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Exploratory study of **marketing and advertisement**
of unhealthy food and beverages
targeted to children in **Latin America and the Caribbean**

Executive summary

Childhood obesity obesity is rising to alarming levels in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the most recent data, the prevalence of overweight among children under five years old is 7%. Likewise, it is also estimated that 19% to 37% of children between 5 to 11 years old and 17% to 36% of children between 12 and 19 are overweight and obese respectively ¹.

Marketing and advertising of unhealthy food and beverages beverages (products containing high amounts of fat, sugar and/or salt) directed to children is attributed to the high incidence of childhood obesity that leads to the development of non-communicable diseases during adulthood. Research has shown that the use of cartoons ²⁻⁴, branding elements (e.g. a logo)⁵ and attractive designs⁶ in the packaging influence children's taste perception and buying preferences.

UNICEF, considering the long-term impact of this business activity on health, nutrition and overall development of children, has promoted the realization of an initial exploratory study. The study, done in collaboration with the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP), seeks to identify existing regulations in the region regarding marketing and advertising of food and beverages targeted to children. Moreover and more specifically in Mexico, Argentina and Costa Rica, the study aims to analyze the promotion and advertising techniques of unhealthy food and beverages targeted to children in schools and communication channels such as the internet and social networks, through which it promotes and encourages purchase or consumption of certain products.



Existing regulations in the region

Government regulation has been proposed as one of the most important high-impact strategies to address the problem of childhood obesity and the development of non-communicable diseases.

According to the study, up to October 2014, **31%** of Latin America and the Caribbean countries (10) have a total of 22 current policies aiming to regulate marketing and advertising of food and beverages to children. From these 22 policies, 15 are focused on limiting the presence of certain food and beverage products in schools, 5 are defining clearly the concept of "child", and only 2 restrict the use of characters, gifts or endorsements by famous people.



Promotion and advertisement on the internet (web sites and social media)

From the 18 companies assessed (6 per country), 83 Facebook pages, 56 websites, 32 Twitter pages and 29 YouTube pages were identified as means of marketing and advertisement to children. This places **social media networks as an important tool for marketing and advertisement, being Facebook the most used of all.**

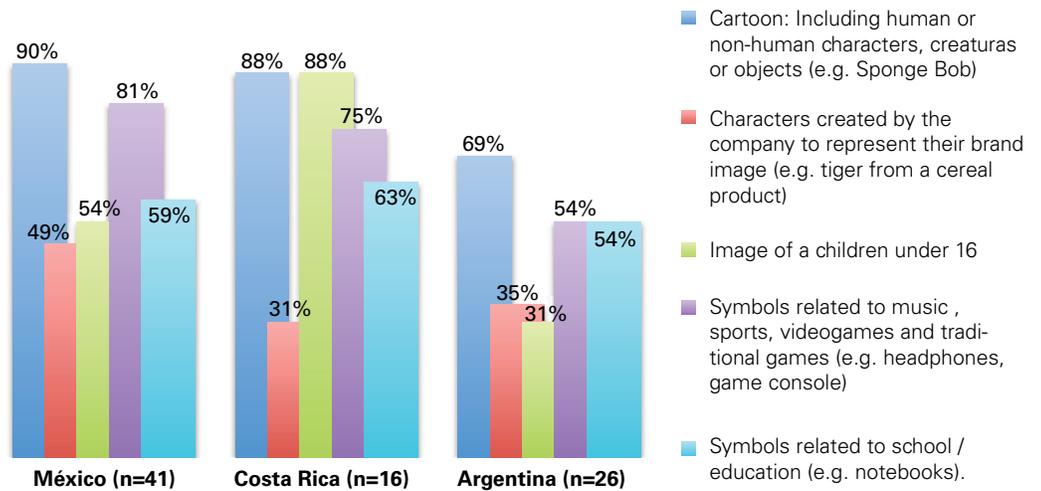
The study found that interactive games were available in **46%** of the websites and **24%** of the Facebook pages. Moreover, free gifts were available in **32%** of the websites and in just **1%** of the Facebook pages. Some examples of interactive games and free gifts attractive for children because they generally refer to the characters or cartoons associated to their brand image were: songs, coloring sheets, stories, etc.

Companies used more marketing and advertising techniques targeted to children in Facebook than in any other social network or websites. Facebook had an average of 5 techniques per page, compared to 4 techniques per webpage or Twitter page, and 3 techniques per YouTube video. The 5 marketing and advertising techniques most used are shown on Table 1.

For this evaluation, the activity on Facebook and Twitter was reviewed during 8 weeks (September 1 - October 26, 2014), and the video-sharing activity in YouTube was reviewed during 16 weeks (July 12 - November 1, 2014)



Table 1: Top 5 marketing and advertising techniques used by food and beverage companies targeting children and the percentage of Facebook pages that contained them



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Marketing and advertisement in schools

Indirect marketing and advertising of unhealthy food and beverages was the most common type of promotion found inside schools

The study found that half the schools evaluated, in the past three years had companies promoting activities such as: taste tests, free sample distribution (e.g., sodas or flavored milk) to students during special events (e.g., Children’s Day, football tournaments, and informative sessions), plays, active breaks, informative sessions given to parents or students by nutritionists and free cinema or food vouchers.

All school kiosks (tuck shops) had food and beverages containing high amounts of fat, sugar and/or salt available to children (e.g., salted snacks, crackers, cookies, cakes and / or chocolate bars)

7 of 12 schools had refrigerators for beverages or ice cream with the logo of a certain product.

58% of schools had kiosks or street vendors outside its facilities and 25% of them had some type of external promotion and publicity.

Although the region has made significant progress in establishing government regulations, promotion and advertising techniques of unhealthy foods and beverages targeting children in recent communication channels (e.g., websites and social networks) and indirect, have not yet been addressed by these regulations.

UNICEF recommends the creation of comprehensive public policies and programs that regulate and protect children and adolescents from direct and indirect promotion and advertisement of unhealthy food and beverages.





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Study limitations

The regulation search was done only using the Internet. Promotion and advertisement techniques of 18 companies were analyzed and 12 schools were visited in three countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, so the results cannot be generalized for the entire region. During internet evaluation, certain brands of chosen companies were excluded from the count and analysis. During the social network evaluation, it was not possible to identify the age group that visited these pages most frequently.

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