



Mothers and food advertising directed at children: perceptions and experiences

Las madres y la publicidad de alimentos dirigida a niños y niñas: percepciones y experiencias

Luciana Castronuovo¹, Patricia Gutkowski², Victoria Tiscornia³, Lorena Allemandi⁴

¹PhD in Social Sciences. Researcher, Fundación InterAmericana del Corazón Argentina (FIC), Argentina.



²Master's Degree in Communication Management of Organizations, in progress. Director of the Communication Area, Fundación InterAmericana del Corazón Argentina (FIC), Argentina.



³Master's Degree in Human Nutrition, in progress. Researcher, Fundación InterAmericana del Corazón Argentina (FIC), Argentina.



⁴Master's Degree in Public Health, in progress. Director of the Nutrition Area, Fundación InterAmericana del Corazón Argentina (FIC), Argentina.



ABSTRACT The objective of this study is to analyze how food advertising is perceived by mothers from different socioeconomic sectors of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Between May and November 2015, eight focus groups were conducted with the participation of 49 mothers of different education levels living in the study area. The results show how the purchasing decisions of mothers are influenced by the requests of their children, which are in turn prompted by food advertising and promotion. The study also shows how food advertising and promotion are combined with other environmental factors (greater supply of food products, "more demanding" children) that affect the decision-making process of mothers regarding their children's nutrition and foster the consumption of certain unhealthy products. This situation was observed in all the focus groups, without differences among education levels.

KEY WORDS Food Advertising; Food Promotion; Decision Making; Focus Groups; Argentina.

RESUMEN El objetivo de la investigación es analizar cómo las publicidades de alimentos son percibidas por madres de distintos sectores socioeconómicos del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires (AMBA), Argentina. Entre mayo y noviembre de 2015, se realizaron ocho grupos focales en los que participaron un total de 49 madres de la región del AMBA, con distinto nivel educativo. La investigación ha dado cuenta de cómo las decisiones de compra de las madres son afectadas por los pedidos de los niños y niñas impulsados por la publicidad y las promociones. También mostró cómo estas publicidades y promociones se combinan con otros elementos del ambiente (mayor oferta de productos, niños "más demandantes") que afectan el proceso de toma de decisiones de las madres respecto a la alimentación de sus hijos y permiten instalar el consumo de determinados productos no saludables. Esta situación se ha observado en el conjunto de madres, sin diferir según el nivel educativo alcanzado.

PALABRAS CLAVES Publicidad de Alimentos; Promoción de Alimentos; Toma de Decisiones; Grupos Focales; Argentina.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) considers that childhood overweight and obesity constitute one of the main public health problems of the 21st century. The WHO informed that globally in the year 2010 an estimated 42 million children under the age of five years were overweight or obese, out of whom almost 35 million lived in developing countries.⁽¹⁾

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), over the last several years a process known as the “double burden of malnutrition” has emerged, which has resulted in the coexistence of childhood undernutrition and a considerable increase in the prevalence of obesity.⁽²⁾ This global growth of the overweight and obesity rates in children is due to multiple factors: the change in consumption patterns that led to an increased intake of industrialized food low in nutritional value, rich in fat, sugars and salt; scarce accessibility to foods with a high nutritional quality, such as fruits and vegetables; and our increasingly sedentary lifestyles.⁽³⁾

In Argentina, as stated by the latest Global School-Based Student Health Survey⁽⁴⁾ conducted in the country and targeted at adolescents aged 13 to 15 years, overweight rates increased from 24.5% to 28.6%, whereas obesity rates shifted from 4.4% to 5.9% as compared to the data revealed by the same survey conducted five years earlier. Furthermore, with respect to nutrition habits, the survey showed that only 17.6% of the students surveyed consumed five daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and 48.1% consumed two or more sugary drinks per day.

Overweight or obese children have a greater risk of suffering from non-communicable diseases.^(5,6) Consequently, they have a stronger probability of death and premature disability in adulthood. Among the main consequences resulting from obesity in childhood and in adolescence, we could mention increased risk factors related to cardiovascular diseases (such as high cholesterol

and hypertension)⁽⁶⁾ and a greater risk of suffering from sleep apneas, problems involving the locomotor system as well as social and psychological problems.^(7,8)

There is evidence indicating that food advertising has an effect on children's likes and dislikes, their purchasing behavior and consumption patterns. At the same time, there are research studies that prove an association between the frequency of exposure to unhealthy food advertising on television and the consumption of the foods being advertised.⁽⁹⁾ Research studies conducted in Argentina highlight that the advertised foods targeted at children have, in most of the cases, low nutritional quality.⁽¹⁰⁾

There are several reasons that explain the relationship between exposure to advertising and overweight/obesity, among which we may find an increased consumption of the products being advertised and the children's influence on purchase decisions made by their mothers.⁽¹¹⁾

It is important to examine the role of mothers when mediating their children's food consumption since they are the main socializing agents when it comes to nutrition habits and preferences. Similarly, it is mothers that act as guardians, since they participate in the food selection process and eventually decide what to buy or not buy.⁽¹²⁾ Eating is understood as a socially engaged practice that includes standardized practices and shared knowledge.⁽¹³⁾ The decision-making process implied in a family's nutrition planning is considered a complex process where biological, ecological and demographic, political, social and cultural factors operate.⁽¹⁴⁾

At present, those practices linked to nutrition are immersed in a social system, in which the market logic is the governing principle.⁽¹⁵⁾ If we understand eating to be a social practice that is developed in a certain historic environment, we are bound to wonder about the impact of advertising upon experiences and perceptions of mothers, who play a crucial role in purchasing decisions when buying foods to be consumed and in terms of healthy habits that are developed at home.^(16,17)

In this study, the concept of advertising will be defined as “any kind of paid, non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor,” and promotion will be defined as “short-term incentives that encourage the purchase or sale of a product or service in particular.”⁽¹⁸⁾

This study is part of a multi-component investigation on food advertising directed at children in Argentina and is aimed at promoting policies to reduce childhood obesity. The investigation has four components: a) an analysis of the current regulatory framework, which indicates the main actors involved in the regulation of food advertising and analyzes potential obstacles, challenges and facilitators in the promotion of regulatory changes in Argentina;⁽¹⁹⁾ b) a quantitative analysis of the number and characteristics of food advertisements aimed at children in Argentine television;⁽¹⁰⁾ and c) a nutritional analysis of the foods advertised.⁽¹⁰⁾ This work presents the results of the fourth component of the research, whose objective is to analyze how food advertising directed at children is perceived by mothers of different education levels, highlighting how advertising influences the purchasing requests from their children and the strategies that these mothers develop to respond to those requests. Furthermore, an analysis is presented of how food advertising is combined with other environmental elements that affect the decision-making process in relation to their children’s nutrition and help to install a particular consumption of unhealthy products. With this study we will provide information to understand how advertising and promotion of food directed at children affect the purchasing decisions of their mothers when it comes to their children’s nutrition, identifying a number of attitudes based on their education level. In addition, this article is intended to identify other factors that have an impact on this decision-making process and to provide information for the regulation of food advertising targeted at children.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is a descriptive cross-sectional study that uses a qualitative approach.

The population studied consisted of mothers of children aged 5 to 13 years. The incorporation of mothers was prioritized because evidence has shown the important role they have in the organization of household nutrition.^(20,21) The age group of 5 to 13 years was considered because it includes children that have already developed their speech abilities, therefore they can verbally ask their parents for foods and, additionally, this age range coincides with the primary schooling education in Argentina. Likewise, childhood was defined in demographic terms, as the period up until the age of 14 years.⁽²²⁾ In order to avoid bias, mothers who are healthcare professionals (doctors, nutritionists) were excluded from this study and so were professional mothers working in nutritional-related fields. We selected mothers of different educational levels, since parents’ education level constitutes a socioeconomic level proxy,⁽²³⁾ and is also associated with child nutritional status.⁽²⁴⁾ The focus groups were conducted between July and November 2015. All the mothers included in the study resided in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA) [Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires], a geographic area that comprises the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, as well as 34 other departments located in the province of Buenos Aires.

The Committee of Ethics in Research Protocols (CEPI) [Comité de Ética en Protocolos de Investigación] within the *Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires* evaluated and approved this study (approval code: 2115). All the participants signed an informed consent form. Data confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Fictitious names will be used to identify the participants.

Focus groups were used as the data collection technique. The focus group technique is framed within qualitative collection techniques and is defined as a type of group interview in which a small number of individuals come together in order to discuss one

(or more) topics of interest, in this case, the importance that food advertising has in the decision-making process with respect to what they feed their children. The participants of the groups were recruited using the mechanism of snowball sampling and through school authorities. We designed an interview guide with a few questions, which were developed by the research team on the basis of the literature review carried out in relation to topic in question and the objectives of this research study. In order to analyze the clarity, comprehension and relevance of the questions, a pilot study was carried out with a focus group consisting of four parents of children aged 5 to 12 years. The pilot study was useful in answering the following questions: Is the meaning of the question clear? Do the questions use terminology that is easily understood by the participants? Do the questions inquire only about one topic at a time? Do the questions have some type of bias or lead to a certain answer? After conducting this focus group, the data collection tool was adjusted.

The focus groups, conducted between May and November 2015, were led by two professionals of the research team and lasted almost one hour. The central aspects that the interviews explored were: the importance of advertising in the requests from children and the answers given by their mothers (such as: What foods do children request? Do mothers agree to their wishes? Why do children request these products?); perceptions related to the contents of advertisements (What food advertisements do you remember? Which ones are more attractive to children? What type of food do you believe is being advertised?); perceptions related to children's nutrition (What do you think children eat at present? What factors contribute to what children eat?). In addition, during the focus group an advertisement was shown and a discussion was held about the product being promoted and the advertising technique used. During the development of the focus groups, we were aware of a possible limitation of this data collection tool linked to the "theoretical" answer. In an artificial situation like the one in which data collection is developed, the interviewees

may adopt an equally artificial posture, in this case the one of a mother worried by the type of foods being advertised. When moderating the group, efforts were made to avoid these types of answers and, in order to prevent this social desirability bias, mothers were interviewed not so much based on their own experience but rather as "representatives" of a population group.

The data collected from the focus groups was recorded and transcribed verbatim and analyzed along with the notes taken by the two researchers present in the groups. To analyze the data, we established codes which came up inductively during the encoding process, and later grouped them into dimensions and categories. As regards data analysis, the software used was Atlas.ti 7.0.77. When analyzing the data, we took into account the particular features of the focus groups as well as the conversation environment in which we received the comments in order to spot ambiguities, inconsistencies and themes that were perceived with more or less attention. The preliminary data encoding was conducted by a researcher and was then shared with another team member. On the basis of this discussion the codes, the themes identified and the definitions adopted were reviewed. In addition, the consensus obtained among the different opinions of the interviewees and the existing differences among the mothers of different education levels were identified during the analysis.

RESULTS

Eight focus groups were conducted with a total participation of 49 mothers with different education levels who had at least one son or daughter aged 5 to 13 years (Table 1). The inductive approach for data analysis served to identify three important themes: 1) perception of the effects of advertising: requests and strategies to respond to them; 2) perception of the environment's influence when selecting foods; and 3) perception of "inevitable" consumption.

Table 1. Number and characteristics of the participants in the focus groups. Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2015.

Group	Number	Average age	Education level
Focus group 1	5	36,4	Incomplete secondary education
Focus group 2	4	28,7	Incomplete secondary education
Focus group 8	5	28,6	Incomplete secondary education
Focus group 3	12	38,0	Completed secondary education
Focus group 6	4	40,2	Completed secondary education
Focus group 4	7	41,0	Completed secondary education
Focus group 5	7	35,1	Completed university degree
Focus group 7	5	36,0	Completed university degree

Source: own elaboration.

Perception of the effects of advertising: strategies for responding to children's requests

The requests

While the different groups were being conducted, there was consensus about the influence of advertising over children's purchasing desires and requests. Although at the beginning of the focus group, when inquiring about the children's requests in general, the importance of advertising and promotion is not clearly highlighted, as the conversation progresses this theme comes up recurrently within the different groups and different experiences are shared that account for the influence of advertising over such requests. During the discussion participants identify that their children's requests are motivated not only by the flavor of the product ("they ask for a product because they like it"), but mainly by the advertisement, since many times they request products that they have not tried before.

Children want what they see on TV, that's what catches their attention. (Fernanda, focus group 3)

Mothers perceive their children as active requesters of different kinds of foods. Going to a supermarket or getting out of school are the situations where these requests may be mostly observed. Mothers indicate that their children become insistent and repeat "buy me this, buy me this, buy me this," especially in the case of younger children (approximately 5 years old).

I notice this with my youngest children, it never happened to me with my eldest ones. We go to a candy shop and they say: "Buy me this, buy me that." I used to tell my eldest children "there's none left" and when we got home, no one talked about it, ever again. However, with my youngest children it's always "buy me this, buy me this, buy me this." (Elisa, focus group 8)

The participants in the study emphasize that TV advertising has increased over the years and is what "gets the children all worked up." However, children not only ask for the products that they see in TV advertisements but also in advertisements and promotions found in supermarkets and public places. According to the participants, children find themselves "swamped with advertising." One participant highlights how the request for a product is originated by the "toy prize" or the "character." The food itself proves to be something ancillary: consumption is motivated by whatever surrounds the product.

It happens to me, for example, that [...] he stops in front of the shelves of the aisles for potato chips but do you know what really catches his attention? All this advertising stuff, [...] and they are not interested in what is inside the package [...], I mean, what sells is advertising, not the product. (María, focus group 4)

The emergence of characters in advertising or packaging, and gifts and promotions associated with the purchase of a product, are the main reasons that prompt children's requests, according to the mothers in the

study. Although they mention “advertising” in a general way, without making a difference between the marketing channels and techniques used, they consider that advertising techniques that use a “character,” a “figure,” whether a trademark of a particular brand or characters from a movie, to be the most effective in prompting children’s consumption. This aspect was mentioned several times in all the groups conducted.

[Her daughter] eats the yoghurt because it has drawings of Pachorra, which comes with cereals that she didn’t use to like and now she loves because of that (because of Pachorra). (Laura, focus group 5)

Among the main reasons explaining children’s requests for certain products, apart from characters, drawings and promotions, mothers indicate the importance of the message conveyed by the advertisements. Mothers narrate how their children feel compelled by the message associated with the consumption of the product that is being advertised. They also report to be influenced by the message given by advertisements, as the message is not only addressed to children, but, at times, it also speaks to the children’s guardians, when highlighting the nutritious qualities of a given product. This consumption is interrupted when an authorized spokesperson states that the information provided in such an advertisement does not reflect the real quality of the product.

If you didn’t give your kid that product, you were a bad mother because you didn’t care about the health of your kid because you didn’t give him Danonino. The advertisement more or less gave that message. Do you remember? (Lorena, focus group 3)

With respect to the product mentioned in the previous testimony, one of the mothers highlights:

I remember that when they were young my daughters consumed Danonino but because there was this boom about it and growing up better and all that. But then their pediatrician told me “forget about it.” (Luciana, focus group 3)

Similarly, mothers identify the request for specific brands. The recognition by children of certain brand names and their fidelity toward those brands is perceived by mothers as a behavior of their children, but it is also the mothers themselves that favor the purchase of certain brand names over others. Unlike the aspects indicated above, about which there was consensus among all the groups in relation to how characters and promotions prompt the request for certain products, there was no consensus in the groups with respect to brand names: while some mothers comment that they look for certain brands when they do the shopping, others say that they do not consider them to be important and, even if they consume the products advertised, they also decide to replace advertised brands with others with cheaper prices or others that they consider healthier.

Yes, absolutely. I already did that with cereals, I don’t buy cereals, I buy unpackaged cereals, from a health food store. I mean, I don’t buy cereals in a package for my daughter. She might love Nesquik’s little character and that stuff, but she knows those cereals won’t be at home for several reasons, because they have more sugar and also because the other ones are cheaper, that is, they are healthier and cheaper. (Nora, focus group 4)

In the focus groups of mothers with lower education levels, we can observe that they place the emphasis on the importance of the brand name when doing the shopping. These mothers highlight that having access to certain brands is positive and they assume that certain brand names are equivalent to “good.”

Yes, also when you already know the brand you say: "Yes, I know it, it's good, it'll be good no matter the price." (Verónica, focus group 8)

Agreeing to the requests: reasons and strategies

When the children make requests influenced by food advertising, mothers show different attitudes that are linked to setting limits inside the household. The issue of limits goes beyond the foods, and it is connected to "saying no" to children's requests. With respect to the limits established on the consumption of certain foods, they adopt several attitudes ranging from those mothers that impose clear limits and claim not to be influenced by the requests of their children, to those that find it difficult to "say no." "I'm kind of obsessive," "I'm a hopeless case" are different descriptions used by the interviewees to explain their attitudes regarding their children's upbringing, in general, and in connection with food in particular. The different attitudes adopted by the mothers interpose themselves between the children's requests and their own purchasing decisions. The refusal to consume certain products due to their nutritional quality alone was observed in some members of the groups with higher educational levels, especially with respect to sugary drinks and certain foods which are considered "bad" (sausages, hamburgers, etc.).

I'm pretty strict. For example, potato chips, all that stuff, I don't buy that for my kid, nothing like that, on the street. In summer I may buy him an ice cream, those things, it might happen or maybe we know that there's nothing sweet for the night and he tells me: "Come on, let's buy a little chocolate today." (Nora, focus group 4)

Sometimes he's started screaming at me to ask me to buy something [...] in a supermarket. Then, what I don't like or what I try to control is my kid's behavior,

which is not only about food but in general, when he tries to manipulate me and makes a fuss about something. (Graciela, focus group 7)

Mothers perceive that when children have direct contact with the products on the shelves of the aisles in supermarkets or in candy shops, their requests are intensified. In other words, mothers comment that purchasing requests are made more insistently whenever their children have the product in front of them. Faced with these requests, mothers produce different responses that include agreeing to the request so their children can "have a try," refusing to buy the product, or not going to the supermarket with the children to avoid such requests. Mothers admit that they eventually agree to buy certain products when their children become insistent "to prevent a tantrum." The consumption of the product takes place as a response to their children's insistence, especially in supermarkets.

Sometimes we have to go through that experience and confirm they don't like it to then tell them: "Look, you didn't like it, I won't buy it again," then you have the power not to buy that product because what other reason have you got not to buy the product for your kid? You can't just say no without any reason (Ana, focus group 6)

The problem is that otherwise your children bring a tantrum from there [the supermarket] to your house and sometimes I prefer to say "ok, take it" ... (Sarah, focus group 3)

Participants highlight that the consumption of certain foods "is negotiated" and a frequency is established for the ones that are considered healthy. The ones that are negotiated are those products considered "junk food": soft drinks, in some cases, and snacks. Mothers try to negotiate between what that they know ideally children should not consume and what they really can achieve.

In this way, they restrict the consumption of the product, but they do not remove it from the things they buy.

No, I tell him, you've already eaten junk food: you ate some on Monday. No, I tell him, the junk food serving is already covered this week. (Julia, focus group 4)

They always ask me for sweet cookies, when they are drinking milk but I try not to allow it every day ... (Irma, focus group 7)

Buying food or going to fast food restaurants is also used by mothers as a "reward" or "punishment." In this way, the reasons why mothers agree to the requests from their children account for different meanings of eating-related practices and the consumption of certain products that go beyond nutritional issues.

I use them a lot to bribe them [laughter]. To buy those products, just to buy them, no. If I decide to buy them, somehow I have to obtain a benefit out of it. Well, in that case as a reward, otherwise, I don't buy them. I try not to buy them. (Irma, focus group 7)

Okay, they love Shimmy so much, and when I go to the supermarket I tell them: "If you let me do the shopping and you behave well, when we finish we can take one and we go home with that, otherwise, we won't." With that I also have some control over them. (Marta, focus group 7)

Perception of the supply of food products and their consumption: changes over time

Mothers identified different environmental factors which they consider to affect the types of food their children eat and that are combined with the impact of advertising. When compared to other eras, it is highlighted that the present day is characterized by a

"lack of time" and this is related to the consumption of certain types of products (hamburgers, sausages, etc.). In discussions related to food advertising, there is consensus in the different groups about the fact that the foods advertised are "bad" or "not so good" and within this group of foods certain products are clearly identified: sausages, hamburgers and other products which are considered "junk." The reasons for their consumption have to do with "time" and "speed" when cooking them. This consumption occurs partly due to the request from children, but also due to the decision made by their mothers, the ones who select them based on the characteristics informed.

Coordinator: *What would you say are bad foods?*

Fabiola: *Sausages.*

Blanca: *Nuggets.*

Soledad: *Sure, I think that candies and all that stuff.*

Ana: *I don't know whether they're "bad" or "not so good." No good at least.*

Blanca: *There are kids that ...*

Fabiola: *At home we don't buy sausages ... either sausages or nuggets. Or only every once in a while, for a birthday celebration, an event for a lot of children, and when they go home we have the bag left over. But they don't like nuggets, sausages and hamburgers so much either.*

Soledad: *I don't buy hamburgers either, to me hamburgers are not safe. But, honestly, I think the others are safe ... They're not our usual diet but they're useful to get by.*

Ana: *Yes, I also have nuggets just in case.*

Soledad: *I think I've become a hopeless case.*

Blanca: *I always have nuggets in the fridge for my eldest son because he usually comes home with two or three friends and ... (Focus group 5)*

Participants highlight that, at present, there is a greater supply and variety of food products. However, the perception of this situation is not homogeneous in all the groups. Mothers of higher educational levels are

aware and concerned about the increase in the supply of foods, while mothers of lower educational levels view this greater supply of food products positively. This is due to the possibility of having access to products which in the past were not available to them.

[In the past] you only had Manon and nothing else, but now there is a sort of variety. I mean, you also get the packaging so it can be ... I mean, carried by your children or you just pop it in their backpacks and they fit exactly in the space provided in the backpack. I think that we didn't have this variety in our childhood. The stimuli now is much stronger, with TV and everything ... (Nora, focus group 4)

My husband, for example, was poorer than me and he says that he only used to eat at night when his mother, who worked all day long, returned home, and he sometimes tells our girls, Delfina: "You have to care about and value what we give you because I remember that we couldn't drink a single Coca Cola." So you sometimes give your children what you ... what our parents couldn't give us. (Cora, focus group 6)

The greater supply of foods is combined with "more demanding children." Mothers comment that at present children have a more active role in making requests and that these requests are mostly taken into account by mothers. It is the children themselves that choose their foods. This was mentioned equally in all the focus groups conducted.

What I see now, let's say, is that children have decision power in the kitchen: "I want to eat this, I want to eat that." I remember, when I was a child, I had to sit at the table and had to eat what was there only. (Amalia, focus group 4)

Although in different groups several mothers agree that at present their children's nutrition is "worse" compared to other times, mothers of higher education levels often

mention the fact that at present mothers are more aware of their children's nutrition and that, for that reason, they choose healthier options.

In reality, I think it's a two-way process ... I believe that in my case in particular, it seems to me that nowadays, and I repeat, this is my experience, there is a greater supply but I believe that there is also more knowledge. I think, perhaps, the kid is also put in a different place, being more aware of eating better, I'm not sure if this applies to everybody. (Sarah, focus group 5)

A type of consumption perceived as inevitable: sugary drinks and fast food restaurants

In the different groups, participants mention types of consumption on the part of children and their families that is incorporated into their everyday consumption, despite being identified by their mothers as foods with low nutritional quality. Going to fast food restaurants, for instance, has a wider meaning than just the consumption of the products offered there. It is perceived as a family outing and a place where children have fun. In addition, the issues mentioned above are also observed, such as the importance of promotions like toys associated with the purchase of products and foods given as "rewards." In the focus groups consisting of mothers of lower education levels, the consumption in fast food restaurants is less problematized and fewer restrictions are identified regarding this type of consumption.

I collect my pension and insurance, and when I collect that money, twice a month I take her to those places. Because my other daughter who is 12 years old, her body is grown but she still thinks like a child and she also wants to eat burgers at McDonald's. (Mirta, focus group 1)

For example, if my child gets good grades at school, I give him money and let him go to McDonald's. Or after his rugby practice, he goes with a friend, if he shows me he got good grades at school. Otherwise, he's not allowed. (Lucía, focus group 3)

Among the foods that are mostly requested and negotiated for consumption, sugary soft drinks are the most frequently mentioned. In some cases, their consumption is reserved for certain occasions, but they are rarely restricted completely. In the different groups conducted, several attitudes are observed: a greater consumption seems to be present in the groups consisting of mothers of lower education levels, whereas there is a greater problematization about this consumption in the groups with mothers of higher education levels. Participants highlight that, even when the product is not consumed at home, once the children recognize the flavor they start to request it.

Birthdays parties, social events lead them to try things that perhaps are outside the things you allow them to try, what you want. I don't know, I remember that at birthday parties, I didn't buy Coca Cola for my kid but then there was no going-back: "Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola." The same thing happened with snacks. (Fabiana, focus group 7)

DISCUSSION

This study constitutes a contribution to the research body that highlights that advertisements and promotions are factors to consider when it comes to understanding children's eating practices.^(9,25) Prior research studies^(26,27) show that children have a growing influence over the products to be bought and the consumption of foods, and one of the reasons that can explain this influence is the so-called "annoyance effect" that accounts

for children's tendency to insistently request the products that are advertised and promoted. Our research coincides with these studies as it shows how the characters on a package and advertisements, together with promotions, trigger requests from children⁽²⁶⁾ and how this situation is intensified the moment that children get in contact with the product, when they go to supermarkets or candy stores.

This study demonstrates that the "annoyance effect" is not the only reason why mothers agree to their children's requests. As shown in another research study,⁽²⁸⁾ mothers can use the food their children eat not only as a way of giving them the necessary nutrients, but also as a way of offering rewards or prizes. This study helps to show the different meanings given to food and how nutrition transcends the mere satisfaction of a basic need. During this work we observed how eating and, in this case in particular, the purchase of certain food products requested by children, are not only associated with a reward, but also with a kind of expression of maternal/family affection toward the child, or as a celebration of an important event.

Mothers consider that their purchasing choices are based on their individual decisions. This should be analyzed taking into account the discourses proposed by ultra-processed food companies, which foster the idea that what one eats is the individual's exclusive responsibility.⁽²⁹⁾ This data coincides with research studies carried out in other countries that show that obesity is perceived as the result of individual behaviors and not as the responsibility of food industry practices and the lack of regulation on the part of the State.⁽³⁰⁾ This situation poses a challenge and a need for public health actors to sensitize the population regarding the influence of the environment in general and food advertising in particular, with respect to overweight and obesity, especially in children, and the need to outline, promote and implement public policies that would reduce the exposure of minors to food advertising.⁽¹⁾

The group participants identify different environmental elements that have modified

eating behaviors over time such as a greater supply of foods, and point out that the present-day lifestyles lead to certain decisions that they do not consider ideal, such as preparing fast foods, for instance, in an environment where children “*are more demanding*” and where there is a greater supply of ultra-processed products (snacks, crackers, sodas, sweetened cereals for breakfast, sweetened yoghurts, hamburgers, sausages, etc.). The reference to “*more demanding*” children assumes the construction of a boy or girl as a consumer, which explains how the logic of the market compels subjects from a very early age and affects eating practices.⁽¹⁵⁾ The presence of these children is combined with mothers who do not “*feel authorized to teach their children how to eat.*”⁽³¹⁾ In this scenario, the messages legitimated by the mass media and the requests from children become the governing principles of food consumption. In this way, it is easy to understand that, based on all the debate that took place inside the focus groups, mothers appear to be confused with respect to the nutritional quality of the products that they consume.

These research findings coincide with those that indicate that having knowledge about the nutritional quality does not itself predict an eating behavior.⁽¹⁴⁾ Although there was consensus in all the focus groups conducted about the existence of “*bad*” foods, affirming that these are the most advertised, and that ultra-processed foods were “*worse*” than homemade food, participants also expressed that these foods are consumed because their consumption “*is easier*” and “*they can be cooked more quickly.*”

An important finding of this study is the differential attitude that mothers of different education levels have toward advertising. For mothers of higher education levels, a greater sensitization is observed in relation to the consumption of certain types of foods, such as sugary drinks and ultra-processed foods like sausages, hamburgers, cereals, etc. Although observed in some mothers, it proves worrisome that in the lower education sectors there is apparently less problematization and sensitization in relation to this matter. While

in higher education level sectors specific strategies are identified to avoid certain foods and replace them with healthier products, mothers of lower education levels, despite highlighting the importance of homemade food, have a less critical view in relation to the wide supply of ultra-processed products and greater access to these types of products. It is interesting to observe that the consumption of certain products is mentioned as something aspirational, and they also highlight the importance of consuming certain brands and having access to certain products that “*were not available in the past.*” In this sense, it is relevant to understand nutrition practices within a value system and a given environment in which different social groups convey different meanings to the concept of “*eating well.*”⁽¹⁷⁾ The consumption of ultra-processed products should not be understood as mere ignorance or aspiration, but should be understood within a given social environment, where women face a series of requirements related to domestic and extra-domestic work, where said consumption helps to satisfy their children’s requests and save time (it allows them to “*get by*”). These circumstances are exploited by advertising, in which the consumption of processed and easy-to-make products is encouraged and legitimated.

It is important to look at the set of social relationships that affect the capacity of the different mothers when “*choosing*” foods. Income restrictions and time available to accomplish food-related tasks may operate as barriers to choose healthier options. This should be especially considered in the case of lower-income women, since they are the ones that have a greater participation in child-care tasks due to the impossibility of delegating these activities.⁽³²⁾

The differences among socioeconomic sectors should be considered when designing effective policies that help narrow the gaps in obesity prevalence in childhood and adolescent populations. This aspect is of a special significance because the most vulnerable sectors are affected by overweight and obesity conditions to a larger extent.^(33,34)

In this scenario, it is important to highlight the role that the State has in the design of a food policy that would include different sectors committed to the population's health and would help improve the food environment and "not leave the only logic of the food production chain in the hands of the market."⁽¹⁵⁾ Our findings highlight the need to design policies that discourage the consumption of foods with low nutritional quality. Among these policies, the restriction of unhealthy food advertising directed at children is considered a fundamental component of any comprehensive strategy that is intended to tackle this problem. To this effect, the WHO elaborated the *Global Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases 2013-2020*,⁽³⁵⁾ which proposes the restriction of food advertising and non-alcoholic drinks directed at children and adolescents. And the last report issued by the Commission to put an end to childhood obesity also indicates the need to reduce the exposure to unhealthy food advertising directed at children and adolescents.⁽³⁶⁾ In our region, the Pan-American Health Organization adopted the *Action Plan for Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents*,⁽³⁷⁾ which emphasizes the importance of advertising regulation as a strategic line of action for the region. An effective policy on the restriction of unhealthy food advertising directed at children should: a) be comprehensive in nature, so as to include not only the mass media and traditional communication channels but also non-traditional advertising, such as relational marketing strategies; and b) establish the healthy nature of food through nutritional profiles.⁽³⁸⁾

This study represents an innovative analysis in Argentina regarding the perception of mothers about how advertising affects what their children's eat, identifying different environmental elements that prompt the consumption of certain products. The differences identified among groups revealed the importance of taking into account income disparity when designing nutrition policies. A limitation of the present study is linked to the use of focus groups as tools to analyze the perceptions of food-related issues, since mothers may have been influenced by the opinions given by the other participants of the group. However, the dynamics of the arguments and spontaneity of the answers indicate that it was possible to overcome this limitation throughout the investigation. The sample included mothers from the region known as the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires and with different education levels in order to account for the heterogeneity of the situation. In future research studies, it would be interesting to replicate this research study in smaller urban centers to describe diverse situations that may take place in other regions of the country. Similarly, it would be interesting to develop a population survey that would help establish the differences found among mothers of different education levels in a sample with statistical representativeness in order to have useful information for designing effective policies for the society as a whole. Likewise, it is important to carry out research studies for an in-depth analysis of eating habits and the consumption of ultra-processed products in the population.

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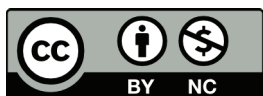
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