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Brand social media marketing strategies for foods consumed by children and adolescents in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. As per the National Survey on Nutrition and Health, in Argentina, 4/10 children and adolescents aged 5–17 years are overweight.

Objective. To identify marketing strategies on Facebook® and Instagram® of brands of foods consumed by children and adolescents and to categorize them according to the Dietary Guidelines for the Argentine Population (GAPA).

Methods. The posts made between August and September 2019 were analyzed, identifying those targeted at children and adolescents and categorizing promoted foods according to the GAPA.

Results. Out of 200 brands identified, 111 had a Facebook® page and made 65 posts and 95 had an Instagram® account and made 64 posts. Product image and interaction with consumers were the more used stategies. Six out of 10 of the foods promoted corresponded to the optional group according to the GAPA.

Conclusions. It is important to monitor the implications social media have on eating behaviors.

Key words: *marketing; food; social media; child; dietary guidelines.*

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INTRODUCTION

As per the data from the most recent National Survey on Nutrition and Health, in Argentina, 4 out of 10 children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years old are overweight.[1] One of the determinants is the advertising and promotion of foods high in critical nutrients, such as energy, sugars, and fats, as evidence shows that advertising influences their preferences, choices, and food consumption.[2]

Food brands have managed to insert themselves into the new media by implementing digital marketing.[3] This type of marketing employs a wide network of strategies, and the viralization of social media allows them to share their content to a wider audience.[3,4] For their part, companies obtain data from users, which allows them to target content to a specific audience.[5]

At an international level, the evidence on food marketing on social media is still in the early stages; studies are found on Facebook®, Instagram®, and YouTube® in different countries such as Australia,[3,6,7] New Zealand,[8] and the United States.[9] These studies found that foods promoted on social media had a high content of critical nutrients. In Argentina, studies have focused on traditional media;[10,11] there is no published evidence on digital marketing in social media.

The objective of this study was to identify marketing strategies on Facebook® pages and Instagram® accounts of brands of foods consumed by children and adolescents and to categorize them according to the Dietary Guidelines for the Argentine Population (*Guías Alimentarias para la Población Argentina*, GAPA).

METHODS

In view of the advance of digital marketing, this analysis is part of the same line of research carried out by the authors in a similar study on websites.[12] However, due to methodological differences and given that data collection for this study was done later, the authors decided to present the results in two publications. The methodology differs in the marketing strategies considered, which are specific to each digital medium.

For this analysis, we conducted a descriptive, cross-sectional study. The selection of the foods, the identification of the brands, and the classification of promoted foods was carried out following the methodology of the study on websites.[12]

The official Facebook® and Instagram® accounts of each of the selected commercial brands were identified and the corporate accounts of food companies were excluded. Active pages and accounts were analyzed, i.e., those with at least one post during August and September 2019, and number of posts, format (image, video or text), and marketing strategies used in the posts made during the study months were recorded. The models developed in other studies were adapted to analyze the strategies (*Table 1*).[4,6,8]

Accounts targeting children and adolescents were identified by considering those that implemented strategies in their posts, such as characters or cartoons, celebrities, games, contests or events aimed at attracting this audience and/or appealing to themes such as fun or adventure.[9]

Table 1. Marketing strategies used in social media

Marketing strategy	Description
Product image	Presence of the food product, either with the packaging or in the way it is consumed.
Characters and celebrities	Use of characters and cartoons, influencers, famous people such as actors, athletes or musicians.
Interaction with consumers	Activities that promote consumer participation, such as sharing the publication, uploading photos, making a recipe with the product or complying with procedures proposed by the brand.
Promotional strategies	Presence of contests, sweepstakes, giveaways, and events.
Deals	Offer to have the free delivery of another product, 2×1 or 4×3 deals, free items with purchase or limited-time discounts.

A Google® form was used to record data, and a pilot test was done. Descriptive statistics were performed. Results are expressed on the total number of active pages and accounts and the total number of posts. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS®), version 20 for Windows, was used.

Table 2. Selected foods, percentage of consumers, number of brands identified, and number of active sites in social media

Food	Percentage of consumers (%)*	Brands identified (n)	Active Facebook® pages	Active Instagram® accounts
Sunflower oil	76.9	5	1	1
Sugar	61.8	3	2	2
Eggs	61.3	1	1	0
Fluid whole milk	52.6	6	4	4
Regular soft drinks	45.6	12	4	5
Butter	33.1	3	3	3
Noodles	31.8	11	4	4
Cocoa powder	30.8	3	1	1
Rice	28.2	4	3	3
Grated cheese	26.8	3	2	2
Canned tomatoes	26.1	5	2	2
Chicken	25.4	2	1	0
Wheat flour	24.1	3	0	0
Regular powder juice	22.2	2	0	1
Fluid reduced-fat milk	23.4	6	4	4
Semi-hard cheese	22.8	3	2	2
Ham	22.6	5	3	3
Soft cheese	20.5	6	3	2
Mayonnaise	17.3	5	1	2
Sweet cookies	17.1	15	4	3
Turnover dough	15.2	2	1	1
Apple	14.9	4	1	1
Crackers	14.7	9	0	0
Diet powder juice	14.1	4	1	1
Banana	13.9	3	2	1
Filled biscuits	13.5	18	5	3
Chocolate cookie sandwich	12.9	13	7	7
Mozzarella	11.5	1	1	1
Caramel *(dulce de leche)*	11.4	5	3	3
Flavored waters	11.0	6	2	2
Sliced bread	10.5	5	4	4
Yogurt	10.1	7	4	4
Vienna sausages	8.4	5	2	3
Candies	7.5	11	2	2
Chocolate	7.5	13	6	6
Dairy cream	7.2	4	3	3
Cream cheese	6.9	5	4	4
Diet soft drinks	6.9	5	3	4
Potato chips	6.9	5	2	1
Sugary breakfast cereals	6.8	15	1	1
Patties	6.7	4	2	3
Processed juice	6.2	5	2	2
Cereal bars	6.0	4	0	0
Assorted sweet cookies	5.6	3	1	1
Milk desserts	5.5	6	3	4
Olive oil	5.2	9	2	4
Chocolate milk	5.0	6	3	3
Pre-fried chicken products	5.0	4	2	1
Gelatin	5.0	5	2	1

Source: data obtained from the Survey on Nutritional Food Intake of the City of Buenos Aires (2011).

Ethical considerations

All aspects related to the development of this project have been conducted in accordance with valid national and international standards.

RESULTS

A total of 200 commercial food brands were selected; of these, 111 had an official Facebook® page and 95 had an Instagram® account. Of the total number of pages and accounts identified, 58% (n = 65) were active on Facebook® and 68% (n = 64) on Instagram®, i.e., they made posts during the study months (*Table 2*).

The marketing strategies observed were very similar on both Facebook® and Instagram®, given that, for brands that had both social networks analyzed, most posts were duplicated on both accounts. In this regard, the most used strategy was product image, present in more than 90% of the accounts in both networks. The second strategy was interaction with or activities for consumers, observed in 71% of Facebook® pages and 75% of Instagram® accounts. To a lesser extent, promotional strategies, characters and celebrities and, lastly, deals were used (*Table 3*).

When analyzing the strategies according to the number of posts, a total of 847 posts were counted on Facebook® and 1043 on Instagram®. The order of the strategies was similar to what was observed in the analysis by page and account; the most used marketing strategy was the product image and the most frequent post format was the image (*Table 4*).

A total of 109 promoted foods were found on Facebook® and 75 on Instagram®. When sorted according to the GAPA, the most promoted group of foods was sugars and fats (62% on Facebook® and 64% on Instagram®), followed by the milk, yogurt, and cheese group (18% and 11%); then the legumes, cereals, potato, bread, and pasta group (11% and 15%); the fruits and vegetables group (4% and 5%); and the oil and seeds group (3% and 5%). The meat and eggs group was only observed on Facebook® (2%).

It was observed that 46% of Facebook® pages and 48% of Instagram® accounts used strategies aimed at children and adolescents. When analyzing the foods promoted on these, a higher proportion of the sugars and fats group was identified, present in 68% of Facebook® pages and 77% of Instagram® accounts.

DISCUSSION

This study found that half of the brands implemented strategies aimed at children and adolescents to promote their products on

Table 3. Marketing strategies used by food brands in Facebook® pages and Instagram® accounts

Marketing strategy	Total Facebook® pages (n = 65) n (%)	Total Instagram® accounts (n = 64) n (%)
Product image	59 (90.8)	62 (96.9)
Interaction with consumers	46 (70.8)	48 (75.0)
Promotional strategies	22 (33.8)	25 (39.1)
Characters and celebrities	14 (21.5)	20 (31.3)
Deals	5 (7.7)	5 (7.8)

Table 4. Post formats and marketing strategies used on Facebook® and Instagram®

	Total Facebook® posts (n = 847) n (%)	Total Instagram® posts (n = 1043) n (%)
Post format		
Image	550 (64.9)	742 (71.1)
Video	278 (32.8)	281 (26.9)
Text	19 (2.2)	20 (1.9)
Marketing strategies		
Product image	551 (65.1)	683 (65.5)
Interaction with consumers	249 (29.4)	286 (27.4)
Promotional strategies	72 (8.5)	81 (7.8)
Characters and celebrities	43 (5.1)	55 (5.3)
Deals	9 (1.1)	51 (4.9)

social media.

In Argentina, the most used strategy was the product image, which was observed in more than 90% of the accounts evaluated. Similar data were found in Australia, where 100% of Facebook® pages included elements characteristic of the brand. Another frequent marketing technique was the use of characters or celebrities, present in 22 pages, and contests, giveaways, or prizes, observed in 24 of the 27 pages evaluated.[6] A study carried out in New Zealand found that 41% of posts included these promotional strategies.[8] In addition, the results of a research conducted in the United States are equivalent to those of Argentina, since they identified that one third of the posts of food brands and fast food chains used the interaction with followers strategy, which was more frequent in those posts aimed at teenagers.[9]

As for the foods promoted, the New Zealand study classified them according to standards proposed by the Ministry of Health and found that almost all of them corresponded to those of low nutritional quality.[8] This is consistent with what was observed in Argentina, where, according to national recommendations, two thirds of the pages and accounts aimed at children and adolescents corresponded to foods high in critical nutrients.

The World Health Organization has requested countries to reduce the exposure of children and adolescents to advertising of low-quality foods.[2,4] In Argentina, there is a self-regulatory advertising code in place for the food industry in traditional media.[13] However, according to the evidence, this is not an effective measure, and regulation and control mechanisms should be applied by the government.[14]

The main strength of this study is that it is the first of its kind conducted in Argentina, providing unpublished data on this topic. It also allows to establish a baseline for the enactment of Law no. 27642 on the Promotion of Healthy Eating, which regulates front labeling and food advertising.[15] One of the limitations is that there is no information about the actual exposure to food marketing in social media, which have a constantly changing dynamic. It is necessary to analyze marketing in other digital media and include fast food brands.

CONCLUSIONS

We observed the presence of communications about low-quality foods targeted at children and adolescents in social media. It is important to monitor the influence social media have on eating behaviors. ■

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