A safe glimpse within the "black box?" Ethical and legal principles when assessing digital marketing of food and drink to children.

This review presented digital media marketing as a challenge to identifying and monitoring the amount of exposure that children have to digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages which are high in fat, salt, and sugar.

The WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity suggested reducing children’s and adolescents’ exposure to marketing in all media. Due to marketing being increasingly personalised and based on Internet users’ behavioural patterns, it is challenging to assess the exact nature and extent of exposure to unhealthy food exposure.

The ethics and legal aspect of accessing personal data which can help understand the exposure of personalised food marketing has not been established. This has been described as the ‘black box’ nature of digital data, which presents further challenges to understanding how widespread and dense unhealthy food marketing is.

The review uses the conclusions of a workshop at the WHO regional office for Europe which recommended informing policymakers, researchers, and regulators about the ethical and legal considerations in study design. The workshop stated the need to consider digital ethics guidance, EU law and terms and conditions of social media platforms. There was a need to conduct research ethically and make “case by case” assessments, with consent. The review understood that the terms and conditions of digital platforms and applications presented ‘legal access challenges.