

Policy Brief

**"Exposure of Children and Adolescents to Digital *Marketing* of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages in Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico: A Policy Brief"**

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# Exposure of Children and Adolescents to Digital Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages in Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico



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## Introduction

The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region faces the double burden of malnutrition, characterized by the coexistence of stunting and a concerning increase in prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents.

Over the past two decades, overweight prevalence among children under five increased from 6.7 per cent in 2000 to 8.6 per cent in 2022. Mean while, in 2016, 49 million children and adolescents aged 5 to 19 were overweight, accounting for 30.6 per cent of this age group. At the same time, some countries continue to experience stunting rates above 20 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

This scenario represents a significant public health and nutritional crisis for children in the region, exacerbated by obesogenic environments that promote the consumption

of unhealthy foods and beverages.<sup>1</sup> Digital platforms and social media contribute to these environments, intensifying the advertising of ultra-processed products while displacing healthier alternatives such as locally produced foods and drinking water. The marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, as part of the broader food environment, directly affects the purchasing decisions and consumption practices of children and adolescents. The digital environment, where children are active users, has become a space for interactions with brands and products, most of which are unhealthy.

Unlike traditional television marketing, which limits the amount of information communicated within a defined time and space, digital marketing allows for continuous, real-time communication using artificial intelligence techniques integrated into content and personal

data usage. Through persuasive strategies, such as contests, interactions, and the use of influencers and celebrities, children and adolescents are continuously exposed to content designed to capture their attention, shape their food preferences, and encourage the consumption of unhealthy products. These advertising strategies not only negatively influence the eating habits of children and adolescents but also have long-term negative consequences for their health.<sup>3</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes that states must guarantee children's right to adequate nutrition and protection from all forms of malnutrition. However, the constant exposure of children and adolescents to the aggressive marketing of ultra-processed products, high in trans fats, saturated fats, sugars, and salt, violate these rights.

In 2010, the Member States of the World Health Organization (WHO) approved the Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children.<sup>4</sup> These recommendations urge governments to implement policies that limit the exposure of children and adolescents to the advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to protect their health and well-being.<sup>5</sup>

This document updates UNICEF's 2023 analysis of digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages in the LAC region.<sup>6</sup>

Based on studies conducted in Argentina<sup>7</sup>, Colombia<sup>8</sup>, Guatemala<sup>9</sup>, and Mexico<sup>10-12</sup>, it presents a comparative summary of children's exposure to such marketing and highlights its persuasive power. It also includes evidence-based recommendations to strengthen public policies and regulations to limit advertising of ultra-processed products aimed at children and adolescents.

The methodology used is based on the CLICK monitoring framework, developed by WHO.<sup>13</sup>

This five-step process collects data on children's exposure to digital marketing, providing an in-depth understanding of how digital strategies negatively influence children's health by promoting unhealthy food choices from an early age.

To contribute to the promotion of healthier environments for children and in line with UNICEF's 2020-2030 Nutrition Strategy, this study aims to promote approaches that comprehensively address malnutrition in all its forms, including the regulation of marketing of ultra-processed products targeted at children and adolescents through effective regulations and the use of scientific evidence.



# Methodology

For the preparation of this document, the primary results of studies commissioned by UNICEF in Argentina<sup>14</sup>, Colombia<sup>15</sup>, Guatemala<sup>16</sup>, and Mexico<sup>17-19</sup> were analyzed.

These studies aimed to evaluate the exposure and persuasive power of digital marketing of ultra-processed products targeted at children and adolescents.

The CLICK monitoring framework<sup>20</sup>, proposed by the WHO and recommended internationally, was used to monitor the digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages targeted at children and adolescents. In this methodology,

each letter represents a step in the monitoring framework (see Figure 1). It is worth mentioning that the study in Argentina evaluated only the first three steps (CLI), while in Mexico, all five steps (CLICK) were implemented.

The methodology was adapted to each country's context, resulting in variations that limited the direct comparability of data across countries. This adaptation was recognized as the the adaptation was not the limitation. The limitation was the inability to have comparative data across countries.

Figure 1 CLICK monitoring framework.





# Main Results


## Exposure to the Digital Ecosystem


The studies conducted in Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico revealed the following consistent findings:




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When given the opportunity, children and adolescents **spend all the money they have access to on ultra-processed products** they were exposed to on social media.
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Digital *marketing* on **social media is aggressively targeted at children and adolescents.**
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All four studies showed that **distinguishing by platform type is essential to understand the target audience.**
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The **most used social** by children and adolescents are **TikTok, Meta (Instagram, Facebook), and YouTube.** On the other hand, WhatsApp is the most used messaging app.
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The **average screen time of children and adolescents in Argentina, Guatemala, and Mexico is three to five hours**, reaching up to eight hours in some cases, especially among adolescents. Children and adolescents' prolonged exposure to digital media creates learning difficulties

**This practice is associated with sedentary behavior and mental health issues (anxiety, stress, envy).**

When their mood is affected, children and adolescents seek compensatory mechanisms to improve their emotional state, including increased consumption of unhealthy products.
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**Digital platforms have their own advertising regulations and policies, which do not always align with the legal standards in their countries of origin.**

For example, the ads regulations do not control the content of videos uploaded by users unless those videos are paid content.
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**Early exposure** of children and adolescents to the internet and social media **begins around the age of two**, with YouTube typically being the first platform they access.

## Parental control in digital media

- At an early age, navigation is assisted; however, after a few months, constant supervision or control over the use of digital media becomes more difficult.
- There is very limited information among parents and caregivers regarding the regulation of content to which young children are exposed through settings or the use of filters.
- Adults or caregivers often trust that adolescents can regulate or select their own content. However, this is not advisable, as they are also vulnerable to digital advertising strategies and can be influenced by the messages generated in these spaces.



## Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages



- When people are online, they enter in a "flow state" (a state of complete concentration and attention). Digital marketing takes advantage of this state to create personalized experiences that capture the attention of younger audiences, generating an emotional connection with the product to achieve loyal consumers.
- The food and beverage industry designs interactive games, videos, and apps aimed at capturing the attention of younger audiences.
- Investment in advertising and marketing is focused on social media, including digital ads to ensure and increase reach.
- Many of these digital strategies are cutting-edge and lack proper regulations, allowing the industry to exploit this gap and maximize their impact on consumers.
- The leading international brands of ultra-processed products invest the most in market research and marketing, rivaling technology companies. They are also the pioneers in innovating new sales strategies and product placements. These brands were the first

to hire *influencers*, recruit celebrities from sports and culture as ambassadors, use 360° marketing strategies (across all formats and platforms), and experiment with new forms of advertising, including entertainment and AI-generated ads.

- The efficient monetization of paid content targeted at children and adolescents is due to the extended time they spend online and on social media. Additionally, this population tends to react and engage spontaneously with content.
- Digital *marketing* is highly effective at grabbing attention and influencing decisions, not only through traditional ads but also through more subtle strategies, like using artificial intelligence, integrating ads within content, and leveraging *influencers*. The latter require a lower investment and promote desired lifestyles that include brands of ultra-processed products. This persuasive ability makes regulation more complex, as it cannot be limited to official advertising campaigns.
- Typically, these strategies are not used in isolation but are combined to create a greater impact. This includes interactions with games and contests, fun contexts, emotional triggers, bright colors, *influencers*, and appealing giveaways. For adolescents, the use of memes, contests, promotions, and discounts was particularly prominent.
- The advertisements for ultra-processed products that dominate social media content targeted at children and adolescents, such as

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have a high persuasive power.

- Regarding format, in all four countries, short videos were observed to be the most used, both on social media (Instagram and Facebook stories) and on live streaming platforms (YouTube and Twitch).
- Among the ultra-processed products most remembered by children and adolescents after seeing their advertisements are energy drinks and snacks.
- The aggressive and abundant *marketing* of ultra-processed products on the internet, particularly on social media, increases the purchase and consumption of these products, altering the dietary and nutritional habits typical of each country.

Among the ultra-processed products most remembered by children and adolescents after seeing their advertisements are energy drinks and snacks.





## Other relevant findings



Malnutrition is a concern among the population interviewed in these studies, particularly among women and individuals of middle-high socio-economic status. Some adolescents mention that they begin to worry about their diet for aesthetic, academic, or social reasons.









Adolescents who face overweight issues acknowledge that they do not receive sufficient external support, such as consultations with nutritionists or more supervision from adults. They also note that, like the use of mobile phones, it is difficult for them to change their excessive consumption of ultra-processed products on their own.



In the family context, discussions about healthy eating mostly occur during adolescence. Although children are exposed to a constant stream of advertising for unhealthy products from the age of two, and their preferences and habits are already established by the time they reach adolescence, these conversations often come too late.

## Summary of Results from Studies Conducted in Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico

	 Argentina	 Colombia	 Guatemala	 Mexico
 <p><b>Device Usage</b></p>	<p>Children and adolescents acquire their first internet-enabled device at an average age of 9.1 years. They typically have access to <b>3 to 4 devices</b>, including smartphones, tablets, and/or laptops.</p>	<p>Each household has an average of <b>3 to 4 devices</b> available for children's use, such as smartphones, smart TVs, traditional televisions, and laptops. By age five, 85.5 per cent of children have access to a smartphone, and 64.6 per cent use one regularly.</p>	<p>Smartphones are the most frequently used devices by children and adolescents. Internet access is integral to daily life for 70 per cent of children and adolescents, with 85.5 per cent of metropolitan youth connecting daily.</p>	<p>Children aged 6 to 11 use smartphones, tablets, computers, or gaming consoles like Xbox. Adolescents aged 11 to 19 use similar devices, though they use gaming consoles less frequently.</p>
 <p><b>Internet Usage</b></p>	<p>Among adolescents, 90 per cent access the internet via smartphones using Wi-Fi or mobile data and spend more than <b>four hours</b> daily on social media platforms. The most used platforms are WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, with less frequent use of Twitch, Zoom, Pinterest, X, Facebook, and Snapchat.</p>	<p>Children and adolescents stay connected for an average of <b>92 minutes per session</b>. They are exposed to advertising for ultra-processed products 30 to 189 times per week.</p>	<p>Among children and adolescents who own their own devices, the frequency of internet access increases significantly: 69 per cent of those who have at least one device for exclusive use report accessing the internet every day or almost every day, several times a day, compared to 33 per cent of those who do not have an exclusive device. On average, children and adolescents spend <b>5 hours per day online</b>, with adolescents aged 16 to 19 <b>spending up to 8 hours per day</b>.</p>	<p>60 per cent of children aged 6 to 11 and 90 per cent of adolescents aged 12 to 17 are internet users, accessing it via Wi-Fi or mobile data. Adolescents <b>spend more than five hours daily</b> on various platforms.</p>
 <p><b>Most Used Platforms</b></p>	<p>YouTube (81 per cent), WhatsApp (68 per cent), and Netflix (65 per cent) are the most popular, followed by Instagram (48 per cent) and TikTok (47 per cent). The number of platforms used increases with age, from 3 for children aged 5 to 8 to 7 for adolescents aged 16 to 18.</p>	<p>Television and social media are the most used by children and adolescents to view advertisements. YouTube is the social media platform where they see the most ads, followed by Instagram. Print advertising, such as posters in stores, was also mentioned.</p>	<p>TikTok (42 per cent), Facebook (26 per cent), YouTube (14 per cent), Instagram (10 per cent), and X (2 per cent) are the most frequently used platforms.</p>	<p>YouTube is one of the most utilized platforms by children and adolescents, along with Facebook, TikTok, and online games for younger children, and Instagram, Spotify, and X for adolescents.</p>

 <p><b>Exposure to Food and Beverage Marketing on Social Media</b></p>	<p>75% of respondents mentioned that children and adolescents are exposed to advertisements while browsing social media. This percentage increases to 81% for the group of adolescents aged 16 to 18 years.</p>	<p>Children and adolescents reported cravings for excessively salty, spicy, or sweet products after online exposure or during free time, after school or during recess. Children and adolescents pointed out that after seeing the ads, they were strongly urged to purchase the product.</p>	<p>80 per cent of children and adolescents reported being significantly exposed to <i>marketing</i> of ultra-processed products on social media or the internet.</p>	<p>Adolescents mentioned that the food and beverage ads they see on social media are typically shown at specific times, usually aligning with mealtimes. The platforms where these ads appear most frequently are YouTube and Facebook.</p>
 <p><b>Estrategias de marketing más utilizadas</b></p>	<p>Messages often evoke feelings or emotions, such as the value of sharing, boundless energy, or the benefits of home education, to promote unhealthy products. Online games, collectible promotions, <i>influencer</i> challenges or giveaways on social media are also utilized.</p>	<p>Short videos are the primary medium for promoting ultra-processed products. These videos captivate attention through sensory elements, surprise, and humor, creating pleasant experiences that leave lasting impressions.</p>	<p>The use of celebrities and/or influencers and the targeting of advertising through cookies are among the most used strategies. Additionally, neuropsychology is applied as a tool in the <i>marketing</i> of unhealthy products through advertising contamination, which occurs not only in digital environments but also in the external environment where billboards are abundant.</p>	<p>Strategies include the creation of lasting connections, and the invasion of privacy through the use of <i>cookies</i>, geolocation, and profile data, including usage times. Animated characters are also used, or ultra-processed products are included in entertainment programs offered through digital platforms.</p>



# Public Policy Recommendations

Despite some progress in commitments and public policies, the latest evidence reveals that children and adolescents continue to be regularly exposed to digital *marketing* of unhealthy foods and beverages.

The response from governments and public health institutions to this threat to children's well-being has been insufficient. Furthermore, rapid advancements in digital *marketing* strategies pose additional challenges to regulatory efforts. Effective tools are urgently needed to monitor and enforce the recommendations of the **World Health Organization (WHO)** and **UNICEF** in digital environments to protect children and adolescents.

The following policy recommendations are directed at decision-makers and national regulators to develop, implement, and monitor regulations for digital *marketing* of unhealthy foods and beverages targeting children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean:

1. Generate evidence that allows recognizing and addressing the aggressive promotion of ultra-processed products.
2. Prioritize the physical and psychological integrity of vulnerable populations, especially children and adolescents, over the economic interests of companies that produce and market ultra-processed foods when developing regulatory frameworks.
3. Work collaboratively with key stakeholders, including civil society, academia, and international organizations, in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies, and avoid conflicts of interest.
4. Consider a broad definition of the types and techniques of *marketing* used in digital media to prevent its migration to other channels or unregulated spaces.
5. Implement mandatory policy models that are not self-regulated or co-regulated by the food and beverage industry.
6. Follow the recommendations from the WHO's guide *Policies for the Protection of Children from the Harmful Effects of Food Marketing in the policy design process*.<sup>21</sup> It is also recommended to define the foods and beverages to be regulated considering the WHO's nutrient profile model at the regional level<sup>22</sup>, in accordance with each country's dietary guidelines and regulations (e.g., front-of-pack labeling).
7. Promote and ensure the enforcement and monitoring of regulatory frameworks that establish restrictions on the digital *marketing* of ultra-processed products, avoiding any participation from the food and beverage industry.
8. Incorporate new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to monitor websites, social media, videos, and online gaming platforms.
9. Conduct regular reviews of public policies and regulations to identify gaps and make the necessary updates, as digital *marketing* is constantly evolving and expanding.

# Annex 1

## Definitions

**Ultra-Processed Products:** Ultra-processed products are formulations composed mainly of low-cost ultra-processed raw materials, such as modified starches, hydrogenated fats, added sugars and salts, soy protein, and mechanically separated meat. They are of industrial origin and tend to be energy-dense, high in salt, sugars, trans fats, food additives, and preservatives. These include, among others, fast food, junk food, sweet and salty snacks, sausages, packaged cookies, cakes, ready-to-eat frozen meals, breakfast cereals, many meat products, sodas, and sugary drinks.<sup>4</sup>

**Food and Beverage Industry:** Refers to commercial entities involved in the production, processing, and distribution of food and beverages.<sup>23</sup>

**Marketing:** Marketing encompasses all forms of commercial communication designed to increase awareness, appeal, and/or consumption of specific products and services. This includes any actions aimed at advertising or promoting a product or service.<sup>23</sup>



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