For teenagers, social identity and peer approval are central to consumption habits¹⁹. Young people especially value the idea of belonging to a group. For example, clothing is used as a way to identify with their peers through special and recognizable brands¹⁹. Thus, objects become symbols of identity¹⁹. This strategy creates a sense of attachment with the fast food brand. Furthermore, these clothing collections are sometimes associated with popular celebrities among youths, such as Justin Bieber or BTS.

On social media, fast food restaurants are the most promoted food category among teenagers, especially McDonald's²⁰. Peer pressure, difficulty in identifying advertising, and heavy use of social media result in teenagers being particularly vulnerable to marketing on these platforms²¹.



Source: mcdonaldscanada Instagram page, 2022

Source: mcdonaldscanada Instagram page, 2022



Source: A&W Canada, 2021

Source: timhortons Instagram page, 2021

Two thirds of adults in Quebec agree that the government should **ban marketing** of foods and beverages high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium **targeting teenagers on social media**²².



The **holiday season**, a time of the year strongly associated with pleasure, is often an opportunity for fast food restaurants to intensify their marketing and strengthen attachment with their brand. For example, Tim Hortons proposes a holiday contest in which inflatable bears with the restaurant's branding are distributed to every house of the winning street. Other holidays, like Valentine's Day, are also used to spread brand advertising.



Strengthening the Brand's Presence in Young People's Daily Lives

Fast food restaurants hold an important place in teenagers' living environments, notably **around their school**, where brands are highly visible. The **omnipresence of fast food restaurants and their brands** is striking.

- In Canada, almost half of all schools are located less than a kilometre from a fast food restaurant²³.
- In Quebec, almost 6 out of 10 public schools are located less than 750 metres from a fast food restaurant²⁴.

Teenagers who attend high schools close to fast food restaurants are most likely to frequent them²⁴.



Learn More About Brand Advertising in Canada

The food industry uses creative techniques and strategies to attract young people. In the face of persistent and widespread food and beverage advertising directed at Canadian children and teenagers, the Collectif Vital has conducted an overall survey of brand advertising and produced specific case studies focused on sugar-sweetened beverages, energy drinks, children's cereal, and fast food restaurants.

To find out more, visit collectifvital.ca/marketing-to-kids.



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