

Food Marketing Communications and Consumer Behavior

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered our relationship with food – what we’re eating (Sozzi, 2021), where we’re eating (Forman, 2021), why we’re eating the way we are (O’Connor, 2020), and even when we are eating (Mull, 2021). With life outside our homes having been in short supply for many since 2020, it is no surprise that in the absence of our favourite restaurants, cafes, or fast-food joints, people have increasingly turned to food media content to get their culinary fix.

The food marketing communications landscape continues to rapidly evolve. For instance, over four billion people now use social media around the world with the average user spending approximately 2.5 hours on social media every day (Hootsuite, 2021). On these platforms, people are inundated with visual displays of food, with over 400 million posts using “#food” and 250 million posts using “#foodporn” on Instagram alone (Instagram, 2021). BuzzFeed’s *Tasty* is one of the most popular pages on Facebook with over 100-million followers and over two billion views per month (Tubular, 2020). Recent evidence suggests that social media platforms help glorify the preparation and consumption of unhealthy food. For instance, people are more likely to like and share unhealthy food media content (Pancer et al., 2021) in an environment where algorithms are designed to promote content that receives more engagement (Gillespie, 2016; Zulli, 2018), further propagating its virality. Additionally, social media ads for unhealthy food have also been shown to evoke more positive responses than healthy food – they are more likely to be recalled, recognized, viewed longer, and shared (Murphy et al., 2020).

An emerging concern is the influence of food marketing and media exposure on obesity, a chronic disease afflicting almost two billion people globally in which excess body fat impairs health, increases the risk of long-term medical issues, and shortens lifespan (Wharton et al., 2020). While multiple genetic, behavioural, and environmental factors influence obesity, the fundamental cause is an imbalance of calories consumed and calories expended (World Health Organization, 2021). In most cases, obesity arises from living in an environment that encourages and glorifies the plentiful consumption of food, especially food rich in energy (e.g., fats, oils, sugars, and starches), alongside low levels of physical activity – these are

known as 'obesogenic' environments (World Obesity Federation, 2021). Food marketing communications have been a major contributor to high rates of obesity and diet-related disease among children (Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020a). Beyond more traditional channels, marketers have also been shifting their ad spending to social media, spending billions on Facebook and YouTube ads annually (Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020b), which are platforms with mechanisms designed to boost the sharing of content.

Given the ubiquity of food marketing communications and the propagation of unhealthy food media in these channels, the aim of this special issue is to help better understand the characteristics of food marketing communications that impact consumer behavior. Conceptual, methodological, qualitative, or quantitative contributions that offer insight into this domain are welcome. Our hope is that this special issue will also have impact on practice, informing content producers looking to tailor media towards viewer preferences, advertisers seeking to increase impact, and health advocates and policy makers interested helping consumers make better food choices.

Submissions may focus on topics including (but not limited to) the following:

- What factors influence and drive consumers to consume and engage with food marketing communications?
- What is the typology of social media strategies for food stakeholders (e.g., restaurants, food brands, food media content producers, food suppliers, etc.)?
- What strategies are most effective for food stakeholders (e.g., restaurants, food brands, food media content producers, food suppliers, etc.) to enhance healthy consumption?
- How does exposure to food marketing communications influence actual eating choices and habits?
- How does the ability to post and share food content online influence actual eating choices and habits?
- What policies and regulations should be put in place on food marketing communications to promote healthier consumption?
- How do food marketing communications shape the relationship between children and their caregivers?
- What role can food marketing communications play in the fight against obesity?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic altered how people engage and respond to food marketing communications?

- What role does personality play in how people engage with food marketing communications?
- How do the structural differences between various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Reddit) influence how consumers respond to food media?
- To what extent do social media platform algorithms influence the type of food media content people are exposed to?
- What policies and protection measures need to be implemented regarding food marketing communications and controlled substances (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, prescription drugs)?
- What groups are most vulnerable to having food marketing communications influence their behavior?
- What are the roles of product packaging and display on consumer overconsumption or healthy eating?
- What are the most common types of misinformation surrounding food that exist and what is the role of food marketing communications in propagating or mitigating this?

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