"Tag a person who loves candy" – sociocultural approach to unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media

Ulla-Maija Sutinen, Roosa Luukkonen and Elina Närvänen

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to examine adolescents' social media environment connected to unhealthy food marketing. As social media have become a ubiquitous part of young people's everyday lives, marketers have also shifted their focus to these channels. Literature on this phenomenon is still scarce and often takes a quite narrow view of the role of marketing in social media. Furthermore, the experiences of the adolescents are seldom considered.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Using a sociocultural approach and netnographic methodology, this study presents findings from a research project conducted in Finland. The data consist of both social media material and focus group interviews with adolescents.*

Findings – *The findings elaborate on unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media from two perspectives: sociocultural representations of unhealthy foods in social media marketing and social media influencers connecting with adolescents.*

Originality/value – *The study broadens and deepens the current understanding of unhealthy food marketing to adolescents taking place in social media. The study introduces a novel perspective to the topic by looking at it as a sociocultural phenomenon.*

Keywords Social media, Food marketing, Influencer, Online media, Sociocultural, Advertising, Online social networks, Qualitative methods, Netnography, Focus group, Adolescence, Other media and children

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There has been an increasing amount of concern around the long-term effects of unhealthy food marketing to minors (Coates *et al.*, 2019a; Harris *et al.*, 2021; Smit *et al.*, 2020; WHO, 2019). Among all marketing activities encountered by children and adolescents, there is an emphasis on food products, especially unhealthy food products, which in this study are defined as food products containing high levels of fat, sugar or salt (De Jans *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a reduction of advertising of unhealthy food and beverages has been introduced as one of the most effective ways to reduce obesity, which represents a major global concern (Lobstein *et al.*, 2020; Gortmaker *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, policymakers have taken different types of marketing regulations and guidelines into action (Lwin *et al.*, 2020). The scope of regulation differs in terms of age range and marketing channels (for a review, see Smith Taillie *et al.*, 2019). For instance, the UK has recently published plans to completely ban online marketing of unhealthy food products (Sweney, 2020). Furthermore, several voluntary efforts, such as the EU pledge (i.e. food companies' joint pledge to change food advertising to children), have been initiated to protect children and adolescents.

While some more traditional channels for marketing activities have become more restricted, the marketing activities of unhealthy food products targeted at younger audiences have

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found their way to social media platforms (Smit *et al.*, 2020). The shift to the online world has also contributed to the establishment of new types of marketing activities, including, for instance, influencer marketing (Tsen and Cheng, 2021). In today's world, online platforms and social media can be regarded as common "spaces" for especially adolescents to spend time and "hang out" with their friends. Statistics have estimated that in the UK, for instance, already 91% of 12–15-year-olds and 97% of 16–17-year-olds use social media (Ofcom, 2022). In Finland, where this research was conducted, 92% of 16–24-year-olds used social media daily in 2022 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022). While social media platforms have originally been regarded and created as spaces for social activities, they have become increasingly commercialized in recent years. The current social media sphere surrounding adolescents is a blend of commercial and non-commercial content, and sometimes, the lines between these are rather unclear.

Earlier research has tended to view unhealthy food marketing to adolescents with a focus on, for instance, social media engagement and its effects on social behaviours and dietary patterns (Coates *et al.*, 2019b; Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2021). Less attention has been put on how the social media marketing environment of adolescents is culturally constructed. Yet, because culture frames how people make collective sense of their experiences and orients their actions (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), it is important to understand, for instance, how unhealthy products are represented in this context, what kind of meanings are created to the consumption of such items, and how adolescents themselves participate in the co-construction of meanings. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to *describe and analyse unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media as a sociocultural phenomenon.* Adopting a sociocultural lens to gain insights into the phenomenon widens the current discussion around the topic, which is strongly focused on rather normative approaches and often revolves around the harms and the needed restrictions for unhealthy food marketing.

Adolescents and unhealthy food marketing in social media

Adolescents in social media

Spending time on the internet and navigating on different social media platforms have gained important, even integral, roles in adolescents' everyday lives. Social media platforms have provided means for adolescents to be constantly connected (Thulin, 2018). For instance, "like" buttons can be clicked back and forth on Instagram, and Snapchat provides its users with a streak score that reflects the number of consecutive days when two users have sent messages to each other (Griffiths, 2018). To understand social media platforms' role from the adolescents' perspective, the online sphere has to be seen as a central social context for adolescents, where they, for instance, construct their identities (Hübner Barcelos and Vargas Rossi, 2014; Sihvonen, 2015), cultivate their social relationships (Décieux *et al.*, 2019; Hübner Barcelos and Vargas Rossi, 2014; Thulin, 2018), take political action (Allaste and Saari, 2020) and learn about the events happening around the world (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). In some studies, the high (or even extensive) usage of social media has also been connected with the so-called "fear of missing out", which refers to the desire to keep up with all the things happening within one's social sphere (Handa and Ahuja, 2020; Sultan, 2021). All in all, the online activities taking place in social media are interrelated with versatile offline aspects of adolescents' everyday life.

Social media is all about interactions, which take various forms on different platforms. Some social media interactions resemble active two-way conversations, but social media has also put forth new sorts of constellations of interactions. Thulin (2018), for instance, discusses mobile applications as opening the floor for many-to-many communication, allowing for effective group discussions. In social media, online interactions can also take the form as, for instance, online publics where some actors take part as active followers without making

any content themselves (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). In the contemporary social media sphere, online influencers often gather these types of online publics around them, where the followers are important "consumers" of the content but often remain mostly silent in the interaction. Studies have shown the powerful impact of the bond between, for instance, social media influencers and adolescents (Smit et al., 2020). By spending time on social media platforms and watching content created by social media influencers, people (and especially adolescents) develop attachments with the content creators (Chen, 2016). These attachments can range from one-sided friendships (Tukachinsky, 2010) to even considering certain influencers as their "older siblings" (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

The marketing of food to adolescents in social media

The focus of food marketers has increasingly shifted to online channels (Potvin Kent et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2013). There are several reasons for this, but the main one is that marketers want to reach their potential customers, so they follow consumers' media consumption patterns closely. Another reason for using online channels is that there is currently less regulation, restrictions or monitoring of advertising compared to traditional media (Smit et al., 2020). Similarly to traditional media channels, studies indicate that unhealthy food products dominate advertising in social media (Coates et al., 2019b; Folkvord et al., 2019). A lot of industry regulations have focused on protecting small children and covering traditional media channels like television (Harris et al., 2021). However, recent research has argued that the adolescent group may be even more susceptible to the harmful effects of unhealthy food marketing than younger children because of the social influence of peers (Harris et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2018). When marketing to younger children is either regulated or perceived to be against industry norms, adolescents have become even more aggressively targeted by the industry.

The online media and marketing environment consists of several different tools that can be used by marketers, ranging from paid advertising on banners or within social media platforms to sponsoring the content produced by social media influencers (Potvin Kent et al., 2019). The actual nature of the persuasive content in food marketing to children and adolescents has not been addressed very often. However, according to recent studies, different visual styles are used to appeal to teenagers, including colourful presentation and artisanal authenticity, as well as the use of humour and brand characters (Ellison et al., 2023; Nieto et al., 2023). Food and beverage brands can also engage consumers through their own social media profiles and content. Many food and beverage brands, whose products can be considered as unhealthy, have millions of followers in social media (Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020). Through their social media profiles, brands can go beyond sending messages towards engaging their followers in liking, sharing or commenting on their content. According to a study conducted in the USA, there was widespread engagement with food and beverage brands on social media among adolescents (ages 13–17), with most participants engaging with brands in the categories of fast food, sugary drinks, snacks and candy (Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020). Furthermore, according to another study, engaging with unhealthy food marketing online was perceived by young participants as more positive than with healthy food or non-food products, and they also rated peers that had unhealthy food products in their social media feed more highly (Murphy et al., 2020).

As one form of online food marketing, influencer marketing in social media is becoming increasingly popular among marketers, as it offers many additional benefits, including a more authentic and credible source for the message (Jhawar et al., 2023; Tsen and Cheng, 2021). The sender of the message being considered as one's peer or even as a friend rather than a company, influencer marketing in digital channels is considered more impactful than traditional marketing (Buchanan et al., 2018). Furthermore, in influencer marketing, the commercial message blends more easily into the content that is produced

by the influencer, and it is, therefore, more difficult for consumers to identify as marketing. Contrary to what is often perceived, however, even disclosing advertising does not protect adolescents from the effects of the marketing itself. According to one experimental study, the open disclosure of advertising in the influencer's content may, in fact, increase children's consumption of the marketed snack compared to if they had not been made aware of it (Coates *et al.*, 2019b). Influencer marketing has also allowed individual people (even children and adolescents) an opportunity to be both producers and consumers of content (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). While adolescents themselves may not suppose that social media has impacts on their food consumption behaviours (Gilmour *et al.*, 2020), the existing evidence for the effectiveness of this type of marketing of unhealthy food suggests that engaging with this type of content negatively influences adolescents' dietary patterns as well as impacts their well-being in the long term (Coates *et al.*, 2019b; Smit *et al.*, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

Study approach

The interpretive framework of the study is sociocultural. This means that the emphasis is put "beyond" the individuals, their attitudes and motivation. Instead, the focus is on the social and cultural sphere of everyday life (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This social and cultural sphere is constantly shaped through different actors' sayings and doings. Based on this perspective, the adolescence culture (offline and online) is seen as shaped by not only the adolescents themselves but also by other actors, including marketers. Previous studies using this approach have discovered, for instance, the social uses of advertising by adolescents (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) and how children seek meanings of control and mastery in their relationship to advertising (Bartholomew and O'Donohue, 2003). The study embraces an interpretive approach and uses qualitative methodology. The purpose of this type of approach is to deepen the understanding about a topic in question instead of, for instance, finding reasons for it or predicting its outcomes (Silverman, 2014). Combining netnographic research methods and focus group interviews, the study attempts to "make sense" of the current social media environment of adolescents related to unhealthy food marketing. We aim for balancing the emic (the subjective significance of the phenomenon as experienced by participants) and the etic (the comparative and interpreted perspective of researchers) (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Interpretation is a key element of this type of approach, which requires that research is conducted in a context that is familiar to the researcher (Moisander *et al.*, 2020). This study was conducted in Finland, and thus the findings may include features that are specific to this particular context.

Data gathering

The data for the study have been gathered as part of a broader research project (Fogelholm *et al.*, 2021). There are two sets of data that are strongly connected to each other. To make sense of the online sphere of unhealthy food marketing, the study uses a netnographic research method that is developed for online consumer research (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography has its roots in ethnographic research that aims to clarify the ways culture [...] simultaneously construct and is formulated by people's behaviours and experiences (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 485). The netnographic observation data (NOD) generation started with an explorative approach to investigate which social media channels were worth closer scrutiny and to decide upon the best practices to collect data (Kozinets, 2020). The focus was put on posts generated in three popular social media channels used by adolescents: YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. The postings were searched manually by two researchers using hashtags commonly used by social media influencers to indicate a commercial collaboration, and by visiting social media profiles of the largest Finnish food companies that have unhealthy food items in their product lines or

had a lot of marketing activity online. Only commercial postings that focused on food items were included in the data. Finally, the data consisted of social media postings (pictures, text and videos) published by social media influencers and food companies to promote unhealthy food products. Altogether, 141 postings were gathered, all of which are set in the context of online food marketing in Finland. In this article, we refer to this data as NOD. Even though the data were collected between August 2020 and February 2021, it involved postings published in 2019–2021. One positive aspect of using netnography is its ability to capture online data from the past and the present. The two-year time span of the NOD ensured that we had a rich and detailed view of the phenomenon, as it covered various individual marketing campaigns that had run during the time.

Furthermore, to generate a more profound understanding of the experiences of adolescents, five focus group interviews were conducted. The focus groups were organized in an online format using online meeting software Zoom, allowing participation from different parts of Finland. Each focus group gathered three adolescents and was facilitated by one or two researchers, except for the pilot focus group that only had two adolescent participants. Participants were recruited from a local Youth Parliament, researchers' contacts and through the snowballing technique. The data generation was continued until similar themes started to be repeated in the focus groups, giving evidence of data saturation. Thus, altogether, 14 adolescents participated in the five focus group interviews. The participants were aged 12–17, and ten of them were girls and four boys. The discussions lasted between 65–86 min. To facilitate the discussion, a semi-structured interview guide was developed, including questions about the adolescents' favourite social media channels, favourite type of content and social media influencers they follow, their conceptions of marketing and their views on the current marketing regulations related to minors that were introduced to them. Also, projective materials chosen from the NOD were used in the interviews; the participants were shown pictures and videos as examples of unhealthy food-related social media content to initiate discussion on how familiar this type of content was for them and what their experiences were about it. Careful consideration was put into the way how healthy versus unhealthy food was framed and discussed by the interview facilitators. It was acknowledged that the healthiness of food can be regarded as a rather sensitive topic and also connected to, for instance, considerations of body ideals and norms of adolescents (Kvalem and Strandbu, 2013). To protect the privacy of the participants, the participants were given pseudonyms. This data set is referred to as focus group data (FGD) in this article.

Analysis

The first step of the data analysis was to become familiar with the NOD. In the observations, emphasis was put on the role of the food product, audiovisual elements and marketing techniques, which were interpreted in the light of the sociocultural meanings the advertisement portrayed as a whole. The data were asked questions like:

Q1. How are food products represented?

Q2. What kind of social and cultural settings are they presented in?

Q3. What kind of cultural categories are present in the data?

The data were open-coded inductively. Two researchers conducted the first round of analysis using the analysis software Atlas.ti, which enabled a systematic way of coding the features identified in the data and detecting recurring themes. During the social media content gathering time period, the focus group interviews were started. The transcribed interviews were analysed separately from the social media data. The analysis, however, followed a similar inductive logic. Here, the focus was on interpreting adolescents' experiences, paying attention to how adolescents make sense of what they see and experience related to unhealthy food marketing in social media. After these two separate

analysis processes, the emphasis was put on the holistic understanding of the social media environment of adolescents connected to unhealthy food products, and the two analyses were combined.

Findings

The main findings of our study are presented through two perspectives that assist in shedding light on the multifaceted environment of unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media. Firstly, we discuss the sociocultural representations of unhealthy food in social media marketing. Then, we discuss further a specific feature that was evident in our data; social media influencers connecting with adolescents. Instead of objectively framing young people as passive targets of unhealthy food marketing and solely explaining the phenomenon from an "outsider" perspective, we have also included adolescents' experiences about unhealthy food marketing as part of their sociocultural environment in social media in our analysis. Combining the two sets of data in the analysis and interpretation, the findings create an understanding of how adolescents are being persuaded and activated through social media marketing and how the young people themselves perceive these engagement attempts.

Sociocultural representations of unhealthy food in social media marketing

Based on our analysis, the social media marketing contents create versatile sociocultural representations of food consumption and the position of unhealthy food products in everyday life. Commercial content was a familiar phenomenon for all the adolescent participants in our focus group interviews, and they remembered having recently encountered social media content that advertise, for instance, sodas, energy drinks, candy, chocolate, chips and protein bars. Based on our NOD analysis, we highlight three aspects related to how the content represents the consumption of unhealthy food products: the social situations where foods ought to be consumed, the product's visibility and the context of play in commercial social media content.

Firstly, food products in commercial social media content are often presented as part of a certain social setting based on our NOD. These social situations either mirror the sociocultural norms of the society about where and when unhealthy food products are consumed or aim at creating new norms for unhealthy food consumption. In our data, the unhealthy products are linked to moments of celebration, enjoyment or spending time together with family or friends, which quite well mirror the sociocultural norms of today's society. For instance, in an influencer duo's YouTube video done in collaboration with a supermarket brand, the influencers organize a surprise party for their friends, where sweets and treats are consumed.

As opposite to moments of celebration, we also recognized social settings that are more connected to mundane everyday life. Unhealthy food products are presented and/or consumed within everyday activities, such as doing homework, hanging out with friends, playing video games, practising a hobby or even doing sports. Hence, presenting unhealthy food products in unconventional social situations (e.g. having pizza while doing sports) could create new sociocultural norms for consuming the product. This is especially beneficial for the marketer because new norms create new markets and customers for the brand, who associate the product with a new social situation (for instance, how the soda brand Coca-Cola is nowadays associated with celebrating Christmas). As an example from the data, a sugary pudding is presented as a good option for breakfast because "it gives energy to everyday hustle and bustle" (NOD: TikTok video in collaboration with a dessert brand).

Secondly, we identified that the visibility of the food product in the social media content varied so that the product is either centred or it is in the background. When the product is

centred, it is actively presented to the audience. In these cases, for instance, the influencer tasting new products acts as a sort of a sales representative of the product, explaining its good qualities and most often praising its good taste (NOD: TikTok video in collaboration with a potato chips brand). When the product is centred, it is quite easy to recognize that the social media content is an advertisement. However, in some of the influencer collaborations, the product's role is not that visible and the presence of the product has been merged into the influencer's typical content (e.g. vlogs, humorous videos). This was also discussed in the focus groups (FGD); some participants stated that it is not always that clear to separate commercial content from "regular" social media content. For instance, after seeing two example videos as projective material, one of the participants compared the two and said that in one of them, it was not perhaps that evident; it was a commercial (a YouTube video in which an influencer is disguised as a fast-food restaurant worker). He also said that "when the commercial collaborations are done well, the logo or the product does not stand out, instead it blends well in the content" (FGD: Leo), implying that those advertisements where the commercial part is not that clear are better and more entertaining to him.

In Finland, there is a regulation for paid collaborations in social media, demanding that the influencers mention a paid collaboration at least in the caption of the posting. In an example from our data, a popular social media influencer starts her vlog by mentioning the commercial collaboration on the video and then continues to other topics (NOD: YouTube video in collaboration with a soda brand). As the video continues, she is drinking soda in different situations, for instance, when going for a swim or having dinner with her family. In the video, she also tells that the soda brand has challenged her to think about small things that she had taken for granted before the COVID-19 pandemic but is now grateful for. At the end of the video, she wears a hoodie with the brand's logo on it and drinks the soda again. In this example, the product's role is to be a subtle side character of the story, through which the influencer is implying that she likes to consume this product regularly, even though she is not directly saying it to the audience.

Thirdly, in addition to the unhealthy food products being part of a social setting and having either a centred or a background role, the context of play was repeated in our NOD. All in all, preferring social media content that is fun, "light" or entertaining was also mentioned in our focus groups when discussing the adolescents' favourite types of content in social media. Early in our interpretation, we acknowledged that unhealthy food products in social media marketing are presented through play. This associates unhealthy food with sociocultural meanings of playfulness and enjoyment. Furthermore, games, challenges, humour and skits are used as persuasion to get the viewers' attention and engage them in watching the media content. For instance, food products are presented as part of a game when two young influencers are blindfolded and try to guess which flavour of ice cream they are eating (NOD: YouTube video in collaboration with an ice-cream brand). In food-related social media challenges, influencers might, for instance, eat the food of a fast-food chain for every meal during a day (NOD: YouTube video in collaboration with a fast-food restaurant). Thus, foods are also presented as part of skits, such as a comical situation of an influencer serving only chips for their partner on a romantic dinner (NOD: TikTok video in collaboration with a potato chips brand). Most often, the playfulness in the content is enhanced with music, dancing, colourfulness and happy expressions, which also represent persuasive techniques especially influential for young viewers, according to earlier studies (Ellison *et al.*, 2023; Elliott *et al.*, 2022; Truman and Elliott, 2019). All in all, the context of play makes the advertisements more tempting and entertaining but also associates sociocultural meanings of happiness, joy and excitement with unhealthy food.

Social media influencers connecting with adolescents

A major part of the commercial social media content representing unhealthy food products was done by social media influencers. Therefore, we recognize the role of influencers as important in

the phenomenon. The content in which social media influencers appeared was published both on the influencers' accounts and on the social media profiles of the food brands. In addition, some of the marketing campaigns were extended beyond social media, and the influencers, for instance, appeared in TV advertisements. Indeed, according to the data, the collaborations of food brands and influencers in marketing unhealthy food products are intense. An interesting example is an influencer duo's collaboration with a juice brand in which the influencers created multiple social media contents (YouTube and TikTok videos) promoting the brand, and their picture was also placed on the product package. Furthermore, our data present a rapper-influencer whose rap song was used in an ice cream brand's marketing campaign on social media so that the song and the ice cream were associated with each other.

In the focus group interviews, the adolescents said that they typically follow the social media influencers that have the same interests as themselves. For instance, game enthusiasts were following gamer influencers, and the ones who are doing sports followed athletes. Interestingly, the influencers in our NOD were often minors themselves. Their young age makes them viewed as peers or friends for the young audience, and by engaging with their social media content, adolescents form a strong relationship with them. These impactful relationships between influencers and viewers are created through all sorts of social media content, all of which is not commercial. Thus, the lines between commercial and non-commercial content are not always clear. This creates an interesting shift in the influencers' position: at the same time, they are peers or idols to their audience but also promoters and marketers of commercial goods. Hence, the fact that an influencer gets a commercial collaboration deal gives them more credibility and legitimization as an influencer. In one sense, any young person creating social media content can "become" an influencer, which makes the positionings of influencers as peers and promoters even fuzzier.

We argue that this all affects the way how adolescents perceive influencers' commercial content in social media. In general, the focus group participants seemed to have a rather pragmatic stance towards social media marketing. There were mentions about the youth adolescents understanding that "there is no content if there are no commercial collaborations" (FGD: Maria), acknowledging the advertisements as bringing revenues for the influencers, allowing them to create more content. Yet, at the same time, the interviewees presented critical views on the matter. They were, for instance, suspicious about the truthfulness of influencers praising the promoted products: "I get this feeling, whether he [social media influencer] really likes it [a cookie] or is he just getting paid for taking that picture" (FGD: Aurora).

Viewer involvement, a very typical feature of social media content (McClure and Seock, 2020), was also evident in our data. The implicit objective of many of the social media postings in our data is to make the viewer react to the content either by liking, commenting, sharing the posting or creating their own posting and linking it to the original one. Commenting is encouraged by asking the viewer questions, such as "What is your favourite flavour?" (NOD: Instagram posting in collaboration with a chips brand) or "Can you guess what is the next flavour coming to stores?" (NOD: Instagram posting of a soda brand). Moreover, the encouragement to comment does not always address the product or the brand: "Comment below what is the time when you see this picture" (NOD: Instagram posting in collaboration with a soda brand). Asking for tagging a friend in the posting is also common: "Tag a person who LOVES candy!" (NOD: TikTok video in collaboration with a candy brand). Quite often, there is also a competition involved, so through reacting, the viewer is, for example, participating in a draw and could win sweets and treats for themselves.

A particularly interesting way of engaging is when the influencer encourages the audience to create their own social media content related to the posting. The aim of these "social media challenges" or "trends" is to get multiple social media users to create similar types of content. In some cases, the viewer is ought to buy the food product to recreate the commercial posting: "I challenge you all to show your weird ways of eating pizza, tag me to

the pictures and I will like them" (NOD: Instagram posting in collaboration with a convenience food manufacturer). However, buying the product is not always required, but still, the viewer is supposed to at least mention the brand, the commercial hashtag or the brand's social media account in the posting. Sometimes, the influencer promises to also like or comment on the created posting, which further rewards the viewer for engaging with the marketing campaign. In our NOD, we noticed that the encouragement to recreate postings had succeeded, and there were trends that had spread on the social media platform (e.g. a dancing challenge related to a bakery brand's marketing campaign on TikTok).

When it comes to food products, taste represents a central attribute. The observation data included several taste testings done by social media influences. In these types of postings, the viewers are not necessarily directly encouraged to buy the product, but it was brought up in the focus group interviews that these sometimes initiate the desire to also have a taste of the showcased products. There were mentions, such as "If my parents pay, I could try out all the new products" (FGD: Olivia), "I sometimes want to try or I feel like trying it" (FGD: Sofia) or "At the cashier, I realised that I was a victim of an advertisement" (FGD: Maria). One could argue that the desire to get the same taste experience as the influencer also represents a form of engagement, not with the social media content but with the product being marketed.

Discussion and conclusions

The study sheds light on the cultural construction of unhealthy food marketing in social media, where adolescents spend a significant amount of time in their everyday life. Approaching the phenomenon from a sociocultural perspective, the study draws a multidimensional picture of the topic, which goes beyond treating online food marketing solely as one-way marketing communication or adolescents as passive targets of marketing activities. By seeing social media integral part of the social sphere of adolescents, it is possible to take a more holistic approach to the phenomenon. In the findings section of the article, we described this from two perspectives and discussed the sociocultural representations of unhealthy food in social media as well as social media influencers connecting with adolescents.

Theoretical contributions

Our study describes and analyses unhealthy food marketing to adolescents as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Thus, our purpose was to gain understanding from a perspective that is often left out of the public discussion, regulative actions and even academic articles concerning the topic. Figure 1 summarizes our study's sociocultural view of the unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media.

As depicted in the figure, the phenomenon is constructed by both marketers through different types of social media content and adolescents' experiences. Regarding the nature of unhealthy food marketing, we identified different representations associated with social media content connected to unhealthy food products. These include how unhealthy food products are represented within the social media posts and the role of influencers in the social media. In addition to contributing to research on characteristics of unhealthy food marketing content (Ellison *et al.*, 2023), we highlight the importance of acknowledging adolescents as co-constructing the cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003) in this social media sphere and considering their experiences (depicted in the right-hand side of the figure). Our study supports the notion made already in earlier research; while adolescents might be critical or even cynical about food marketing, this does not mean that they are not impacted by the content (Elliott, 2017; Elliott *et al.*, 2022; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019).

The figure also illustrates marketing as one part of the sociocultural environment in social media (left-hand side of the figure). As highlighted in the figure, the sociocultural approach of our study considers the role of marketing in a way that individual advertisements and the

Figure 1 Unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media

Source: Authors' own work
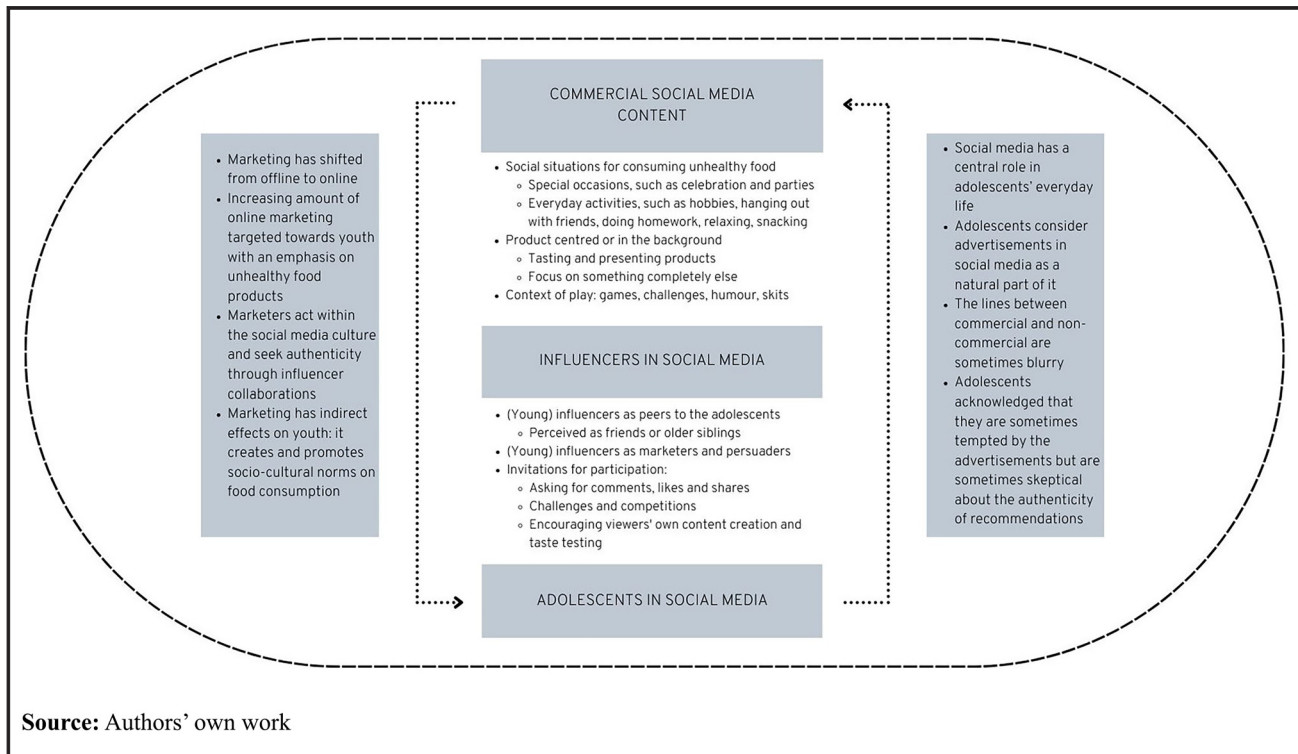
commercial content are seen as part of the larger marketing system (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). The marketing actors have their own agendas to take part in the content creation on social media. Marketing actors, such as food companies, operating in social media take part in the construction and shaping of social norms related to food consumption through, for instance, connecting consumption of a certain product with a certain social situation. Social media activities may also contribute to building strong brand relationships with adolescents that will last until adulthood. We identify that marketers have adapted their activities to the social media setting by, for instance, using social influencers as their "ambassadors" who can build strong bonds with adolescents and have a significant impact on their behaviours (Smit *et al.*, 2020).

The study identifies and discusses the features of unhealthy food marketing to adolescents in social media, increasing understanding about the appeals and persuasive techniques of marketing messages in a wider sociocultural context. With its sociocultural approach and the use of interpretive qualitative methodology, the study enriches the understanding about the highly topical concern of unhealthy food marketing to adolescents that has often been analyzed with quantitative approaches. Paying attention also to the experiences of adolescents in this wider context, this study attends to an important perspective called for in earlier research (Elliott, 2017; Elliott *et al.*, 2022).

Practical implications and future research

While legislation and other protective measures should be in place to protect potentially vulnerable consumer groups, it is always important to listen to the voice of the ones being protected. Thus, taking an adolescence perspective and engaging adolescents themselves in a matter that concerns their daily life is crucial when addressing unhealthy food marketing to adolescents (see also Elliott, 2017). For the adolescents themselves, our findings have

implications regarding media and marketing literacy. Even as it is very important for adolescents to understand the nature and objectives of marketing, we argue that it is not enough to highlight this cognitive awareness aspect. Instead, education should also emphasize the sociocultural perspective and focus, for instance, on the systemic nature of social media marketing and how adolescents' own engagement and participation are being monetized and commercialized.

The study also offers important, concrete learning points for policymakers and regulators. These include detailed accounts of the descriptions of the nature of unhealthy food marketing content (for instance, regarding the subject position of the product). Furthermore, the sociocultural approach adopted in the study, emphasizing the role of marketing as embedded in adolescents' everyday life rather than as one-way activities, provides the policymakers with a novel way to think about the issue as embedded in a wider, more complex social and cultural environment. For instance, when discussing unhealthy food marketing to minors, the attention cannot solely be on regulations on marketers' individual advertisements' technical targeting choices, as social media needs to be regarded as a broader social context, which is constructed through all kinds of contents and thus concerns people of all ages that spend time in the social media.

The shift in the understanding of the role of marketing is also an important area of reflection for food companies and retailers. Companies can be regarded as focal shapers of social and cultural understandings, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, for instance, through the use of influencer marketing. This highlights the responsibility of the companies who are engaging in marketing activities around unhealthy food products. Many companies have already acknowledged the impact of marketing activities on young children, and several self-regulative policies and pledges have been established to protect the children. However, quite often, these policies only protect children under 12 years old (e.g. EU pledge) and adolescents are left unmentioned – and almost completely unprotected. As research indicates that adolescents may be even more vulnerable to unhealthy food marketing than young children (Harris *et al.*, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2018), it is a matter of ethics for marketers to look after them.

We suggest that future marketing regulations should focus on the visibility of commercial content in social media, interfere in the way unhealthy foods are presented in the advertisements and regulate the commercial collaborations of food producers with social media influencers. While marking commercial content in social media has become a norm in the context of Finnish online marketing, the lines between commercial and non-commercial content are still unclear for adolescents. Especially when influencers act as brand ambassadors for food companies, the role of the influencer as a marketer is not as clear. Moreover, the social setting where the unhealthy food is presented in advertisements matters. For instance, advertisements should not encourage replacing meals for treats (such as having a dessert as breakfast), and this should be considered in marketing regulations. Finally, adolescents are persuaded to consume unhealthy food, especially by their peers, young social media influencers, who have strong persuasive power on the adolescents. This relationship should be acknowledged in future marketing regulations.

Recently, researchers have suggested the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled systems to monitor marketing restrictions more effectively (Olstad and Boyland, 2023). In light of our findings, this would not be an optimal solution as the AI may not be able to detect the subtle nuances of communication (e.g. when a healthy product is being marketed with similar tools), and especially the sociocultural context of messages. Thus, AI-enabled systems work best when regulations totally ban online marketing of unhealthy food, which currently is not the case in most countries. Furthermore, in light of our findings, the adolescents may not welcome such a total ban either, as they are well aware of the commercial logic behind the influencer industry and that their favourite influencers depend on sponsors to continue producing content in the social media.

This study has provided an example of how the complex issue of unhealthy food marketing could be approached from a sociocultural perspective. It is hoped that the study inspires future research around the area, for instance, in different countries and cultural contexts. For instance, it would be interesting to study unhealthy food marketing in social media in countries, such as Chile, where strict measures have been taken to regulate unhealthy food marketing and see how well these types of bans have managed to evict unhealthy food marketing from social media. Furthermore, also comparisons across different countries could provide interesting new insights into the topic. While this study focused on the unhealthy food marketing to adolescents, future research could also approach other topics from a similar perspective. These could include, for instance, social media shaping the consumption practices of alcohol or tobacco. It would also be possible to completely shift the angle of the study. A sociocultural approach to the social media environment could also be used to analyse how sustainable consumption practices or healthier lifestyles can be supported in social media.

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