

Digital Marketing and Fast-Food Intake

Subjects: Behavioral Sciences

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The connection between digital marketing and consumption behavior in the fast-food industry among the adult population provides a series of essential practical implications for marketing professionals and companies in the sector. The adult population often has a higher purchasing power and more autonomous purchase decisions compared to younger populations, it is vital that companies understand how to influence this demographic segment responsibly. In relation to firm-generated content (FGC), it is essential that brands invest in creating genuine, relevant, and attractive content that resonates with the adult population, warning of harmful consumption patterns. Strategies that go beyond simple promotions and focus on values, healthy lifestyles, and social responsibility might have a more profound impact on this demographic group.

Keywords: fast-food consumption patterns ; social media engagement ; digital marketing ; health implications ; consumer behavior

1. Introduction

In the current society, digitization and the rise of social media have dramatically transformed how businesses engage with their customers and consumers ^{[1][2][3]}. In particular, the fast-food industry has exhibited remarkable adaptability to these shifts, strategically incorporating social media platforms as a core component of their marketing strategy ^{[4][5][6]}. One of the most notable transitions has been the gradual shift from traditional communication and advertising channels (television, radio, and press) to a new landscape where they coexist with social media advertising ^{[4][7]}. Within these platforms, company-generated content plays an essential role in shaping consumer behavior ^{[1][8][9]}. This tool serves as direct promotion, facilitating interaction and engagement with the audience, allowing for bidirectional information flows ^{[4][5][10][11][12]}.

In this context, international fast-food franchises frequently advertise their latest creations and products on these platforms: “Indulge in the Signature Crafted Recipes collection by McDonald’s and discover the sweet and savory flavors from our menu of mouthwatering burgers”; “Enjoy our delicious recipes on single or double 100% fresh beef patties that are sizzled and seasoned on our flat iron grill right when you order” ^[13]. These campaigns are intensively promoted on the brand’s portal and social media, encompassing text, graphics, photos, videos, or reviews from culinary influencers ^{[1][4][14]}. Within hours, the company-generated content becomes available to millions of users ^{[4][9][11]}. Any potential social media user can interact with the brand’s post, make an online purchase, try and taste the product, and share their own experience ^{[6][10][15]}. For instance, a gourmet burger designed by a renowned chef, accompanied by a special sauce that promises to revolutionize the consumer’s palate ^{[16][17]}. This type of advertising strategy, rooted in brand-generated content, is easily replicable for businesses across sizes and sectors ^{[15][18]}.

Concurrently, political, social, and academic concerns about the effects of exposure to fast-food advertisements on social media have been escalating ^{[19][20][21]}. This is, in part, due to repeated warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO) on the health implications of promoting unhealthy diets: “fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and chocolate and confectionery” ^[22]. Recent research has aimed to calibrate these effects, especially among more vulnerable groups like children and adolescents ^{[5][23][24][25][26]}. However, few studies have focused on the repercussions of advertising on consumption patterns among adults. In this regard, prior investigations like those by Bragg, Pageot, Amico, Miller, Gasbarre, Rummo, and Elbel ^[4] identified varying interaction behaviors with advertisements based on the target audience. This ties into the potential of fast food (ultra-processed) as a possible trigger for obesity and related health issues ^[27]. Accordingly, various studies have underscored how cumulative exposure to advertising correlates with fast-food consumption in adults ^{[8][9][28]}.

2. Digital Marketing and Fast-Food Intake

Analysis of the effects of advertisements and marketing communications on food and nutrition has become an emerging research line [29][30][31]. Various studies have provided evidence on the potential adverse effects of advertising on the consumption patterns of unhealthy foods [9][23][25][31]. Research focused on fast food faces the absence of a universally accepted definition of the concept [32].

Within this framework, the impact of advertising on fast food consumption patterns shows significant variations across cultures, influenced by distinct traditions, values, and mindsets [33][34]. While Western societies amplify the promotion of convenience and speed, in cultures with deep culinary traditions, such as Japan or Korea, advertising tends to focus on quality and the fusion of traditional flavors with modern fast-food formats [35][36]. This cultural dichotomy is even more pronounced in the United Arab Emirates, where a massive expatriate population intersects with a rich cultural heritage to create a unique backdrop. Here, the efficacy of social media advertising is shaped by a complexity of sociocultural factors, requiring marketing campaigns to balance universally appealing attributes with local values such as hospitality and family communion during meals [37][38]. Several European studies have shown that food products commonly promoted on television do not adhere to international guidelines (European nutrient profile model of the World Health Organization); for instance, Gallus et al. [39], in a study in Italy, concluded that most food advertisements during children's viewing times violated these directives. Similarly, in Brazil, based on content analysis of advertisements from different brands associated with fast food, Pereira [40] found the same trend. In New Zealand, Vandevijvere et al. [41] mapped convenience stores, fast food, and takeaway outlets, showing that the country's schools are surrounded by marketing of unhealthy foods.

In this vein, the troubling connection between fast-food advertising and public health issues like obesity is evident, underlining notable cultural differences [9][42][43][44]. Although advertising for high-energy, low-nutrient foods is associated with an increasing prevalence of obesity across cultures, reactions to these advertising practices vary widely [5][8][43]. In places where obesity is prevalent, fast-food advertising faces scrutiny and stricter regulations are put in place, demanding that companies promote healthy habits and avoid messages that exploit the most vulnerable [31][45]. Conversely, in cultures with traditionally low obesity rates and an emphasis on dietary moderation, advertising has focused less on health and more on the taste and convenience of fast foods [35][36][46]. However, even these societies are not immune to change, as the growing influence of Western lifestyles and the availability of fast food are introducing new public health challenges that demand attention [31][47].

2.1. Relationships between Firm-Generated Content (FGC), Attitudes towards Social Media Advertising (ASMA), Social Media Engagement (SME), and Online Shopping Behavior

Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, and Kannan [18] conceptualized firm-generated content (FGC) as messages directly emanated by brands on their official platforms and social networks, emphasizing its capability to fortify relationships with customers through the interactive dynamics that social media provides. This variable manifests not only as a conduit offering essential information on products, prices, and promotions, but is also augmented by consumer interactions and evaluations, both positive and negative. In this context, FGC encompasses a variety of content crafted by the brand, including texts, images, videos, and other formats [15][48]. Such content has been shown to have a profound impact in areas like brand recognition, loyalty, and purchase intention [48]. Beyond its intrinsic goals of promotion and engagement [15][48], FGC sways consumer attitudes and values [49], and when paired with positive experiences with products and corporate practices, can result in favorable sentiments [50].

In alignment with this, FGC emerges as a pivotal agent in shaping and adjusting consumer attitudes towards social media advertising (ASMA) [42][48]. This content not only informs but, acting as a paramount source of information, holds the potential to persuade and reshape perceptions [15]. Moreover, due to its ability to incorporate playful and creative elements [38], FGC captures and sustains consumer attention [51]. An illustrative case could be a fast-food restaurant campaign, which, by employing humor and appealing visual design, evokes a more positive response to its social media advertising [52]. This interactive nature of FGC, granting consumers the freedom to express their approval or share content, boosts their engagement [15][48], and could serve as a social endorsement, positively shifting the perceptions of other consumers [53]. Consequently, in juxtaposition with other advertising formats, it may be perceived as more authentic, especially if synergized with user-generated content [15][54].

Recent studies on FGC have suggested that messages disseminated on company-owned social media platforms have the potential to evoke a positive perception and brand image in consumers [55]. However, they emphasize that further research is still needed regarding the impacts of the two types of FGC (emotional and informational) on consumer engagement behaviors (likes, shares, comments). Social media engagement (SME) signifies the level of commitment and interactions evoked by the brand's content [8]. It acts as a catalyst by offering relevant, appealing, or emotional content for

the consumer [8][55]. Frequently, this FGC is designed to be highly shareable, thus encouraging active user participation. For instance, content that encourages sharing pictures enjoying food at an establishment in exchange for a promotion [15][18][53][54]. Cheng, Liu, Qi, and Wan [55] previously found a relationship between informational and emotional FGC with SME, thereby corroborating earlier findings like those of Pansari and Kumar [56]. Additionally, FGC might include specific calls to action aimed at deeper consumer engagement, such as subscribing to newsletters, taking part in contests, engaging in online communities, and can serve to establish feelings of belonging [15][18][53][54].

Online shopping behavior refers to the actions that consumers take in the online environment related to the search, selection, purchase, and post-purchase of products or services [57]. This behavior can be influenced by various factors [58][59], including marketing stimuli such as FGC [26]. Given that FGC serves as a primary source of information for the consumer looking to better understand products [56], FGC can enhance the shopping experience by providing a social and emotional context that enriches the consumer's interaction with the brand [55]. This is especially relevant in the realm of online shopping, where the lack of physical interaction can make consumers feel uncertain [58][59].

2.2. Relationships between Attitudes towards Social Media Advertising (ASMA), Social Media Engagement (SME), Online Shopping Behavior, and Fast Food Pattern (FFP)

The consumer's attitude towards social media advertising (ASMA) not only has the potential to amplify their engagement with certain brands [15][48] but also plays a pivotal role in shaping online purchasing patterns and consumption decisions [43]. This linkage between attitude and engagement is underpinned by the notion that a positive perception of ads can catalyze heightened interaction with the advertising content [42][48]. Furthermore, it has been posited that the attitude towards advertising serves as a significant predictor for both social media participation [60] and online shopping behavior [57][59][61]. In essence, when an individual holds a favorable view of the ads on social media platforms, they are more inclined to interact with brand content [62], which is mirrored in increased digital engagement [63]. For instance, studies have shown that exposure to digital marketing can enhance attitudes and bolster interest in products such as energy drinks [64] and other food items [43]. From a theoretical standpoint, these arguments align with the theory of planned behavior [65] and resonate with the motivations and rewards derived from interacting with advertising [66][67]. In accordance with this theory, positive attitudes towards a product or its advertising often lead to proactive behaviors on social media. Additionally, a favorable attitude towards ads is commonly associated with the perceived utility, entertainment, or informational value they provide [66][67]. In the realm of brand-generated content, a positive attitude towards advertising can manifest in actions like "liking" posts, sharing content, or engaging in brand-related conversations, thereby amplifying the overall engagement rooted in attitudes towards such content [15][18][53][54], and can be an influencing factor in online shopping behavior [58][59][61].

The construct Fast Food Intake Pattern (FFIP) refers to the trends and consumption habits associated with fast food. This variable has been less frequently studied in the academic literature as a dependent variable. Understanding it could be crucial to discern how consumer preferences and behaviors translate into specific food choices, or dietary habits, particularly in the context of fast food. Santoso et al. [68], in their work on sodium intake, outline how consumption patterns are defined by repetitive behavior in a given situation. While the development of habits and patterns in daily routines (like eating) optimizes decisions, they might not always lead to positive outcomes if the products consumed are not healthy [21][23][24][25][26]. Given this, an individual's attitude towards social media advertising could influence their fast-food consumption patterns in various ways. A positive attitude towards ads might make the consumer more inclined to try new products or frequent fast-food restaurants more often [1][6][37][69]. This reasoning is grounded in the Theory of Classical Conditioning [70], where repeated exposure to positive stimuli (in this case, attractive ads on social media) can lead to favorable behavioral responses, such as the choice to consume fast food [71]. For instance, if someone sees a social media ad about a new gourmet burger at a fast-food restaurant and has a positive attitude towards that ad, they are more likely to decide to try that burger on their next restaurant visit. This behavior could become a pattern if the individual finds the experience satisfying [68]. Previous studies in marketing and consumer psychology have demonstrated that attitudes towards advertising can influence purchasing decisions and, by extension, consumption patterns [9][29][43][65][72].

Online shopping behavior (OSB) encompasses the actions and decisions that consumers make when purchasing products online [58][59]. This variable has been extensively studied in the e-commerce context and has been shown to have a significant impact on various aspects of consumer behavior [73][74]. There may be a relationship between online shopping behaviors and fast-food consumption patterns. The underlying logic of this relationship is that individuals more accustomed to shopping online may be more inclined to use fast food delivery services or mobile apps for ordering [75]. This is based on the Technology Acceptance and Use Theory, suggesting that familiarity with technology and usage behavior facilitate the adoption of similar behaviors (placing orders online) [76], and this acceptance could shape their consumption patterns [68]. For instance, those individuals used to purchase other products online might find it easier and

more convenient to use apps to order food from fast-food restaurants, rather than physically visiting the establishment. This behavior might lead to an increase in the frequency with which that person consumes that kind of food, thus establishing a pattern. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that convenience and ease of use are key factors influencing online shopping behavior [59][77].

2.3. The Influence and Moderating Role of Word of Mouth (WOM) on Fast-Food Intake Patterns (FFP)

Word of mouth (WOM) refers to the act of sharing information, opinions, or recommendations about products or services among consumers [78][79]. This phenomenon has been extensively researched in the marketing literature and is deemed one of the most influential methods affecting consumer behavior [80][81].

The linkage between WOM and fast-food consumption patterns (FFPs) is predicated on the notion that recommendations and opinions shared among friends, family, or even influencers concerning brand-generated content can significantly sway an individual's dietary choices [82][83][84]. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, suggesting that attitudes and social influences can shape intention and subsequent behavior through subjective norms (consumer's opinion referents) [85]. For instance, if a close friend positively endorses a newly tried burger from their favorite fast-food restaurant, the likelihood of one being inclined to taste the said food increases. Such endorsements could escalate the frequency of such food consumption, fostering specific consumption patterns [68].

The previous literature suggests that WOM can serve as a moderating factor in various consumer behavior relationships [86][87], including the impact of advertising on purchase decisions [87][88]. In the context of attitudes towards social media advertising (ASMA) and fast-food consumption patterns (FFP), WOM might play a moderating role. Peer or influencer opinions could either bolster or counteract advertising messages, adding another layer of influence on the consumer's decision-making process. For instance, a consumer might be positively swayed by an advertisement for a new burger at a fast-food restaurant. However, prior to finalizing the purchase decision, they may come across unfavorable online reviews, prompting them to reconsider. This negative WOM could diminish or even negate the initial positive effect that the advertisement had on their attitude [80][86][89]. Therefore, it is plausible to posit that WOM might moderate the relationship between attitudes towards social media advertising and fast-food consumption patterns.

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