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Digital marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean

1. Introduction and context

The objectives of this document are to: (a) present the main results of an analysis of the scientific evidence of the last 10 years on the exposure to and persuasive power of the digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children and adolescents, and (b) provide evidence-based public policy recommendations addressed to politicians and legislators, in order to contribute to the development and implementation of effective public policies which allow adequate regulation of the digital marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages aimed at children and adolescents in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region.

The LAC region has a high prevalence of child and adolescent overweight, including its severe form, obesity. In the last two decades, this prevalence has continued to rise in most countries. In children under 5 years of age, the prevalence of child and adolescent overweight has increased from 6.8 percent in 2000

to 7.5 percent in 2021. Likewise, about 30 percent of children aged 5 to 19 years live with overweight¹. These numbers are partly due to the fact that, at present, children and adolescents grow and develop in unhealthy food environments characterized by limited availability, affordability and accessibility to healthy foods and by scarce opportunities to practice physical activity^{2,3}.

The marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages is an important element of the food environment. It is well-documented that the marketing of unhealthy foods influences the decisions, behaviours and diets of children and adolescents⁴. In this context, the digital environment should be considered a space in which children interact with food and beverage brands and products which, for the most part, are unhealthy (*see Figure 1*). Likewise, children and adolescents are exposed to highly persuasive digital marketing techniques such as contests, interactions, influencers and celebrities.

Why is it important to pay attention to children’s and adolescents’ interactions in the digital environment?

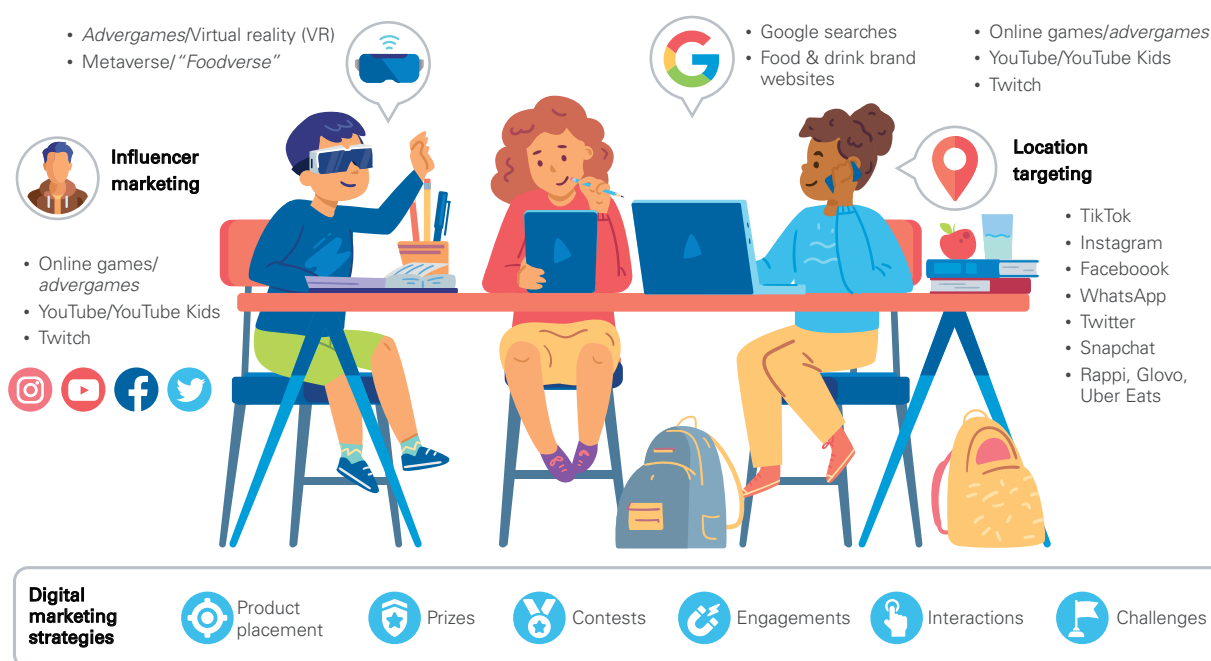
Globally, one in three Internet users are children⁵ and the number of children and adolescents using the Internet, social media and online gaming platforms has been increasing⁶. In LAC countries such as Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay, about 90 percent of children access the Internet through mobile phones⁷. The steady increase in child and adolescent access to and time using electronic devices⁶ sets them in a unique position within the digital environment, since companies consider them a group of consumers who have grown up with technology and use it in numerous ways; furthermore, children and adolescents can influence purchases at home by exerting persuasive influence on their mothers, fathers and/or caregivers.

Moreover, the food industry manufacturing unhealthy products increasingly invests in digital marketing, to the detriment of traditional channels, and has come to rely on various drivers of digital marketing such as its greater reach on children and adolescents, the global proliferation of digital devices, less parental control in the digital environment and the efficiency and effectiveness of digital marketing to capture and retain potential consumers⁸⁻¹⁰. In addition, digital marketing’s automated systems for extracting and analyzing data in real time through algorithms facilitate a high degree of message personalization.

The reach of digital media ads is immense, even crossing the geographical limits of a country through cross-border marketing. All of these factors enable companies to increasingly interact with existing (or potential) consumers, collecting user data from multiple digital devices and creating individualized consumer profiles. In this context, children and adolescents are in a vulnerable position because most of them are unable to understand the persuasive intent of many of the marketing techniques frequently used by the food industry, and because their rights to adequate nutrition, health and information are not respected¹⁰.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹¹ explicitly mentions that Member States should guarantee the right to healthy food and act to combat all forms of malnutrition, including overweight and obesity, among children and adolescents. The digital marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages has a negative impact on several of the rights of children and adolescents set forth in the CRC, such as the right to food, life, survival and development, education, information, rest, leisure, recreation and cultural activities, privacy, non-discrimination and health¹². In particular, its General Comment No. 16, Paragraph 59 mentions: **“States should ensure that marketing and advertising do not have adverse impacts on children’s rights by adopting appropriate regulation and encouraging business enterprises**

Figure 1. The digital environment as a space in which children and adolescents interact with food and beverage brands and products



Source: Adapted from: United Nations Children’s Fund, *Children and digital marketing: Rights, risks and opportunities*, UNICEF, Geneva, April 2018.

to adhere to codes of conduct and use clear and accurate product labelling and information that allow parents and children to make informed consumer decisions”¹³.

In addition, General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment urges States to implement legislative, administrative and preventive measures to uphold the rights of children and safeguard them in the digital environment: **“States parties should review, adopt and update national legislation in line with international human rights standards, to ensure that the digital environment is compatible with the rights set out in the Convention and the Optional Protocols thereto. Legislation should remain relevant, in the context of technological advances and emerging practices.”¹⁴.**

In this sense, UNICEF complements the Convention’s policy actions and makes recommendations such as **“Ban all forms of marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to which children [and adolescents] are likely to be exposed, including advertising through all types of media (television, print, social media, digital games and others)”¹⁵.**

Additionally, at the 63rd World Health Assembly in 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) unanimously approved recommendations on the marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children and adolescents. However, to date the implementation of these recommendations by Member States has been extremely slow or almost non-existent, focusing most of the time on self-regulatory proposals with the participation of the

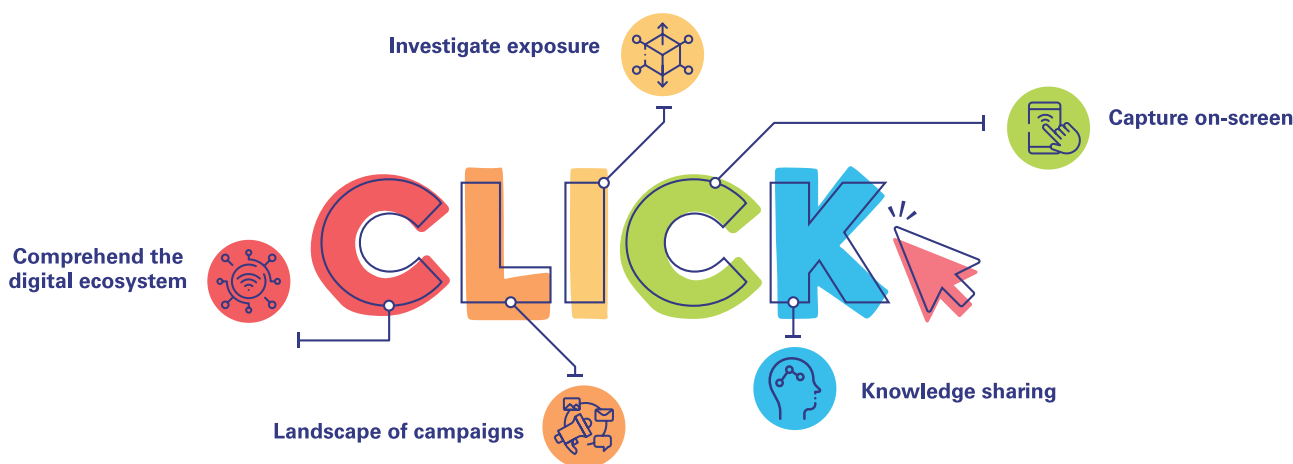
food industry, with little progress in terms of effective public regulatory policies, especially in digital media.

In the LAC region, some countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru include the digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages in their regulations¹⁶⁻¹⁹. However, these are still insufficient, since, for example, they do not contemplate all children under the age of 18; they do not specify which marketing techniques must be regulated; and/or they do not cover the entire spectrum of the digital world.

2. Methodology

The scientific literature published in international scientific journals from the last 10 years (2012-2022) was reviewed with the goal of evaluating the evidence on exposure and persuasive power of digital marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children and adolescents, as well as the effects of digital marketing restriction policies on the exposure, behaviors and food consumption of children and adolescents. This was followed by a comprehensive review of two studies commissioned by UNICEF in 2020 in Argentina and Mexico that evaluated the digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to which children are exposed. Both countries used the CLICK methodology²⁰ proposed by the WHO Regional Office in Europe, which has been recommended internationally to monitor and evaluate digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages aimed at children. In the CLICK methodology, each letter represents a step in the monitoring (see Figure 2). The Argentina study covered the first three steps (CLI) and the Mexico study evaluated steps 1 to 4 (CLIC).

Figure 2. CLICK Methodology



Source: World Health Organization, *Monitoring and restricting digital marketing of unhealthy products to children and adolescents*, WHO, Moscow, 2018

3. Results

3.1. Results of the analysis of scientific evidence

The generation of empirical studies regarding the marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages aimed at children and adolescents has grown in the last decade, making it possible to record the impact of exposure not only in traditional media but also in the digital environment. Most of these studies are global in scope, with some conducted in the LAC region.

The exposure of children and adolescents to unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing in digital media is high and influences their eating behaviours and purchasing preferences.

Scientific studies indicate that exposure to different forms of marketing, including digital marketing, influences children's and adolescents' food choices and their food purchase requests to their parents and/or caregivers, as well as their diet⁴. Despite the existence of certain regulations regarding the digital environment, this realm, due to its characteristics, requires greater control and specificity so that the real needs for the protection of the rights of children and adolescents are taken into account. Regulatory gaps and lax criteria favor a high exposure of children and adolescents to marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages²¹, especially in social media²²⁻²⁵. Some studies have documented that adolescents are more exposed than younger children to digital marketing when using their favorite social media apps (83 percent vs. 55 percent)²².

On the other hand, shopping for food online, watching videos of food brands on YouTube, and viewing favorite food ads on social media are significantly associated with increased frequency of consumption of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages in 10- to 16-year-olds, regardless of age, sex or socioeconomic status²³.

In the digital environment, interactions or engagements such as "likes," "shares" or "comments" on ads were associated with greater impact on the consumption of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages compared to mere exposure to digital marketing aimed at children and adolescents²³. On the other hand, influencers can affect the food consumption of children and adolescents who follow and view them, increasing general calorie consumption derived from unhealthy snacks²⁶.

Globally, children and adolescents interact with various food and beverage brands through digital platforms including websites, social media and virtual games.



Adolescents are highly exposed to digital marketing as they spend between 7.6 to 10.2 hours per weekday in front of different types of screens. Digital media such as YouTube, social media platforms and websites contributed the most to the total of hours they spent per day in front of screens^{22,27}.

Digital marketing through social media exerts a great impact on the attitudes and behaviours of children and adolescents due to its capacity to reach millions of users^{24,28-30}.

In the United States of America, 7 out of 10 adolescents (aged 13–17) engage with food and non-alcoholic beverage brands on social media (ranging from 1 to 48 brands) and 3 out of 10 interact with 5 or more brands³³. In that sense, "using other screens more than 2 h-per-day was associated with following 5 + brands."³³, which contributes to the increase in exposure to digital marketing in this age group.

Ads for unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages in content aimed at children and adolescents on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have a high persuasive power.

Food and non-alcoholic beverage advertising is very common on YouTube. As on television, ads for unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages predominate in content aimed at children on YouTube³². Child influencers have become popular in recent years and have been documented to generate millions of impressions for food and non-alcoholic beverage brands through brand positioning strategies. On the other hand, Instagram turned out to be the most popular social media platforms among adolescents from Australia, Canada, Chile, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, followed by Facebook and Snapchat²⁷.

TikTok is another social media platform that has been gaining popularity among children and adolescents according to a recent study that assessed the content of all videos posted on the TikTok accounts of 16 major global food and non-alcoholic beverage brands, the most common marketing strategies were branding, product images, engagement and the participation of celebrities or influencers, all with high persuasive power. Engagement techniques included video generation by social media users presenting branded products, which generated positive feelings in users and millions of views. These results show that TikTok users who participate in challenges promoted by unhealthy food and beverage brands are becoming unofficial brand ambassadors²⁹, thus contributing to the digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.

Most food and non-alcoholic beverage ads promoted in digital media fall into the unhealthy product category.

Almost all food and beverage marketing directed to children is for unhealthy foods high in sugars, saturated fats and sodium^{4,15,33,34}. In Mexico, Theodore et al. (2021) evaluated 129 accounts on social media and websites and found that, on Facebook, the most advertised foods were carbonated drinks, salty snacks, pizzas, hamburgers, sausages and bread products. On YouTube, the ads with the most views corresponded in greater proportion to fast food such as pizzas, hamburgers and sausages³⁵. In the United States of America, adolescents aged 13 to 17 interact on social media mostly with fast food brands (54 percent), sugary drinks (50 percent), sweets (46 percent) and snacks (45 percent)³¹. As for the videos by child influencers on YouTube, 9 out of 10 of the foods and/or non-alcoholic beverages presented were categorized as unhealthy products³⁵.



Food and beverage brands use multiple digital marketing and information personalization techniques on different platforms to attract children and adolescents.

Marketing techniques used in digital media (websites, social media platforms, online games) in different regions of the world such as Europe, Asia, Oceania and North America are numerous and highly persuasive^{21,27,29,33,35}. Digital marketing of unhealthy fast food, beverage and snack brands is ubiquitous and facilitates interaction with users across multiple platforms, which can contribute to the amplification of the message and the impact of marketing on different outcome variables related to children's and adolescents' behaviours and diets.

The most used digital marketing techniques include the use of:

- product/brand placement strategies
- celebrities and characters (animated, licensed, branded, athletes, other children and adolescents)
- influencers
- sports sponsorships
- incentives (prizes, contests, gifts, concerts, giveaways)
- novel and colorful designs, animations and special effects
- games
- tags or hashtags
- interactions such as sharing, commenting and tagging others, emoticons
- geolocators, mainly in ads aimed at adolescents
- digital fingerprint (cookies) and profile data

There is a gap in the existing regulatory frameworks regarding digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages in the LAC region and globally.

It has been shown that existing policies and regulations are not sufficient to protect children and adolescents from the harmful effects of the marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages in different media to which they are permanently exposed^{21,36-39}. For the most part, existing policies and regulations are insufficient because they cover traditional media such as television, but not digital media; they do not take adolescents in consideration as an age group; and they only refer to marketing "aimed at children" instead of explicitly referring to all the marketing to which children and adolescents are exposed.

The existing gap in regulatory terms in the digital environment is concerning, considering the changing digital ecosystem, the increase in the use of mobile devices, and the integrated nature of marketing across different media. All in all, digital marketing is relatively less expensive and more effective compared to traditional media such as television.

In the UK, parents and caregivers recognize that their children are exposed to unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing on different platforms and support the need for greater regulation of unhealthy food and drink marketing⁴⁰. In New Zealand, children themselves believe that they should not be targeted for "junk food" advertising and that advertising agencies should be more honest⁴¹.

Considering the high prevalence of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverage advertising on social media which children and adolescents use, the regulation of digital media should be considered within regulatory marketing

The LAC region has been a leader in implementing food policies to improve food environments, specifically in the front-of-package nutrition warning labeling of unhealthy products. Front-of-package nutrition warning labeling is a key instrument to define guidelines surrounding the digital marketing of unhealthy products. Chile has been a world pioneer in labeling policies and has used this instrument to define guidelines to regulate unhealthy foods advertising. Chile prohibits all forms of advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages aimed at children and adolescents under 14 years of age, wherever it is carried out, including websites, interactive applications and games¹⁸. In addition, the use of characters, celebrities, athletes, toys and references to school settings is not allowed. At the regional level, however, policy improvements are required to increase the scope of existing regulations⁴³.

Improvement actions include the use of a policy approach based on constitutional rights to health and human rights, the documentation of conflicts of interest of non-State actors, and the strengthening of regulations in digital media. In that sense, suggestions also include a more comprehensive policy approach encompassing different techniques, strategies, channels and digital platforms. The reach of digital media marketing and the existence of cross-border marketing require collaboration not only between countries in the region but with States in other regions of the globe as well.



the voices of a mother and an adolescent

→ *“Yes, there’s a lack of laws, because they even ask you (...) and you tell them not to send [the ad] to you again, ah no, they send it to you again. I do think they should regulate this because (...) it’s a free choice (...) I decide not to consume it, but they are invading [your] time, your device”*

(Mother of 12 year old adolescent – Mexico)



→ *“When we see a product, we do not realize if it is healthy or not, we have to look at the package where the information is, it would be good to be warned about the consequences of consuming it. But like all advertising they will always want to sell at any cost (...) I would tell manufacturers, regarding [their] ads and products, to show more of reality and stop fantasizing so much”*

(Adolescent between 16 and 18 years old - Argentina)



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3.2. Results of the review of UNICEF studies

	 Argentina	 Mexico
Device use by children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and adolescents acquire their first device with Internet access at an average age of 9.1 years. Children and adolescents have access to an average of 3.4 devices with Internet connection, of which the main ones are cell phones, tablets and laptops. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and adolescents aged 6-11 use cell phones, tablets, computers or PCs and gaming consoles such as Xbox. Adolescents aged 11-19 use the same devices as children; however, they use game consoles to a much lesser extent.
Internet use by children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Among adolescents, 90 percent access the Internet through a cell phone using Wi-Fi or mobile data and spend more than 4 hours a day browsing different social media platforms. Most of their Internet use is dedicated to social media platforms: Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60 percent of children aged 6-11 years and 90 percent of adolescents aged 12-17 are Internet users. Children and adolescents connect to the Internet via Wi-Fi or mobile data. In the case of adolescents, they spend more than 5 hours per day browsing on different platforms.
Digital platforms most used by children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YouTube (81 percent), WhatsApp (68 percent) and Netflix (65 percent), Instagram (48 percent) and TikTok (47 percent). The number of platforms with which they interact increases with age from 3.6 for children aged 5-8 years to 6.8 for adolescents aged 16-18 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YouTube is among the platforms most used by children and adolescents. In addition, Facebook, TikTok and online games are popular among children and Facebook, Instagram, Spotify, TikTok and Twitter among adolescents.
Main online activities of children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play online games (33 percent), listen to music (30 percent) and chat/share with friends (30 percent). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and adolescents use the Internet recreationally, often as a "prize" for having completed tasks.
Influencers/ Youtubers/ Celebrities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30 percent of adolescents surveyed mentioned that content is more engaging when it contains videos and posts from influencers or celebrities they follow. The profiles that were most mentioned were linked to sports (e.g., Messi) and the world of music (e.g., Harry Styles, Maluma) and other YouTubers and gamers such as Los Polinesios, Lina Vallejos, Robleis, among others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and adolescents recognized the link between certain YouTubers such as Ana Emilia, elRubius, HolaSoyGerman, Los Polinesios and Luisitorey with the promotion of food and non-alcoholic beverage brands. In addition, they recognized celebrities such as Lionel Messi, Katy Perry and Ryan Reynolds.
Children's and adolescents' exposure to food and beverage marketing on social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75 percent of respondents mentioned that children are exposed to advertising while browsing social media. This percentage increases to 81 percent for adolescents aged 16-18 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adolescents reported that the food and beverage ads they see on social media come up at specific times (usually coinciding with meals). 69 percent of children and adolescents were exposed to digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages despite Facebook, Instagram and YouTube policies that prohibit the use of their platforms for marketing aimed at children under 13 years of age.
Food brands most viewed on social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bimbo, Bon or Bon, Fanta, Oreo, Pepsi, Red Bull, Saladix, Toddy, among others. In addition, fast food advertisements on meal delivery apps such as Glovo, PedidosYa, Rappi, and Wabi stand out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Barcel, Bimbo, Gamesa, Kellogg's, Nestlé and Sabritas. Promotion strategies focus on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, but also on food company websites or through meal delivery apps.
Most used marketing strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online games. Product positioning through influencers. Engagement (hashtags, requests to comment, share and tag). Challenges/interactions. Giveaways. Collectibles. Messages that generate feelings or emotions such as the value of sharing, the idea of infinite energy and the significance of homeschooling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ads aimed at children. Influencers. Engagement (interactions, bond generation). Contests or promotions and discounts. Use of cookies, geolocation, profile data extraction, including times and duration of use. Use of branded animated characters such as bears, tigers, pandas and rabbits as well as personalized labels. Marketing inclusion in entertainment programs offered via digital platforms. Fun contexts full of emotions and bright colors. Eye-catching gifts. Use of memes. Use of hashtags or tags that appeal to emotions, aspirational attitudes and personality traits.
Most advertised foods and beverages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foods such as sweets, fast foods, snacks, and soft drinks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 96 percent of the foods and non-alcoholic beverages to which children and adolescents were exposed were classified as unhealthy, including fast food, sweet cakes and breads, and chocolates. Sugary drinks such as soft drinks, juices, nectars, sugary milks, followed by sweet products such as cookies and sweet bread, chocolates and breakfast cereals.

4. Conclusions

- Children and adolescents use different platforms and are **highly exposed to the digital marketing** of unhealthy foods and beverages.
- Food and beverage brands use **a variety of highly persuasive marketing techniques that cross borders (cross-border marketing)**.
- Most foods and beverages promoted in digital media fall into the **unhealthy product category**.
- **The digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages violates children's and adolescents' rights** to healthy foods, to life, to survival and development, to education, to information, to rest, to leisure, to recreation and cultural activities, to privacy, and to non-discrimination.
- There is **a gap in the specialized literature** concerning regulatory frameworks for the digital marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages
- **Capacity-building is needed at national levels** to develop and implement policies restricting the digital marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages, promoting healthy eating patterns and reducing malnutrition in all its forms.

5. Public policy recommendations

The main objective of digital marketing regulation policies should be to protect the rights of all children and adolescents by reducing their exposure to and the persuasive power of unhealthy food and beverage marketing. In regulatory processes it is important to ensure that there is policy⁴⁴ coherence across the different stakeholders and sectors involved in the issue, including government, the private sector and civil society organizations, academia and children and adolescents themselves. Below are policy recommendations **aimed at national decision makers and regulators** for the design, implementation and monitoring of digital marketing regulations of unhealthy foods and beverages towards children and adolescents in the LAC region:

- Together with UNICEF, other United Nations agencies and academia, **carry out a diagnosis of the situation and establish goals and objectives** for the regulation of the digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to which children and adolescents are exposed.
- **Lead policy design processes** and invite different stakeholders to be part of the consultation process, taking into consideration that policy design, monitoring and evaluation should be independent of the food and beverage industry.
- **Implement marketing regulations that are mandatory** instead of policies based on voluntary or self-regulation by the food and beverage industry. Countries can assess the prevention and management of conflicts of interest by using World Health Organization (WHO) tools designed for this purpose.
- **Expand the coverage of digital marketing regulations to all children and adolescents under the age of 18.**
- When designing policies, define foods and beverages to be regulated considering **the nutrient profile model of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)** at the regional level, in accordance with the dietary guidelines of each country.
- In countries where **front-of-package nutrition warning labeling** has been implemented, use it as an instrument to define guidelines for the regulation of digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.
- **Implement a comprehensive approach** that encompasses not only exposure to but also the persuasive power of marketing techniques. The hours of exposure need to be considered alongside the actual products, different devices and platforms used by children and adolescents..
- **Consider a broad definition of marketing types and techniques** used in digital media. Regulations should be as broad as possible to prevent marketing migration to other channels or spaces.
- Collaborate with different institutions at governmental level, within countries and between governments in the LAC region, to **address cross-border marketing** of unhealthy foods and beverages.
- **Establish independent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating** digital marketing regulations of unhealthy foods and beverages, and the institutions in charge of said mechanisms, avoiding all forms of food industry participation, as well as mechanisms for compliance with regulatory actions that include sanctions for non-compliance.
- **Prioritize funds for policy monitoring, evaluation and compliance**, incorporating new technologies such as artificial intelligence that include the monitoring of websites, social media and online videos and gaming platforms.
- Taking into consideration that digital marketing is constantly evolving and expanding, **conduct periodic reviews of public policies and regulations** to identify gaps and update existing policies.

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