
Miscellaneous

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Food brands, YouTube and Children: Media practices in the context of the PAOS self-regulation code

Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze media practices involving food content on YouTube in terms of the self-regulatory framework established by the PAOS code, which was originally designed for television. The study considers content created and disseminated by two different sources: food brands and child YouTuber channels. We conducted an exploratory qualitative-quantitative study based on a content analysis of videos posted in 2019 on the most viewed YouTube channels in Spain (Socialblade, 2019). The final sample included 211 videos (29h 57m) divided into two subsamples: the official channels of 13 Spanish food brands (82 videos), and 15 Spanish child YouTuber channels (129 videos). The study has facilitated information on nine dimensions: (1) adherence to regulations and ethical standards, (2) nutrition education and information, (3) identification of advertising, (4) presence of risk, (5) clarity in the presentation of the product and in the language used, (6) pressure selling, (7) promotions, giveaways, competitions, and children's clubs, (8) support and promotion through characters and programs and (9) comparative presentations. The main findings reveal the experimental nature of videos featuring food brands that are posted on YouTube for child audiences, especially videos broadcast on the channels of child YouTubers, who post content without an ethical strategy sensitive to their target audience. The lack of compliance with the basic requirement of identifying the video as advertising underscores the urgent need to adapt existing legal and ethical standards to these new formulas of commercial communication.

Keywords

Self-regulation, YouTube, kids, food brands, risks.

1. Introduction

1.1. Food advertising targeting a child audience

The scientific literature shows that the food brands with the biggest advertising presence on television in the time slots subject to enhanced protections for child audiences promote unhealthy products: foods high in sugar, high in calories, and with a low nutritional value (De-Sousa-Almeida, Nascimentoa & Bolzan-Quaioti, 2002; Harrison & Marske, 2005; Recuerda,

2009; Kelly *et al.*, 2010; González, 2013; Romero-Fernández, Royo-Bordonada & Rodríguez-Artalejo, 2013; León-Flández, 2017; Peternella-Veltrini & Da-Gomes-Ribeiro, 2019; Jiménez-Morales, Montaña & Vázquez, 2019). There is a huge discrepancy between the diet recommended by the most widely advertised food products on television and the normal diet recommended for school-age children (WHO, 2020); indeed, the list of most advertised foods is practically the inverse of any list of the most recommended (Menéndez-García & Franco-Díez, 2009).

Television as the preeminent medium now has serious rivals in the form of highly successful audiovisual and social platforms characterized by exclusive, child-themed content (Calvert, 2008). YouTube has a wider offer, a powerful thematic search engine and allows viewing on demand. That is why we selected this media in our study. Advertising of high-calorie foods for a child target audience is notable for the use of creative strategies with a highly persuasive impact on children, such as upbeat music, vibrant colors, animated characters and the association of a food product with social success (García & Díez, 2009, p. 325). 72% of Spanish children between the ages of 6 and 11 have a profile on a social network, a percentage much higher than the international average of 44% (Viacom, 2019). When they connect to the internet, their most common activity is watching videos on YouTube (62%-89%), especially among tweens (ages 8-11) (Weber, 2015; Ofcom, 2018).

“Advertising strategies targeting child consumers [...] are almost never based on rational arguments, as the advertisers fear that children will associate the product with something they have to eat out of obligation rather than for pleasure” (Jiménez, 2006, p. 260). Emotional arguments predominate, instead. (Remolar, 2009, p. 381). Moods and semantic fields associated with happiness, action, success and fun, among others, are also common in the discursive strategy of advertising for products with low nutritional value that target children (Jiménez-Morales, Montaña & Vázquez, 2019, p. 23).

The energy of the product provides after being consumed, shown in an atmosphere of competition, is also a common message in food advertising aimed at child audiences, along with contests, promotions, and collectable items, prizes and special packaging (Roberts & Pettigrew, 2007, p. 362; Kelly *et al.*, 2008; Pérez-Salgado, Ribera-Márquez & Ortíz-Hernández, 2010, p. 124; Ponce-Blandón, 2015, p. 201). The main selling point, which drives sales, is nearly always an incentive (emotional), rather than the nutritional benefits offered by the product itself (Fernández-Gómez & Díaz-Campo, 2014).

It is reasonable to conclude that these strategies used to advertise products with low nutritional value have a negative impact on children’s health, often leading to obesity, in contrast to prevention policies. They encourage children to consume such products by suggesting positive emotions and experiences as a benefit of buying them (Jiménez-Morales, Montaña & Vázquez, 2019, p. 24).

Child YouTubers create and broadcast videos aimed at a child audience (Aran-Ramspott, Fedele & Tarragó, 2018). Notable in this field of research are the studies by León (2018) on the creation process of child YouTuber videos and by Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez & González-Río (2018) and Tur-Viñes & González-Río (2019) on the advertising strategies they employ. Child YouTuber channels are notable for their high level of professionalism, the creation of videos with elaborate post-production techniques and the tonality of the commercial is extremely natural (Aznar *et al.*, 2019; López-Villafranca & Olmedo-Salar, 2019, 2019). “Communication based on influence is more effective than more traditional advertising because its design includes a non-advertising ‘authentic content’ dimension that renders it more credible” (Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez & González-Río, 2018, p. 1214).

Products and their brands are integrated into the content of child YouTuber videos in various ways: as one of the props in the video (brand placement), in YouTuber-product interactions that demonstrate their use, or by associating them with positive emotions channeled through an aspirational prism. Games, narrations or stories about the product,

unboxing, challenges, assembly instructions or do-it-yourself tasks (tutorials) and competitions or promotions with gifts and prizes are the most popular types of content (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016; Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez & González-Río, 2018; López-Villafranca & Olmedo-Salar, 2019).

This phenomenon has regulatory implications that need to be addressed urgently, with guidance for safe, strategic action by brands (Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez & González-Río, 2018, p. 1213). Several important aspects can be identified in the activity of children on YouTube that lack comprehensive legal regulation (Burgess, 2012; Blades, Oates & Li, 2013; Chester, 2015; García, Campbell & Null, 2015; Campbell, 2016; Craig & Cunningham, 2017):

- the status of the child as a broadcaster;
- the question of the support or guidance of their legal guardians;
- the presence of brands;
- the issue of veiled marketing taking into account the difficulty children have identifying the sales pitches of such videos;
- the mass audiences of followers;
- the undeniable influence of these practices on the current media generation;
- and the increasing use of these practices.

1.2. *Legal and ethical framework for food advertising targeting a child audience*

The main legislation on advertising in Spain is Law 34/1988, of November 11, 1988, the General Advertising Act. Article 3 of this act identifies as illegal any advertising targeting children that encourages the purchase of a good or service by exploiting their inexperience or gullibility, or in which children appear persuading parents or guardians to buy the product. Under this article, children cannot be depicted in risky situations without a justified reason due to the risks of imitation. Advertising must not be misleading in relation to the characteristics or safety of the product, or to the skills and abilities. Children would need to use them without causing harm to themselves or others (Law 34/1988).

In 1996, the Association for Self-Regulation of Advertising (*Asociación de Autocontrol de la Publicidad*, AAP) was created in Spain. Self-regulation is supported by the Code of Advertising Conduct (2019). Section E of this code is dedicated entirely to the “Protection of Children and Adolescents”, as stated in Rule 28, which specifies that “commercial communications addressed to children must be extremely careful. They must not exploit the naivety, immaturity, inexperience or natural gullibility of children or adolescents, or take advantage of their sense of loyalty” (Autocontrol, 2019, p. 13).

Title V of the Code of Ethics for E-Commerce and Interactive Advertising (2002), published by Autocontrol (the Association for Self-Regulation of Commercial Communication) and the AECE (Spanish E-Commerce Association), addresses the protection of children in Article 29:

Advertising and Child Protection. Advertising broadcast on electronic media must not cause psychological or physical harm to children and must therefore respect the following principles:

- a. It must identify content intended exclusively for adults.
- b. It must not directly encourage children to purchase a product or service by exploiting their inexperience or credulity, or to persuade their parents or guardians, or the parents or guardians of others, to purchase the products or services being advertised.
- c. Under no circumstances may it exploit the special trust children have in their parents or guardians, teachers or others.
- d. It must not, without justified reason, depict children in dangerous situations (Autocontrol-AECE, 2002).

In 2004, the WHO introduced measures that were agreed to by various countries in the context of the NAOS (Nutrition, Activity and Obesity Prevention Strategy). One year later, Spain's Ministry of Health and Consumption promoted this strategy with the aim of "improving eating habits and promoting regular physical activity [...], with special attention to prevention during childhood" (Ministry of Health and Consumption, 2005a, p. 31). This regulatory framework for advertising of food and non-alcoholic beverages targeting children, thus protects children. To this end, in 2005 the PAOS Code (Self-Regulation Code for Food and Beverage Advertising Targeting Children, Obesity Prevention and Health) was approved in Spain. This voluntary self-regulatory code of ethical best practices established rules for the development, production and broadcasting of advertising messages aimed at children under 12 (Ministry of Health and Consumption, 2005b).

To establish its scope of application, the PAOS Code stipulates that any traditional advertising even the new formats, meeting the following criteria will be deemed to be aimed at children under 12 (Ministry of Health and Consumption, 2005b):

- By type of food product promoted: any advertising promoting a food product that can objectively be described as intended predominantly for children under 12.
- By advertising message design: any advertising or new format designed in such a way that its content, language and/or images are objectively and predominantly suitable for attracting the attention or interest of children under 12.
- By the broadcasting circumstances of the advertising message: any advertising broadcast either via a medium or platform that can be objectively described as predominantly aimed at an under-12 audience, or via a general media outlet during time slots, programming blocks, sections or spaces targeting children under 12 or that have an audience made up predominantly of children under 12.

The PAOS Code prohibits advertising featuring famous figures, either real or fictional, on the grounds of the influence such figures can have over children:

Under no circumstances may food or beverage advertising exploit the special trust that children have in their parents, teachers or others, such as professionals on children's programs or characters (real or fictional) from fiction series or films (Ministry of Health and Consumption, 2005b, p. 4).

The PAOS Code also prohibits "telepromotions" or advertising embedded (product placement, brand placement, branded content) in a program (rule 14) and stipulates that advertising must be clearly separated from programs (rule 15), prohibiting the use of situations, settings and styles evocative of programs that may confuse children.

The PAOS Code of 2005 was reinforced in 2009 by means of a collaboration agreement with television operators. With this agreement, the television networks committed to ensuring that food and beverage sales pitches aimed at children under 12 or broadcast during time slots subject to enhanced protections complied with the provisions established in the PAOS Code. The revision of the PAOS Code in 2012 expanded its scope of application to food and beverage advertising online and broadened the age range to include all children under 15, in accordance with the recommendations of Law 17/2011 on Food Security and Nutrition, which required the promotion of co-regulation agreements and codes of conduct with financial operators to regulate food and beverage advertising aimed at children and youths up to 15 years of age, for the purposes of preventing obesity and promoting healthy habits.

The discursive strategies used in food advertising targeting a child audience that we mentioned above violate section IV point 5 of the ethical rules of the PAOS Code, especially in relation to the presentation of the products:

Food or beverage advertising must not mislead children under 12 years of age (for advertising in traditional audiovisual or print media) or under 15 (for advertising online) about the benefits derived from the use of the product. Such benefits may include but not be limited to the acquisition of strength, status, popularity, growth, ability or intelligence (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2013, p. 6).

The PAOS Code has certain gaps. For instance, the fact that although advertisers are told to show the product together with a reasonable variety of foods in order to promote a balanced diet (González, 2013), it does not regulate the nutritional quality of the products advertised, nor does it consider the potentially negative effects of consuming those products (Ponce-Blandón, Pabón-Carrasco & Lomas-Campos, 2017). Nor does it regulate how often this type of advertising is broadcast (Royo-Bordonada *et al.*, 2016).

In 2010, the Spanish government enacted Law 7/2010, of March 31, the General Audiovisual Communication Act, introducing a series of amendments to the regulation of food advertising:

The competent audiovisual authority must encourage television communication service providers to develop codes of conduct in relation to inappropriate audiovisual advertising during or included within children's programs, for food or beverages containing nutrients and ingredients with a nutritional or physiological effect, in particular ingredients like fats, trans-fatty acids, salt or sodium and sugars, excessive consumption of which is not recommended for a balanced diet (General Audiovisual Communication Act, 2010, p. 30170).

In 2013, the WHO developed the *Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases 2013-2020* (WHO, 2013), which proposes restrictions on advertising of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children and adolescents. The report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity also points to the need to reduce exposure to advertising of unhealthy foods aimed at children and adolescents (WHO, 2016).

In the same year, the Spanish government approved the HAVISA Plan: Plan for the Promotion of Healthy Living Habits in the Spanish Population (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2013). This plan was implemented through a media campaign plan on television. It was designed to give visibility to strategies aimed at promoting healthy eating and regular physical activity, in line with the NAOS strategy.

1.3. Need to control food advertising targeting a child audience

The increased presence of unhealthy food products in advertising can be understood as a risk factor in violation of the human right to adequate food (HRAF) (Paternella-Veltrini & Da-Gomes-Ribeiro, 2019). Controls therefore need to be implemented for the advertising of obesogenic foods in general, and for advertising targeting children audience in particular (Mussini & Temporelli, 2013, p. 175).

The content of the PAOS Code needs to be revised to include the Spanish food industry, agencies and advertisers, with the aim of achieving effective self-regulation of advertising content, including product placement (Jiménez-Morales, Montaña & Vázquez, 2019). Studies have shown a high level of compliance with the PAOS Code, especially the provisions related to the clarity and simplicity of the information presented in commercial communications for foods and beverages and prohibitions on the use of figures who are famous or familiar to children (León, 2018, p. 73).

Regulations on advertising aimed at children in Spain is very permissive compared to other European countries like Belgium, Germany or the United Kingdom, where controls are imposed on advertising times in child programming, and specifically on the informational content of advertising messages for food products targeting children (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2002). In Mexico, the insertion of advertising for products considered "junk

food” during children’s programming times has been expressly prohibited (Fernández-Gómez & Díaz-Campo, 2014).

One of the purposes of the WHO is to reduce the marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt, in order to mitigate the impact of such foods on the child population. The overall policy objective should be both to reduce children’s exposure to the advertising message and to review the creative content of the message (WHO, 2010, p. 8).

IAB Spain (2018) produced the *Legal Guide on Child Influencers*, which contains the regulations applicable to children’s online activity and their relationships with brands, including specific recommendations for the creation of content about toys, video games and food, like the need to differentiate advertising and not promote or present unhealthy eating habits or lifestyles.

Based on the statements done in the introduction, we posited the following research questions:

- RQ1. Is the presence of food brands in YouTube videos targeting a child audience in line with current advertising legislation and the requirements of good faith and good business practices? Are they associated with the promotion of unhealthy eating and living habits?
- RQ2. Are the sales pitches of the message in relation to the product clearly identified?
- RQ3. Does the presentation of the product mislead and/or promote harmless behaviour among viewers?
- RQ4. Does the advertising use understandable language?
- RQ5. What type of pressure selling strategies are used?
- RQ6. Is the promotion of the product supported by characters and/or programs?
- RQ7. Does the advertising offer a comparative presentation of the product?

2. Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyze the adherence to regulations and ethical standards in YouTube content with the presence of food brands targeting children in the context of the self-regulatory framework established in the PAOS Code, originally designed for television. It considers content created and broadcast by two different sources: food brands and child YouTuber channels.

An exploratory qualitative-quantitative study was conducted based on the content analysis of videos posted in 2019 on the most viewed YouTube channels in Spain (Socialblade, 2019). The initial universe of content was made up of 1396 videos: 238 videos by 13 Spanish food brands and 1158 videos from child YouTuber channels (see Table 1). The final sample was taken on January 13, 2020 and is made up of 211 videos: 82 videos from the official channels of 13 Spanish food brands featuring or targeting children; and 129 videos by 15 Spanish child YouTubers that include some type of presence of food brands.

In total, we analyzed 29 hours and 57 minutes of video footage that met all of the following selection criteria: presence (verbal, visual or in the video title) of food products or brands, and the presence of child protagonists/actors/influencers. Table 2 includes the 7 research questions and their relationship to the 57 variables analyzed. The study has facilitated information on 9 dimensions: adherence to regulations and ethical standards, nutrition education and information, identification of advertising, presence of risk, clarity in the presentation of the product and in the language used, pressure selling, promotions, giveaways, competitions and children’s clubs, support and promotion through characters and programs and comparative presentations.

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Table 1: Sample of YouTube channels.

	Channel Name	Type of content	Creation date	URL	Subscribers	Videos since creation	Videos in 2019	Videos analyzed	Cumulative views of channel
1	Las ratitas	Child YouTuber	2015/10/18	http://bit.ly/lasratitas	18,100,000	159	42	4	5,849,792,551
2	MikelTube	Child YouTuber	2015/08/30	http://bit.ly/mikeltube-yt	5,250,000	689	99	15	3,160,062,304
3	The Crazy Haacks	Child YouTuber	2015/03/09	http://bit.ly/the-crazy-haacks	3,540,000	636	102	31	1,320,711,747
4	Los juguetes de Arantxa	Child YouTuber	2015/01/02	http://bit.ly/juguetes-arantxa	3,580,000	853	91	11	1,099,194,144
5	Las aventuras de Dani y Evan	Child YouTuber	2015/01/22	http://bit.ly/aventuras-dani-ewan	1,820,000	445	113	3	994,272,780
6	La diversión de Martina	Child YouTuber	2015/01/05	http://bit.ly/ladiversiendemartina	3,860,000	303	65	10	849,828,248
7	Jugando con Aby	Child YouTuber	2015/12/13	http://bit.ly/jugandoconaby	2,520,000	390	64	24	701,191,013
8	El mundo de Clodett	Child YouTuber	2016/12/27	http://bit.ly/elmundodeclodett	2,400,000	261	73	15	552,071,204
9	TeamNico	Child YouTuber	2013/11/04	http://bit.ly/los-mundos-de-nico	2,340,000	458	104	5	525,356,850
10	Juega con Adri	Child YouTuber	2018/03/26	http://bit.ly/juegaconadri	1,940,000	114	73	41	465,342,764
11	Divertiguay	Child YouTuber	2016/10/11	http://bit.ly/divertiguay-yt	2,220,000	570	118	32	456,502,768
12	Leotube	Child YouTuber	2018/01/15	http://bit.ly/leotube-yt	1,450,000	79	56	4	346,709,452
13	Ladypecas	Child YouTuber	2015/09/01	http://bit.ly/ladypecas	1,830,000	445	61	15	323,508,711
14	Pino y Ares	Child YouTuber	2018/04/16	http://bit.ly/pinoyares	720,000	82	55	11	116,329,389
15	Juguetes MaryVer	Child YouTuber	2010/06/09	http://bit.ly/maryver	250,000	522	42	1	90,538,590
16	Nestlé Spain	Brand	2010/02/15	http://bit.ly/nestlesp	31,500	333	66	4	86,326,294
17	Casa Tarradellas	Brand	2011/06/21	http://bit.ly/casatarradellas	22,400	175	37	2	38,685,413
18	Grefusa	Brand	2012/08/31	http://bit.ly/grefusayt	22,300	68	7	4	11,032,332
19	Nocilla	Brand	2012/02/09	http://bit.ly/nocillayt	14,400	24	9	8	10,650,427
20	Dino Aventuras Danonino	Brand	2016/04/19	http://bit.ly/danoninoyt	11,500	27	2	2	6,738,653
21	The Phoskiters by Phoskitos	Brand	2018/03/09	http://bit.ly/phoskitosyt	4,400	98	37	37	5,657,407
22	Nesquik Spain	Brand	2008/08/07	http://bit.ly/nesquiksp	3,900	16	6	4	4,992,384
23	Kellogg´s Spain	Brand	2016/01/27	http://bit.ly/kelloggs-sp	460	16	6	4	4,938,637
24	ColaCao	Brand	2007/06/25	http://bit.ly/colacaoyt	8,150	203	13	8	4,685,506
25	Hero Spain	Brand	2013/03/11	http://bit.ly/hero-sp-yt	928	86	15	1	2,265,146
26	Adams Foods	Brand	2015/07/10	http://bit.ly/adamfoods	2,570	25	1	1	1,891,355
27	Dulcesol	Brand	2015/10/07	http://bit.ly/dulcesol	653	87	25	2	831,662
28	Galletas Gullón	Brand	2017/05/30	http://bit.ly/galletasgullon	389	23	14	5	165,638
							1,396	304	

Source: SocialBlade and YouTube (2019).

Table 2: Matrix of internal congruence between research questions, study dimensions and variables.

Research question	Dimension	Variable
RQ1. Is the presence of food brands in YouTube videos targeting a child audience in line with current advertising legislation and the requirements of good faith and good business practices? Are the associated with the promotion of unhealthy eating and living habits?	Adherence to regulations and ethical standards. Nutrition education and information.	1. Adherence to regulations.
		2. Good faith.
		3. Values conveyed (Rodríguez-Bravo <i>et al.</i> , 2013).
		4. Promotion or presentation of unhealthy eating habits or lifestyles.
		5. Promotion or presentation of sedentary living habits.
		6. Presentation of food or beverage in excessive or disproportionate quantities.
		7. The food is presented in the context of a meal.
		8. In the context of a meal, the food is presented among a variety of foods (varied and balanced diet).
		9. Healthy living habits (varied diet and physical activity) are underplayed.
		10. The product is presented as a substitute for a main meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner).
RQ2. Are the sales pitches of the message in relation to the product clearly identified?	Identification of advertising. Presence of risk.	11. The advertisement is referred to as a program. Type of content (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016) and communication strategy (Costa-Sánchez, 2017). YouTube category
		12. An expression like newsflash is used.
		13. Program parody (acceptable only if it is obvious that the advertisement is only a parody).
		14. The parody uses people who are not the ones who appear in the program in question
		15. It is identified as advertising by auditory and visual means.
RQ3. Does the presentation of the product mislead and/or promote harmless behavior among viewers?	Clarity in the presentation of the product and the language used.	16. Scenes, images or messages appear that encourage the dangerous or inappropriate use of the product advertised.
		17. Encourages children to enter strange places or talk to strangers.
		18. Acquisition of qualities: strength, status, popularity, growth, ability, intelligence.
		19. It is suggested that the product possesses unique characteristics when all similar products possess those characteristics.
		20. Animation and/or cartoons are used.
		21. The animation and cartoons used create unachievable expectations.
		22. The animation and cartoons used exploit children's inability to distinguish fantasy from reality.
		23. Descriptions of gratuitous violence are included.
		24. Excessively aggressive presentations are included.

<p>RQ4. Does the advertising use understandable language?</p>		<p>25. The language is clear.</p>
		<p>26. The information is comprehensible.</p>
		<p>27. Includes highlighted information.</p>
<p>RQ5. What type of pressure selling strategies are used?</p>	<p>Pressure selling.</p>	<p>28. Makes a direct appeal to buy the product advertised.</p>
		<p>29. Encourages children to ask their parents for it.</p>
		<p>30. Encourages children to persuade others to buy it.</p>
		<p>31. Urges viewers to obtain the product advertised.</p>
		<p>32. Suggests immediacy, exclusivity and/or prestige.</p>
		<p>33. Leads to greater social acceptance.</p>
		<p>34. Suggests that not acquiring or consuming the product will result in rejection.</p>
	<p>Promotions, giveaways, competitions and children's clubs.</p>	<p>35. Features promotions, giveaways, competitions, children's clubs, collectables and/or prizes.</p>
		<p>36. The promotion conveys both the commercial incentive and the product advertised.</p>
		<p>37. The promotion conditions are understandable and expressed simply and clearly.</p>
		<p>38. Advertising giveaways generate unrealistic expectations about the chances of winning or about the prize being offered.</p>
		<p>39. The prizes are indicated clearly.</p>
		<p>40. Misleads about the "chances" of receiving a prize.</p>
		<p>41. The prizes awarded are appropriate for this audience.</p>
		<p>42. Interactivity: the child has to do something that involves intentionally joining the club and receiving something in exchange.</p>
		<p>43. Continuity: an ongoing relationship is required between the club and the child member, based for example on newsletters or regular activities.</p>
		<p>44. Exclusivity: The activities or benefits derived from club membership are exclusive to members and not the mere result of purchasing a particular product.</p>
<p>RQ6. Is the promotion of the product supported by characters and/or programs?</p>	<p>Support and promotion through characters and programs.</p>	<p>45. Child program presenters appear.</p>
		<p>46. Real characters familiar to child audiences appear.</p>
		<p>47. Fictional characters popular with child audiences appear.</p>
		<p>48. Images from children's programs are shown in which direct reference to the product is made.</p>

		49. Images or voices of popular characters are used to endorse the product.
RQ7. Does the advertising offer a comparative presentation of the product?	Comparative presentations.	50. Fictional characters have been created for advertising purposes; they are associated with the product and recognized only for their participation in the product.
		51. Famous figures appear promoting healthy habits or physical activity.
		52. They are “telepromotions”.
		53. Comparative presentations are offered.
		54. They are based on real advantages.
		55. Comparative nutrition claims.
		56. Healthy properties.
		57. Clarity of comparison.

Source: Own elaboration.

3. Results

RQ1. Is the presence of food brands in YouTube videos targeting a child audience in line with current advertising legislation and the requirements of good faith and good business practices? Are they associated with the promotion of unhealthy eating and living habits?

All 211 videos analyzed adhere to the principles of current regulations. However, in the sample of YouTubers, as will be discussed below, the commercial nature of the videos is not always indicated and in most cases it cannot be determined whether the presence of food brands is due solely to the desire to tell a story about everyday life and vest it with realism or whether it is a form of marketing in return for some form of compensation paid by the brand. In the latter case, a notice about the presence of product placement should also be included, considering that many videos also include brands from other sectors such as *toys or fashion products, in a manner similar to that indicated in the regulations for product placement in audiovisual media.*

The entire sample also complies with the principle of good faith, as all the videos meet the requirements of fair dealing and good business practices.

Based on the classification of values proposed by Rodríguez-Bravo *et al.* (2013), the value repeated most in the total sample is wellbeing, in 90.5% of the videos (n=191). In fact, in the YouTuber subsample, except for 2 videos that promote effort, all the videos appeal to this value, taking into account that it includes content related to entertainment, enjoyment, health and sport. Although wellbeing appears in 78% of the food brand videos (n=64), there is a wider variety of values in this subsample: cooperation (4), family (3), health (3), education (2), progress (2), respect (2), friendship (1), and independence (1).

Table 3 shows the results of variables related to nutrition information and education. As can be seen, failure to comply with these points is more common in the subsample of child YouTuber videos. 22.3% of the videos promote or present unhealthy eating habits or lifestyles (n=47). All but one of these videos are by child YouTubers, which means that 35.7% of this subsample includes unhealthy eating habits or lifestyles.

Table 3: Nutrition education and information.

Nutrition education and information	YouTuber subsample		Brand subsample		TOTAL	
The food is not presented in the context of a meal.	101	78.3%	73	89.0%	174	82.5%
Promotes or depicts unhealthy eating habits or lifestyles.	46	35.7%	1	1.2%	47	22.3%
The food or beverage is shown in excessive quantities.	30	23.3%	4	4.9%	34	16.1%
In the context of a meal, the food or beverage is not shown accompanied by a reasonable variety of foods.	16	12.4%	4	4.9%	20	9.5%
The food or beverage is presented as a substitute for one of the three main meals.	8	6.2%	1	1.2%	9	4.3%
Underplays the importance of healthy eating habits.	4	3.1%	0	0.0%	4	1.9%
Promotes sedentary living habits.	1	0.8%	1	1.2%	2	0.9%

Source: Own elaboration based on PAOS YouTube data.

The promotion of sedentary living habits is rare: it was identified in one video in each subsample (0.9% of the total sample). The food or beverage is shown in excessive quantities in 16.1% of the sample, although this percentage is higher (23.3%) in the child YouTuber videos. Only in the question related to the presence of the food or beverage in the context of a meal is the percentage of cases in the food brand subsample higher: 89% (n=73) do not contextualize consumption of the product, while in the child YouTuber videos this contextualization is absent in 78.3% (n=101). However, out of the 28 child YouTuber videos and 9 food brand videos that present the product in the context of a meal, it is more likely to be shown accompanied by a reasonable variety of foods in the food brand videos (5 videos, or 55.5% of videos that present the product in the context of a meal) than in the YouTuber videos (12 videos, or 42.9%). 9.5% of the whole sample do not present the food in the context of a meal or, if they do, they do not accompany it with a reasonable variety of foods in order to promote the idea of its consumption as part of a varied and balanced diet.

1.9% of the videos (n=4) underplay the importance of healthy living habits and 4.3% present the food or beverage as a substitute for one of the three main meals of the day. Both these values are higher in the child YouTuber subsample: 3.1% and 6.2%, respectively.

One example of the promotion of excessive quantities are the challenges to throw a dart at a map with logos of different fashion and food establishments. As Clodett puts it on her channel El mundo de Clodett: “I can eat whatever I want from McDonald’s!”¹. The challenges related to big versus small sweets or real versus chocolate candies also promote excessive calorie intakes: “I really feel like eating chocolate...” (Jugando con Aby)². Figure 1 shows examples of the promotion of unhealthy living habits.

Figure 1: Promotion of unhealthy living habits on Divertiguay.



Source: YouTube (<http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores186> and <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores196>)

RQ2. Are the sales pitches of the message in relation to the product clearly identified?

In no case is the video content referred to as a program. With the exception of the videos on the Phoskiters by Phoskitos channel, the videos on the food brand channels are not sequential, i.e., they do not tell stories that connect from one video to the next, particularly because the largest proportion of videos (64% of this subsample, or n=53) are advertising spots offering an added bonus (gifts, merchandising, competitions, collectables, etc.). This is followed by videos with product demonstrations (11), corporate social responsibility (9) and company news (3). The strategy of the Phoskiters by Phoskitos involves a hybrid format (Phoskitos is looking for a YouTuber) featuring a youth who imitates the style of real YouTubers without much success as he behaves unnaturally and overacts. The videos on this channel contain challenges (the product does not appear) based on gifts that come in the product pack (tazos, finger skates, animal figures, etc.) and they encourage viewers to post their own videos showing them taking the challenge and adding a hashtag to obtain prizes from the brand.

¹ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores3>.

² <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores62>.

According to the classification proposed by Costa-Sánchez (2017), all the child YouTuber videos fall into the category of experience/testimony of child influencers/customers. Although there is no reference in this subsample to the content being a program, there are frequent internal references to previous videos that YouTubers have posted or videos they will be releasing in the future, which does suggest some sequentiality. For example, in the videos for the “eating food of one color” challenge, YouTubers like Aby (Jugando con Aby) and Daniela (Divertiguay) and their parents encourage followers to watch the challenges of this type posted previously or to post in the comments section what color they would like the YouTubers to eat for 24 hours. The types of YouTuber challenges that tend to include food brands are varied: “*pause challenge*”; “*24-hour challenge*”; “*other YouTubers choose my food*”; “*24 hours eating food of one color*”; “*truth versus lie with food*”; “*if you spell it, I’ll buy it for you*”; “*throwing a dart and buying whatever it lands on*”; “*morning, afternoon or night-time routine*”; and “*ordering the same thing as the last customer*”. The case of Ladypecas and the Crazy Haacks is unique because Daniela in Ladypecas is one of three siblings on the Crazy Haacks channel, and thus there are constant references on both channels to content on the other channel. YouTubers also sometimes appear on the channels of other YouTubers, as in the case of the Ladypecas video “*¡YOUTUBERS deciden mi COMIDA por 24 horas (I)! TODO sale MAL*” (“YouTubers choose my food for 24 hours! Everything goes wrong”).

There is one category that appears that is not considered by Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz (2016): the parties that YouTubers organize for birthdays, summer, etc. The 3 unboxing videos involve unboxing Christmas and birthday presents. Halloween inspires YouTubers to tell stories while showing or eating candy and with a single brand (Galletas Gullón) showing themed recipes.

None of the videos use an expression like “newsflash” or any parody of a program. The identification of advertising by auditory or visual means was found in 56.9% of the sample (n=120), in the form of a notice about the inclusion of commercial content, appearing as a caption. While 100% of the videos in the food brand subsample include this notice, in the child YouTuber subsample it appears in only 29.5% (n=38) despite the fact that all the videos feature brands visually, mentioned verbally and/or included in the video title, including brands from outside the food sector.

The most widely used category for classification of the videos is entertainment, in 91% of cases (n=192). All the child YouTuber videos are classified this way. The food brand videos also include the following categories: people and blogs (5 cases); video games (4); film and animation (4); how to and style (3); and science and technology (3).

RQ3. Does the presentation of the product mislead and/or promote harmless behaviour among viewers?

In no case are children encouraged to enter strange places or talk to strangers, but scenes, images or messages do appear that encourage the dangerous or inappropriate use of the product advertised in 2 videos (0.9%), on the child YouTuber channels *Juega con Adri* and *TeamNico*. On the *Juega con Adri* channel, Adri’s family often bathe in products like the chocolate spread Nutella or the soft drink Fanta, and they take on extreme challenges like “don’t choose the wrong drink or box” with mixtures of drinks or foods. In the video with the title “*Llenamos mi bañera de M&M Chocolate*” (“We Fill My Bathtub with chocolate M&Ms”),⁴ which has received more than 5.9 million views, the scenes encourage a dangerous use of the product, as the product in question is a slippery chocolate candy. Although the M&M brand is mentioned in the title, the candies are actually Pintarolas, distributed by Mercadona’s Hacendado brand, and no notice is inserted about the inclusion of commercial content.

³ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores173>.

⁴ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores44>.

The title of the TeamNico video “*RETOS EXTREMOS MENTOS VS COCA COLA*” (“Extreme Challenges: Mentos vs. Coca-Cola”)⁵ includes a warning about the risky nature of the experiment, which involves mixing baking soda and Mentos candy mints with Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Sprite.

In general, it can be concluded that the textual, auditory and visual presentations do not mislead viewers about the characteristics of the product advertised. Proof of this is that none of the videos attribute unique characteristics to the product when similar products possess those same characteristics, and there are no descriptions of gratuitous violence or excessively aggressive presentations.

We only found animation in 2 videos (0.9%), both in the food brand subsample, although neither of these create unachievable expectations or exploit children’s inability to distinguish fantasy from reality.

The acquisition of qualities such as strength, status, popularity, growth, ability and intelligence was identified in 3.8% of the total sample (n=8): 5 in the child YouTuber subsample and 3 in the food brand subsample (brands Grefusa and ColaCao). In the first subsample there are references to strength (3 videos), ability and intelligence, while in the second all 3 videos refer to ability. In a promotion for the Laughing Cow brand in a video on the YouTuber channel El mundo de Clodett (which is identified as a promotion), when Clodett comes up with an idea while eating the brand’s bread sticks with cheese, she claims that “you can tell that the food is starting to reach my brain”⁶, thus alluding to the acquisition of intelligence.

The channel Mikeltube features a collaboration with Actimel to advertise the limited edition of the product celebrating the launch of the final film in the *Star Wars* saga, in which the story associates the product with the acquisition of strength and ability (“*De qué lado estás? STAR WARS Actimel*”⁷), as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Acquisition of strength and ability with Actimel on Mikeltube.



Source: YouTube (<http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores144>).

RQ4. Does the advertising use understandable language?

The content posted on YouTube both by food brands and by child YouTubers targeting a child audience is characterized by the use of clear language, in 98.6% of the videos (n=208), and by the comprehensibility of the information included, in 97.2% of the videos (n=205). These two features apply to 100% of the child YouTuber subsample.

42.7% of the sample (n=90) includes highlighted information, although this feature is more common among food brand videos (95.1%), the majority of which have a message of a predominantly commercial nature based on the product. In the case of the child YouTuber videos, highlighted information has been defined as the communication of collaborations and/or sponsorships with food brands, which occurs in 9.3% of the subsample (n=12).

⁵ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores100>.

⁶ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores7>.

⁷ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores144>.

RQ5. What type of pressure selling strategies are used?

We identified 17 videos (8.1%) that make use of pressure selling strategies, 13 in child YouTuber videos and 4 in food brand videos. In 7% of child YouTuber videos (n=9) a direct appeal is made to buy the product advertised. The YouTubers spontaneously encourage their followers to buy the product: Pino and Ares, for example, assert that “you’ve got to have Coca-Cola” and “I recommend that you try Lollipop” in a video with no commercial content notice⁸.

One video on the Divertiguay channel encourages viewers to persuade others to buy the product and 3 videos urge viewers to obtain it (2.3% of this subsample). In two of these cases –Divertiguay with the Laughing Cow brand and Jugando con Aby with Donettes– the YouTubers are shown displaying the product and the product placement simulates a traditional advertisement, with visual presence, verbal mention and even inclusion of the brand name in the title in the second case. In the food brand subsample, viewers are urged to obtain the product advertised in 3 videos (3.7% of this subsample), all by the brand Grefusa, and in one of these videos exclusivity is also suggested.

Promotions, giveaways, competitions and/or clubs appear in 27.5% of the sample (n=58), although the percentage in the child YouTuber subsample is only 2.3% (n=3) while among food brands it is 67.1% (n=55). All three cases in the YouTuber subsample are prizes: Two on the channels Jugando con Aby and Mikeltube in collaboration with Donettes, and the third on The Crazy Haacks channel with Actimel. In all 3 videos the product is shown and the prizes are indicated clearly, and no unrealistic expectations are created about the chances of winning or about the prize that could be won, although the collaborations with the Donettes pastry brand contain some problematic issues: in the Mikeltube video the promotion conditions are not stated simply and clearly and it is misleading in relation to the chances of winning a prize. Moreover, the prize offered in the promotion, in both the Mikeltube and the Jugando con Aby video, is not very suitable for a child audience (a trip to the Mayan Riviera).

Among the 55 promotions found in the food brand videos, prizes are offered in 51 of the videos (62.2% of this subsample), competitions in 35 (42.7%) and collectables in 13 (15.9%). We found a number of aspects that could do with improvement:

- in 37 videos (17.5% of the total sample and 45.1% of this subsample) the product advertised is not clearly shown.
- in 41 videos (19.4% of the total sample and 50% of this subsample) the essential conditions of the promotion are not stated simply and clearly.
- in 38 videos (18% of the total sample and 46.3% of this subsample) unrealistic expectations are created about the chances of winning or about the prize being offered.
- in 43 videos (20.4% of the total sample and 52.4% of this subsample) the prize is not clearly indicated.

RQ6. Is the promotion of the product supported by characters and/or programs?

Real figures familiar to child audiences appear in 100% of the child YouTuber videos, as the YouTubers themselves have child followers who feel they can identify with them. In this subsample no other variables related to support and promotion through characters and programs were identified.

In the case of the food brand videos, 45.1% (n=37) feature real figures familiar to child audiences, making for a percentage in the total sample of 78.7% (n=166). Only two food brand videos feature fictional characters popular with child audiences, and one video in this same subsample shows images of children’s programs with direct reference to the product. Fictional characters created for advertising purposes were identified in five videos in this subsample, and one video features famous characters promoting healthy habits. None of the videos in the sample were classified as “telepromotions”.

⁸ <http://bit.ly/YouTubersmenores91>.

RQ7. Does the advertising offer a comparative presentation of the product?

We found only one case of a comparative presentation of the product in the entire sample, in the video “¿Cómo son vuestros desayunos en familia?” (“What are your family breakfasts like?”)⁹ by the Kellogg’s Spain brand, although it is a clear comparison promoting healthy habits and based on actual advantages and nutritional properties.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although examples of persuasive communication (deliberate and controlled by the advertiser) were identified in the samples analyzed, brand placements attempt to project a non-commercial appearance in order to convey an image of credibility to the audience. The narrative dimension of content posted on YouTube by brands and child YouTubers is intermingled with the corporate dimension, making it practically impossible for viewers to distinguish between the two.

There is clarity in the presentation of the product and the language used, comparative presentations are absent and the use of strategies that constitute pressure selling is not excessive among child YouTubers. However, in the dimension of nutrition education and information, we have identified the promotion of unhealthy eating habits and obesogenic practices that run counter to existing regulations.

The findings related to the dimension of adherence to advertising regulations and ethical standards reveal that, as is often the case in the advertising industry, legal and ethical regulation need to catch up with current practices. The lack of regulations related to the dissemination of hybrid images (Balasubramanian, 1994) on digital platforms means that every video posted, regardless of who posts it, has a novel approach. Child YouTubers in particular are posting content that exploits this situation without an ethical strategy sensitive to their target audience, underscoring the urgent need to adapt existing legal and ethical standards to these new formulas of commercial communication.

Initiatives in this regard are beginning to emerge. We highlight the principles of IPG Mediabrands: promote respect, protect people, diverse and representative, data collection and use, children’s wellbeing, no hate speech, no misinformation / disinformation, enforce policy, advertising transparency, accountability. IPG Mediabrands introduces media responsibility principles to improve brand safety & brand responsibility in advertising.

The limitations of this study include its restriction to content produced in 2019 and, especially, the small size of the sample (211 videos). Future research could expand the object of study to include other types of YouTube channels that also target the child population, based on the categorization proposed in this article, to identify the presence of food brands in each type.

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⁹ <https://bit.ly/kelloggs-yt>.

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