

"This ban has more loopholes than a box of Cheerios" — campaigner who started fighting junk food ads at 14 says McDonald's can still reach children

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The activist who launched the campaign for today's junk food advertising ban when he was just 14 years old is warning the law has been gutted by corporate lobbying — and McDonald's can still run ads that reach eight-year-olds.

Dev Sharma (20) spent six years fighting for these restrictions. He secured their inclusion in the Queen's Speech at 16. Today, as the government celebrates a "world-leading" victory, he says the victory has been stolen.

"This ban has more loopholes than a box of Cheerios," said Sharma. "McDonald's can still broadcast 'I'm Lovin' It' into the bedrooms of kids watching YouTube after school. They just can't show a burger. The manipulation hasn't stopped. It's got smarter."

The loophole: The new law bans ads showing products high in fat, salt and sugar before 9pm on TV and online at all times. But a "brand exemption" — inserted after intense food industry lobbying — means companies can still flood children's screens with logos, jingles, mascots and emotional imagery.

"From the moment we're born, junk food marketing has us surrounded," said Sharma. "It's forced down our throats. It's the cultural wallpaper. This ban was supposed to rip that wallpaper down. Instead, we've peeled off one layer and left the rest."

"It wasn't just online," said Sharma. "I'd see a fried chicken ad on Instagram at 3:15pm, right before the school bell rang. Then I'd walk out and see the same branding on the bus stop. They built a corridor of temptation from my classroom to my front door."

Sharma started campaigning from his bedroom in Leicester during lockdown, watching junk food ads interrupt his GCSE revision on YouTube. "I was 16, trying to watch a maths tutorial on YouTube," he recalls. "I couldn't learn a quadratic equation without being interrupted by a burger ad. My phone knew I was hungry before I did." Frustrated by the bombardment, he launched an open letter to Boris Johnson — every signature automatically emailed Downing Street and the Health Secretary. The campaign gathered tens of thousands of signatures and the backing of Jamie Oliver. He was invited to meet ministers, and the policy was announced in the Queen's Speech. Six years on, he says the same companies are using the same tactics on the same kids.

"I was 14 when I started this. I'm now 20. This law consumed my entire teenage years. And I'm watching the food giants walk through the backdoor we spent six years trying to close."

"While the government celebrates removing 7.2 billion calories, McDonald's is already running brand campaigns that do exactly what product ads did. The golden arches are more recognisable to British kids than the England flag. You don't need to show a Big Mac to sell one."

Sharma is calling for an immediate government review of the brand exemption within six months, with all loopholes closed by 2027.

"Children deserve protection that actually protects them. Not a ban with a backdoor."

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

About Dev Sharma:

- Founding member of Bite Back 2030 with Jamie Oliver at age 14
- Led the campaign that secured the world's first online junk food ad ban (Queen's Speech, June 2021)
- Received the Diana Award from Prince Harry; named UK Parliament Volunteer of the Year by Sir Lindsay Hoyle
- Chaired the UK Government's first Youth Select Committee inquiry (2024)

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- Worked alongside Marcus Rashford on the free school meals campaign
- Currently studying Human, Social & Political Sciences at Cambridge University

About the ban:

- Announced in Queen's Speech, June 2021; comes into force 5 January 2026 after multiple delays
- Prohibits HFSS product advertising on TV before 9pm and online at all times
- Brand-only advertising (logos, slogans, no product shown) remains exempt

About the loophole:

- Brand exemption formalised via Statutory Instrument after food industry lobbying
- Allows advertising of logos, mascots, slogans and brand imagery without showing products
- Health groups including Obesity Health Alliance and Action on Salt have criticised the exemption

Key statistics:

- UK children exposed to 15 billion junk food ads per year (Bite Back research)
- Government estimates ban will remove 7.2 billion calories from children's diets annually
- 22% of children overweight/obese starting primary school; 36% by the time they leave

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