



Unhealthy Digital Food Marketing To Children In The **Philippines**



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Executive Summary

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), as part of its commitment to address problems of unhealthy diets and increasing rates of overweight and obesity amongst children, commissioned a study of digital food marketing in the Philippines. The study, undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, aimed to identify marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic drinks (‘food’) in social media, its appeal to children aged 5-17 years and marketing strategies used by these products and brands that appeal to children in the Philippines.

Monitoring food marketing is critical in order to understand which foods and beverages are being promoted, whether these are considered to contribute to a healthy diet, and how marketing strategies develop emotional associations with products to increase their appeal. These factors combine to indicate children’s and adolescent’s ‘advertised diet’. This ‘advertised diet’ is the marketing that children consume in the media, and there is extensive evidence that it influences their food preferences, requests and eating.

The Filipino food marketing landscape was scanned by a digital media analysis company (Quilt.AI) based in the East Asia Pacific region. This scan focused on less healthy foods, drawing on food categories developed for the World Health Organization (WHO) [Western Pacific Region](#), to assess the unhealthy foods that are most searched for online, and identify social media influencers with the greatest impact for children and carers. Food marketing on social media was analysed by a Philippines-based research company (Integrative Competitive Intelligence), drawing on WHO [Protocols](#) for monitoring digital marketing to children. A small survey of Filipino children’s digital media use was also carried out by Integrative Competitive Intelligence. This study and the scan both identified Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram as the most popular platforms with children aged under 18 years in the Philippines.

On Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, brand pages for 20 of the Philippines’ most popular food products and brands were identified. These were fast food chain restaurants, salty snacks, noodles and cheese, ice cream, chocolate and cakes, and carbonated, milk and yogurt beverages. From these brand pages, the most recently available 20 marketing posts (stills and videos) were selected for analysis (N=1035 posts in total). First, nutrient analyses were carried out, applying the WHO nutrient criteria for the Western Pacific Region to assess whether the brands and products promoted contributed to a less healthy diet and whether or not they should be permitted to be marketed to children. Next, the key communication strategies of the posts and videos were assessed: which age groups they appealed to, and the marketing strategies they used (e.g., fun, taste, price, family, friendship etc).

The study found:

- **Filipino children aged 5-17 years who have access to the internet are avid users**, with 71% reporting 6-12 hours daily internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily for games, browsing, social media use and shopping as well as school.
- **Children’s favoured social media sites are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube** and they use these for 1-2 hours daily.

- **Children said they did not like advertising on the internet, but food ads were different.** They described liking ads for burgers, pizza, fries, fried chicken, milk tea, doughnuts, and instant noodles, and said they asked their parents to buy foods they saw online.
- **Social media influencers with high appeal to children frequently feature food, taste tests, food challenges and hacks, and food product sponsorship.** Their many followers across these platforms (hundreds of thousands to millions) receive positive messages about foods that are not recommended for marketing to children due to high sugar and salt levels such as chocolate, chocolate spread, instant noodles, breakfast cereals and ice cream.
- **When searching for less healthy foods online,** consumers in the Philippines show particular interest in yoghurt, sour milk and cream products, cheese, cakes, sweet biscuits and other pastries, flavoured and carbonated beverages, edible ices and chocolate. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large spike was seen in online search for yoghurt-based drinks and similar dairy products.
- **99% of social media marketing posts are not permitted for marketing to children according to WHO guidelines,** based on 1035 marketing posts and videos from 20 popular food and beverage brands and products in the Philippines.
- **72% of marketing posts were appealing to children, 84% appealing to adolescents.**
- **One in five posts that appeal to children and adolescents feature Filipino sporting and media celebrities (including children).**
- **Social media marketing in the Philippines communicates that unhealthy foods are**
 - *Fun*
 - *Tasty*
 - *Enjoyable*
 - *Healthy and nutritious*
 - *Promote family love*
 - *Make celebrations special*
 - *Support physical activity.*

Overall, therefore, this food marketing monitoring study found that in the Philippines, social media is almost 100% saturated with marketing for unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages. Interest levels are high in the Philippines for these products. This means that an almost entirely unhealthy 'advertised diet' is promoted to children and families, creating emotional associations of fun, love, sharing and health with these foods, and draws on the 'star' power of local sporting and media celebrities.

The implications of the study are stark. Children of all ages are likely to find much of this marketing appealing, and they report that they like food ads for these and similar products. They are frequently exposed to media cues they view positively, encouraging them to consume these unhealthy products, and creating associations with positive feelings and behaviours. Beyond direct marketing through social media brand pages and channels, children also view content from popular social media influencers who engage in food challenges, games and other entertainment featuring commercial products not recommended for marketing to children. Research demonstrates that food brand associations are formed in children's earliest years, before their food and nutrition knowledge starts to develop, and that these associations develop through the childhood years and persist into adulthood. Social media food marketing in the Philippines, as one part of a complex obesogenic system, is likely to contribute to the ill-health of children throughout childhood and beyond.

In line with the WHO Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children [1], four recommendations are proposed to the Government of Philippines that will protect children's rights, support healthy diets and prevent overweight and obesity.

1. **Enact legal regulations** to restrict media marketing of unhealthy items and brands addressed to, and accessible to, children including adolescents, in line with the 'best interests' principle of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child.
2. **Ensure regulations are comprehensive** and address key digital media marketing strategies such as influencer marketing.
3. **Monitor and enforce regulations** in all forms of media including digital media.
4. **Promote nutrition and media literacy** among professionals and families to increase awareness about the impact of unhealthy food marketing on the attitudes, preferences, eating and health of children, adolescents and families. Literacy is important, but it cannot protect children and families from the impact of advertising exposure.

Introduction

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), as part of its commitment to address problems of unhealthy diets and increasing rates of overweight and obesity amongst children, commissioned a study of digital food marketing in the Philippines. This aimed to identify marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic drinks ('food') in social media, its appeal to children including adolescents (under-18s) and marketing strategies used by these products and brands that appeal to children in the Philippines.

The UNICEF State of the World's Children Report [2] examines why increasing numbers of children globally – including in the Philippines – are eating too much unhealthy food. One systemic factor is food marketing and advertising. These make up children's and adolescent's 'advertised diet', a media diet that goes on to influence their actual diet, as it shapes children's and families' preferences, purchases and diet – and contributes to poor quality diets, including in countries experiencing nutrition transitions.

The impact of food marketing on children's preferences, requests, purchases and consumption has been widely demonstrated in research reviews and meta-analyses [3-6]. Exposure to unhealthy food marketing prompts children to eat more, increasing intake of calories that is not compensated for later, and this has sustained impact on diet quality and body weight over time. The World Health Organization (WHO) has concluded that there is unequivocal evidence [7] that marketing affects eating and that childhood obesity is influenced by consumption of such unhealthy items.

Over a decade ago, the World Health Assembly endorsed the WHO's 2010 Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children [1]. These Recommendations concluded that children's *exposure* to such marketing and its persuasive *power* influences behavioural outcomes (such as preferences, purchase requests and consumption). *Exposure* refers to the volume of marketing children see, determined by the frequency of marketing messages and their reach (i.e., *how many messages reach children and via which media?*). *Power* refers to the creative content, design and execution of messages that enhance their persuasive appeal (i.e., *what techniques are particularly effective in persuading children?*). Therefore, WHO recommends that member states implement restrictive policies that limit children's exposure to such marketing; to reduce its power; and to do so comprehensively in all settings where children gather.

Calls to effectively protect children from food marketing have since been made repeatedly by UN Special Rapporteurs, the WHO, and many civil society bodies [3,5,8,9]. The 2016 WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity noted that unhealthy food marketing remained a major public health issue worldwide despite some industry self-regulation, and in a 2016 transdisciplinary review, the WHO identified the challenges and child rights issues associated with the complex advertising digital ecosystem [3].

Food marketing is increasingly being identified as a practice that infringes children's rights [3,10,11] (per the United Convention on the Rights of the Child, those under 18 years of age). Calls to regulate unhealthy food marketing on digital devices (digital food marketing) have been growing apace [5,8,9]. These specify the need to protect not just younger children but also adolescents, due in part to adolescents' extensive use of digital media, but also due to the ways in which adolescents are extensively targeted by marketers and features of their development that contribute to their vulnerability [3]. It is important to bear in mind that there is increasing understanding that even though advertising literacy does increase with age, in line with evolving capacities, it is not the sole means by which to protect children, including adolescents, from the impact of such marketing. This is because effective advertising works via emotional routes, bypassing cognitive awareness, and requires motivation to resist [2,3,10]. This may be particularly the case for some digital media. Taking a fully developmental and child rights view requires assessing evolving capacities and vulnerabilities in multiple domains including the cognitive but also beyond it.

Impact of digital marketing and its relationship with digital media behaviours

An emergent body of survey and experimental evidence, systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrates that, just as for television food marketing, digital food marketing also affects children's food behaviours and attitudes.

In the naturalistic setting of four six-day holiday camps in Australia, snack consumption in children aged 7 to 12 years was measured. Those who viewed an online game and a television cartoon ate more at a snack after exposure to food advertising compared with non-food advertising. Importantly, the extra daily 194Kj (46 Kcal) were not compensated for at a subsequent meal, meaning that frequent exposure would be sufficient to lead to weight gain over time [12]. In the same sample, there was a particular effect on snack intake among children whose parents reported pressuring them to eat: these children consumed an additional 356 kJ (85 kcal) after viewing food advertising compared with non-food advertising. Similar effects have also been found for the impact of social media influencer marketing on eating in the UK. Children (9-11 years) who were exposed to Instagram images of popular influencers promoting unhealthy foods consumed 60kcal more than those who were shown influencers with non-food products. Exposure to social media influencers promoting unhealthy foods in YouTube videos also resulted in children consuming more of the advertised snack than a similar alternative, an effect not found when influencers promoted non-food items [13, 14].

In May 2010, the World Health Assembly unanimously adopted the WHO Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children [1] that aim to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods. These included recommendations that:

- children’s exposure to marketing communications as well as the power of such communications should be reduced through policy implementation;
- governments should set clear definitions of marketing;
- policies should be comprehensive, addressing all forms of marketing; and
- monitoring and enforcement should be applied to ensure policies are effectively achieving the stated aims.

Furthermore, in 2021, the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), at its 86th session, adopted its [general comment No. 25 \(2021\) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment](#). According to paragraph 41 of GC25, “States parties should make the best interests of the child a primary consideration when regulating advertising and marketing addressed to and accessible to children.”

Despite these recommendations, regulation of unhealthy food marketing to children currently relies largely on the advertising industry, food brands and manufacturers to self- or co-regulate, even though self-regulation has been demonstrated to have little effect [9].

To inform effective regulation protecting children from unhealthy marketing, it is essential to monitor food marketing. This allows policymakers to understand which foods and beverages are being promoted, and how marketing strategies develop emotional associations with products to increase their appeal. Reviews to date of methods to monitor children’s exposure to digital food marketing and its power indicate that specific and comprehensive methods remain elusive [15]. This means that researchers must draw on a patchwork of methods to build a picture of the extent and nature of marketing that children are exposed to.

In 2020, a Philippines-based research company (Integrative Competitive Intelligence), and a digital media analysis company based in the region (Quilt.AI) were commissioned by UNICEF to scan the Filipino food marketing landscape, and to assess marketing on social media channels likely to appeal to children, drawing on World Health Organization (WHO) [Protocols](#) [16] for monitoring digital marketing to children. This report sets out selected aspects of their findings to describe the extent and nature of marketing of unhealthy items in the Philippines.

The study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic; a time of ‘enhanced community quarantine’ or lockdowns, and school closures. As a result, children spent much more time at home leading to heightened use of digital media and even greater opportunities for digital marketing.

Part 1 summarises key findings from the survey of children in Baguio and Cebu about their digital media practices and attitudes to advertising. It also presents some data on key influencers in the Philippines as well as the foods most searched for online, both in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part 2 presents findings regarding the online food marketing landscape, including social media influencers in the Philippines, and Filipino users’ online searches before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-20).

Part 3 analyses the nutrient content of food marketing on the social media platforms most popular with children in the Philippines. It then presents an analysis of the power of marketing – the persuasive appeals and marketing strategies employed to appeal to children of all ages and their families.



PART 1

Children's digital media use in the Philippines

Filipinos are avid social media users. They are among the world's greatest users of Facebook, with 96% of the population accessing it in 2020 [17] and 93% identified as actively engaged. Data from the Philippines pilot of the Global Kids Online study indicate that not only adults but also children are active internet and social media users [18]. Although the terms and conditions of social media platforms require users to be aged 13 years and over, data from around the world indicates that children are also active on these platforms and the Philippines is no exception. However, information about which platforms Filipino children use and how long they spend on them was not available. Therefore, this study of digital media marketing was carried out to survey of children's digital media practices in the Philippines.

Method

The Integrative Competitive Intelligence research company explored the online media consumption and practices of children, aged 5 to 17 years, in two urban areas in the Philippines (Baguio and Cebu), with the aim of describing their patterns of digital and social media use. The study was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, so it took place online, meaning that all participating children were required to have reliable access to the internet.

The research team recruited participants via Facebook and Instagram public posts to parents and guardians (not directly to children), giving information on the locations and the purpose of the study. Those who responded were contacted immediately via direct message to setup an online video or phone call to communicate further the study purpose, answer questions or give clarifications, and provide supporting documentation from the study sponsor and the ethical clearance from the relevant Filipino ethics committee. Informed parental consent and assent forms were obtained before proceeding with any data collection. Because of the target participants' age range, parents and guardians observed them while answering the survey.

Researchers surveyed children via Zoom with a combination of open and close-ended questions that focused on internet device usage, duration and pattern of usage, choice of apps and social media, and awareness of ads. In total, 90 children were surveyed of whom 9 also took part in interviews.

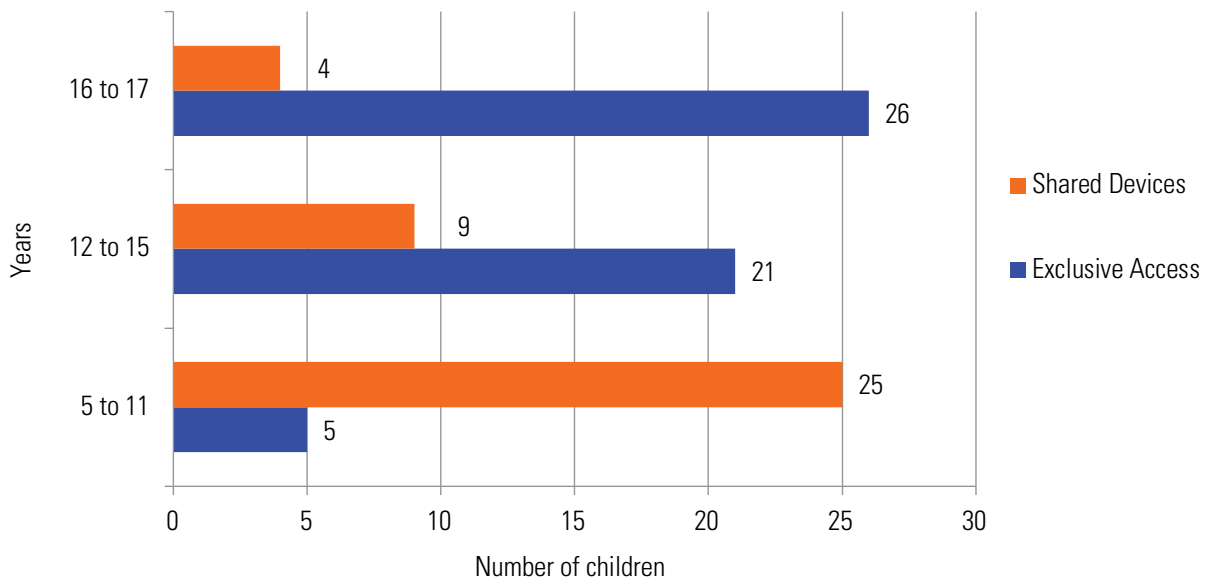
While not representative of the Philippines' child population, this sample still provided indicative data about media practices and preferences among young Filipinos.

Results

Access to digital devices reported by children in the Philippines

Over half of the 5-to-17-year olds (58%, n= 52) participating in this survey reported having exclusive use of internet devices while 42% shared one with parents. Sharing of digital devices with parents diminishes as children get older: of 5-11-year olds, only 17% have their own devices but by the time they are 16-17 years old, 87% children reported having exclusive access to an Internet device (Figure 1).

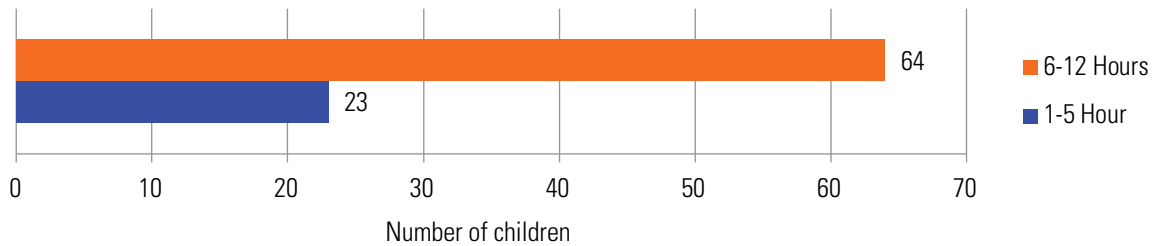
Figure 1: Children's access to digital internet devices



Extent of use of digital media by Filipino children

The extent of internet use described by the participants in this survey was high (Figure 2). Of the 87 participants who answered this question, 71% (n=64) reported using an Internet device for 6-12 hours per day.

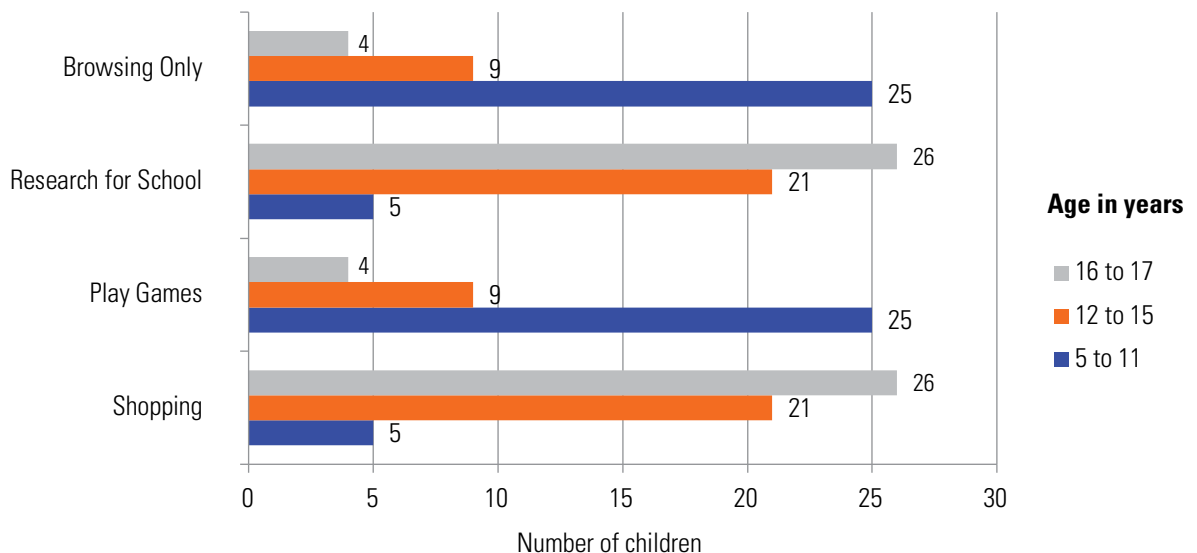
Figure 2: Number of hours devices used per day



Activities engaged in while using digital media

Patterns of use on the Internet vary with age (Figure 3). Online games and browsing only were most popular amongst the 5-11-year olds, with these activities reported by 83% of these younger children (n=25). Although browsing and play were still reported by some 12-15-year olds, research for school and shopping online were much more frequently seen among the 12-15- and 16-17-year-old groups, where 87% (n = 26) of the older children reported these activities and 70% (n=21) of the 12-15-year-old children did so.

Figure 3: Most frequent activities during internet usage, by age

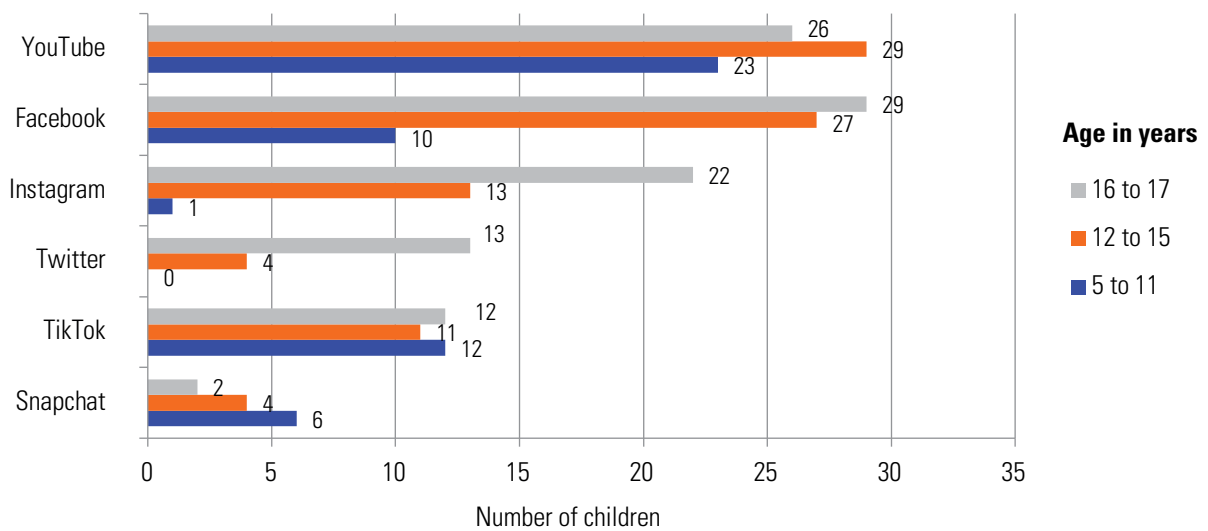


Social media apps used

Facebook and Instagram allow users to interact with their peers, friends, relatives, and famous celebrities that they follow. YouTube has become increasingly popular because of its accessibility to content creators. Snapchat provides added opportunity for creativity and special effects. Tiktok allows users to share and interact with short video clips and longer form live streams.

Of social media apps, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram were the most popular amongst children of all ages in this survey of 90 children in Bagiuo and Cebu (Figure 4). In particular among children aged 12-17 years, YouTube and Facebook were used by almost all, with the 16-17 year olds slightly favouring Facebook while the 12-15 year olds slightly favoured YouTube. Interestingly, a third of 5-11 year olds reported using Facebook and Tiktok despite their young age, and three-quarters of these younger children also used YouTube.

Figure 4: Social media apps used, by age



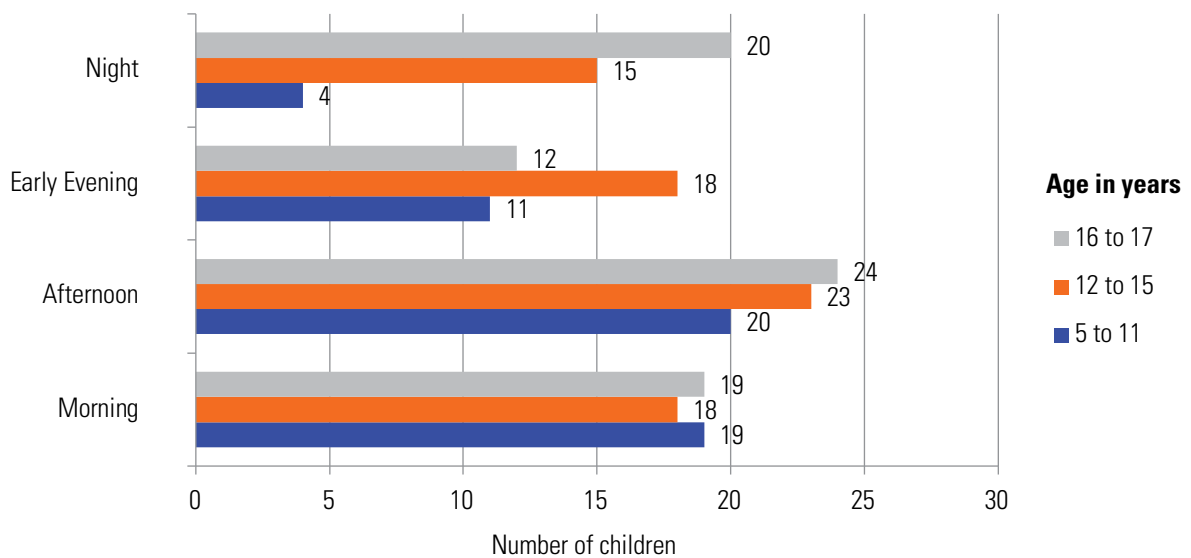
As Facebook, Instagram and YouTube carry extensive advertising to monetise their platforms, the extensive use reported by Filipino children of these platforms has implications for their well-being and physical health.

71% of children spent 6-12 hours a day on the internet during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were the most popular channels and carried extensive advertising for unhealthy food and drink.

Older children in this survey reported using social media apps the most in the afternoon and night (Figure 5). The 5-11-year olds do so more in the morning and afternoon. Older interview participants indicated that they also access social media apps for school research and to communicate with classmates to ask for help for an assignment. This suggests that even while carrying out homework, children may be exposed to advertising for unhealthy foods.

Figure 5: Time of day when using social media apps

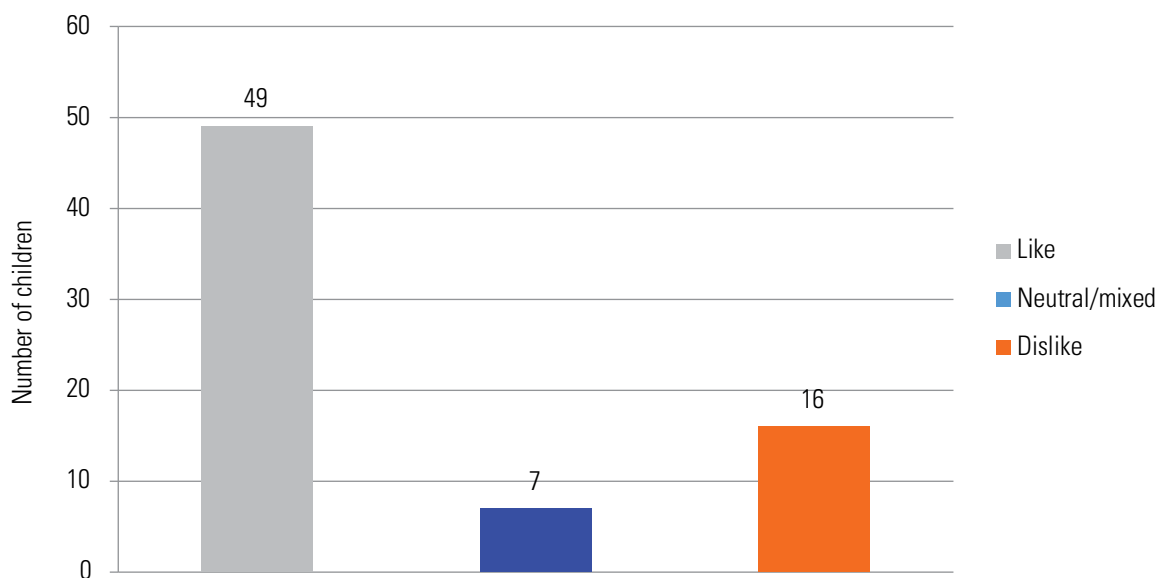


Attitude to food and beverage ads

Almost all survey respondents had seen food and beverage ads online and most (58%) reported seeing ads for fast food franchises, followed by milk drinks, other beverages and food retailers.

Of the 90 children participating in the survey, 72 responded to a question about their attitude to ads for foods and beverages online (Figure 6). Over two-thirds liked these ads (n=49; 68%) and 10% (n=7) liked some or were neutral about them. Just one in five respondents, 22%, disliked seeing foods ads. Not all of them gave reasons for liking the ads, but most responses centred around taste.

Figure 6: Children’s attitudes to food and beverage ads online



Children described enjoying seeing ads for food and drinks including burgers, pizza, fries, fried chicken, milk tea, doughnuts, and instant noodles. They also reported requesting that their parents purchase these items. Note that these are the types of products studied in the social media analysis (Part 2).

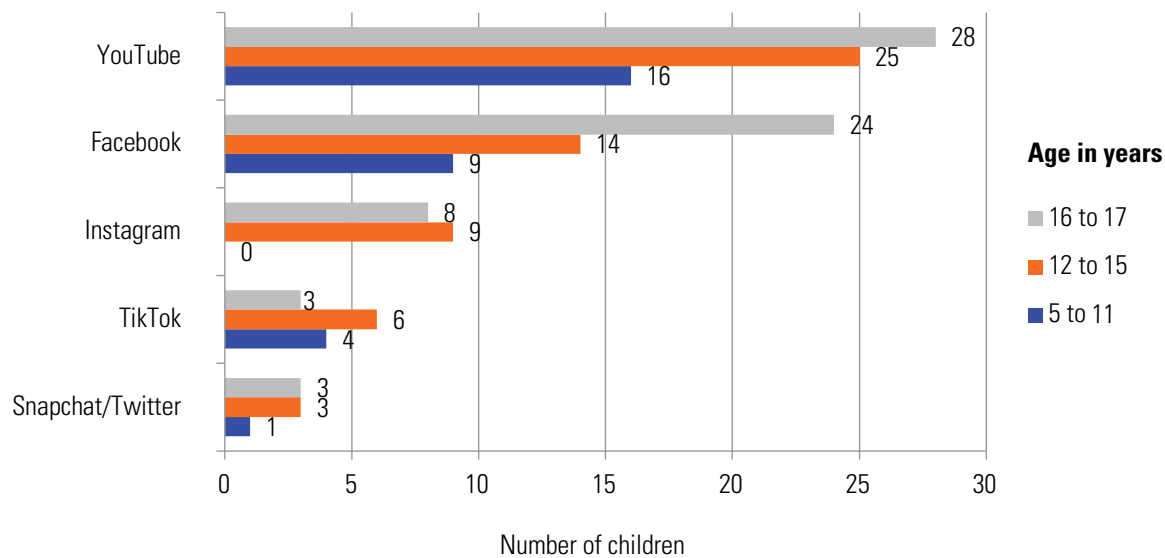
Filipino children said they like ads for burgers, pizza, fries, fried chicken, milk tea, doughnuts, and instant noodles.

Social media influencers and the platforms on which children follow them

Influencers are an important part of 21st century children’s media landscapes [19]. They post videos in social media, showing themselves engaging in funny and enjoyable activities, often featuring food. Children form close, ‘parasocial’ friendship-type bonds with these media characters whom they find more authentic than many celebrities.

The survey of children aged 5-17-years found that YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are the most popular apps on which children follow celebrities and influencers (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Apps on which children follow celebrities and influencers





PART 2

Digital media and food marketing landscape

For Part 2 of this study, the digital media landscape in the Philippines was explored by Quilt.AI, identifying social media influencers most popular with children, young people and carers in the Philippines as well as Filipino online search habits for less healthy foods.

Method

In order to identify influencers with the greatest reach among children, young people, and carers in the Philippines, Quilt.AI created an influencer score based on their following across all available platforms. By normalizing popularity within each platform before averaging each platform following score, the popularity of influencers was compared across platforms.

Filipinos' interest in less healthy foods was also explored via their online search behaviours, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the WHO categories assessing foods for permission to marketing to children in the region, six categories of products were identified as 'unhealthy' as the nutrient thresholds for marketing to children for these usually exceed permitted levels. These were: Savoury Snacks, Sugary Foods, Convenience Foods, Breakfast Cereals, Milk Drinks, and Carbonated Beverages and Sweet Juices. For each of these six food categories, at least 10 products were identified through top e-commerce websites and search behaviour. Through an analysis of a total of 4,306,640 online searches in the Philippines between October 2019 to June 2020, search interest for these products was identified.

Results

Social media influencers that appeal to children

The most popular influencer was [Niana Guerrero](#) (Figure 8). A 15-year-old dancer who creates music and also features K-pop stars in her videos, she has an extensive following in the [Philippines and internationally](#). She and her brother frequently post videos featuring themselves engaging in food and eating 'challenges' often involving major fast food and retail food brands.

The Trinidad Siblings were the second most popular, a brother and sister duo with several million followers who post funny videos, featuring pranks, weird food combinations and colours and also mukbang videos (where excessive quantities of food are eaten at speed).

Figure 8: Key influencer score

Influencer	Score
Niana Guerrero	1.00
The Trinidad Siblings	0.14
Iamsuperbianca	0.12
Fun Fun Tyang Amy	0.12
Andi Manzano	0.08
Kaycee & Rachel in Wonderland Family	0.07
Yesha Camile	0.03
Bikbik	0.01
Jadh	0.01

Thus, the two influencers with exceptional reach in the Philippines are particularly appealing to children and young people and frequently feature unhealthy foods and eating practices in their videos. Consistent with this, the images in Figure 9 illustrate that popular influencers in the Philippines frequently feature food in their content. In particular the young ones with appeal for children feature unhealthy items such as gummy sweets, chocolate, chocolate spread, instant noodles and cookie-flavoured breakfast cereal. This is an important element of Filipino children's 'advertised diet', showing unhealthy foods as part of their peer group or sibling bonding and as a way of having fun and enjoying good tastes and laughter together.

Popular social media influencers who appeal to children often featured unhealthy foods and eating behaviours in their posts.

MEGA INFLUENCERS: VIRALITY

Whether it's food, toys or just plain having fun, these domestic influencers have more than a million followers for their original content.



Niana Guerrero

A vlog with viral food challenges that features her YouTube influencer siblings



TRINIDAD SIBLINGS

A sibling affair; they show recipes for local dishes and also perform food challenges



KAYCEE & RACHEL

A glimpse into the siblings life, this viral sisters explore different foods through taste tests

MICRO CHILD INFLUENCERS

With more than a hundred thousand followers, these homegrown child influencers are increasingly popular. Seeing the world for the first time, viewers share their awe and surprise as they experience everyday situations. They have high credibility among other children.



Yesha Camile

Comprises of vlogs about growing up and food challenges with family members



Jadh

He engages in "color" food challenges and viral TikTok food hacks



BikBik

Taking on product sponsorships, she reviews their tastes as well as convenience.

MICRO MOTHER INFLUENCERS

YouTube channels by mothers that are popular in the Philippines do not only tackle motherhood and children's nutrition but also other issues such as family life and relationships.



iamsuperbianca

Focus on nutritious food for kids and other matters, this mother is also popular for life lessons.



Andi Manzano

This mommy shares tips on how and what food she is feeding her daughter and on parenting.



Fun Fun Tyang Amy

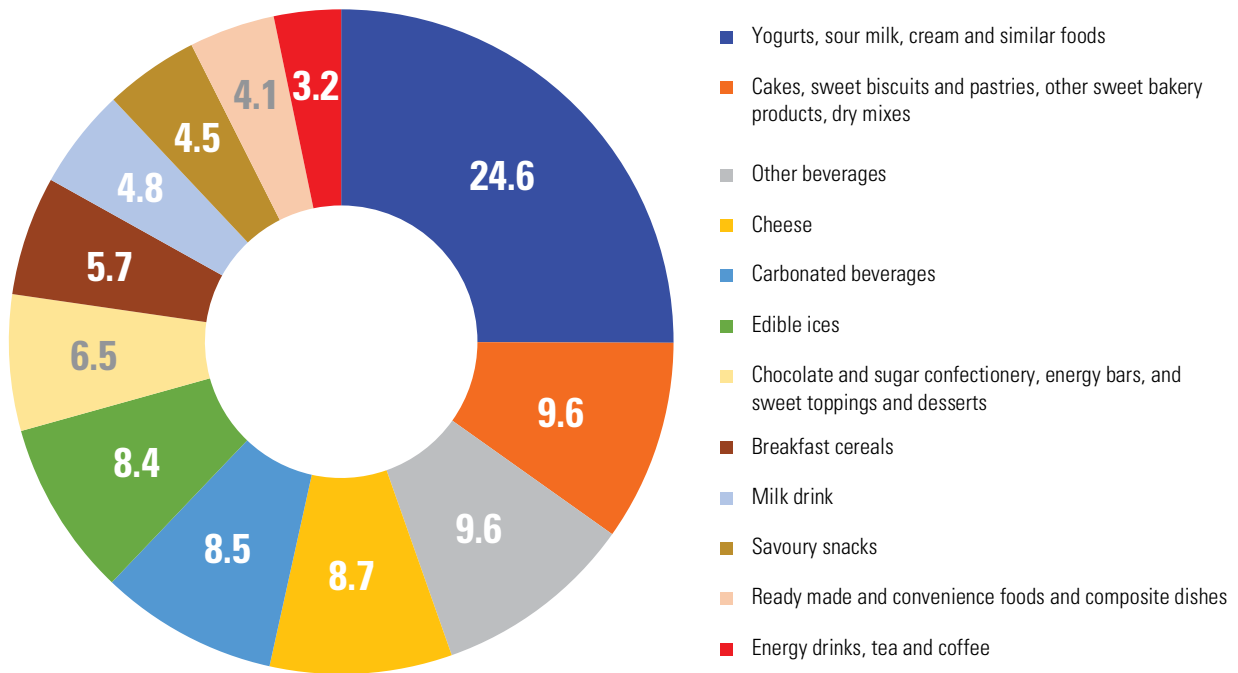
A vlog series that includes recipes, cooking tips and other content.

Figure 9: Key influencers popular with children and carers in the Philippines

Searching online in the Philippines in general and during the Covid-19 pandemic

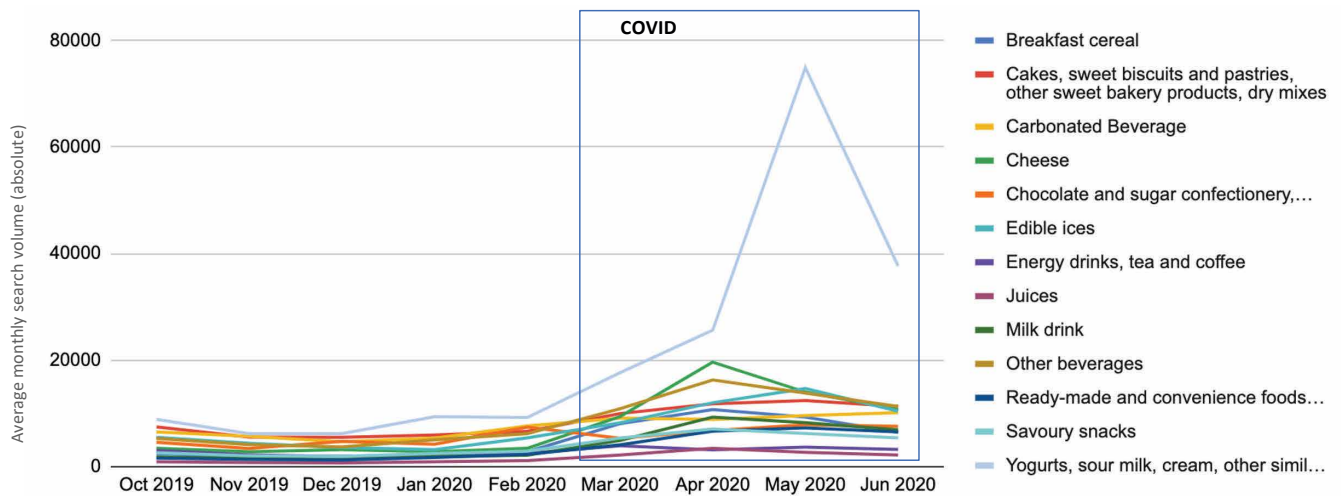
Filipinos' interest in tasty but less healthy foods was explored via their online search behaviours, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Investigations of the less healthy items most searched for online by internet users in general (not segmented by age group) show that flavoured yogurts (generally high in sugar) as well as dairy foods including cheese, sweet foods and various flavoured beverages are the most popular (Figure 10). Many of these items were the focus of the social media marketing analysis in Part 3 of this report.

Figure 10: Searches of less healthy food groups by Filipinos



During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a surge in interest in some less healthy categories of foods with a particular spike in search interest in sweetened yogurts and other dairy products including cheese and milk drinks (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Searches of particular food groups by Filipinos during the Covid-19 pandemic



Overall, therefore, online search behaviour in the Philippines and studies identifying popular influencers indicate the ongoing popularity of unhealthy foods. In Part 3, the study turns to the brands and products to examine their social media marketing strategies more closely and the appeal they have for children.

There was an increase in internet searches for some types of unhealthy foods during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5650
24.00

WHATIA TOPS
Mande Cheese Bar
Mande MAMON

42.00

51.25

48.50

82.00

24.00

15.00

50.75
58.80
56.00

34.75
20.36

45.00

7.50
54.75
25.50

7.50

24.00

15.00

PART 3

Social media analysis of food and beverage products and brands

Part 3 analyses the nutrient content of food marketing on the social media platforms most popular with children in the Philippines. It presents an analysis of the power of marketing – the persuasive appeals and marketing strategies employed to appeal to children of all ages and their families.

Method

To carry out the social media analysis of food marketing, the process and protocols outlined in the [WHO Protocols and Templates](#) for Monitoring of Marketing of Unhealthy Products to Children and Adolescents [16] were followed.

Selecting platforms for the study

The social media/ media sharing platforms most used in the Philippines that also feature advertising were selected for the study. These were Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Next, a set of 20 food and non-alcoholic beverage brands popular with Filipino consumers, that also had a Philippines social media presence and potential interest for children, was identified.

Selecting products and brands for the study

To identify the most relevant brands to assess on social media, the study drew together data sources on food and social media in the Philippines:

- a) Sales data of retail food and beverage brands and products and fast-food restaurants in the Philippines;
- b) Products with less relevance to children and young people were removed. Ingredients that require engagement with cooking were removed (e.g., lard products), but products that require only quick preparation or addition to others were retained (e.g., seasonings, instant noodles, cheese);
- c) Facebook Ad Manager analyses were carried to assess whether brands or key products were relevant for under-18 audiences.

Combining these information sources, a ranked list of brands and products was developed by the research team. Researchers then examined brand pages on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to identify up to 20 different posts or videos for each brand. To capture the brand’s range of advertised products and strategies, repeat posts were counted to measure posting frequency, but analyses focused on the 20 unique posts.

Assessing the healthiness of products featured in social media

Nutrient Profiling is recognized by WHO as a critical evidence-based tool for implementing restrictions on the marketing of foods to children. It is designed to support protection of children from food marketing, as specified in the WHO *Action Plan to Reduce the Double Burden of Malnutrition in the Western Pacific Region (2015–2020)* [20] by identifying foods that ‘should be prohibited’ from marketing to children. Nutrient profiling is a widely used means to identify those foods and non-alcoholic beverages that are less likely to be part of a healthy diet, as they contribute to excess consumption of energy, saturated fats, trans fats, sugar, and salt. Products and brands advertised are coded for their nutrient content to identify whether items are permitted for marketing to children.

Nutrient profiling in the region

The Philippines played an active role in the development of the 2016 *WHO Nutrient Profile Model for the Western Pacific Region* [21]. This model was piloted in eight countries in the region including the Philippines, and it was assessed at a WHO Technical Meeting of the eight countries in Manila in 2015. Multiple adaptations were made from existing European models, such as including region-specific foods and drinks, and increasing the levels of fat permitted in milk drinks, to apply appropriate thresholds and adaptations for local products. The model was adopted at a WHO Western Pacific Region meeting in 2016.

The model requires researchers to identify the categories of foods advertised (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Food category according to the WHO Western Pacific regional nutrient profile model

WHO Western Pacific Region Nutrient Profile Model Category	
1	Chocolate and sugar confectionery, energy bars, and sweet toppings and desserts
2	Cakes, sweet biscuits and pastries, other sweet bakery products, dry mixes for making such
3	Savoury snacks
4	Beverages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Juices b) Milk drinks c) Energy drinks, tea and coffee d) Other beverages
5	Edible ices
6	Breakfast cereals
7	Yogurts, sour milk, cream, other similar foods
8	Cheese
9	Ready-made and convenience foods and composite dishes

WHO Western Pacific Region Nutrient Profile Model Category	
10	Butter and other fats and oils
11	Bread, bread products and crisp breads
12	Fresh or dried noodles, pasta, rice and grains
13	Fresh and frozen meat, poultry, fish and similar
14	Processed meat, poultry, fish and similar
15	Fresh and frozen fruit, vegetables and legumes
16	Processed fruit, vegetables and legumes
17	Products made from soya
18	Sauces, dips and dressings

For each category, the model specifies different cut-off values per 100g for total fat, saturated fat, total sugars, added sugars, non-sugar artificial sweeteners, sodium and energy (Kcal). Items with higher values are not considered suitable for marketing to children.

Nutrient profiling in this study

Where possible, the details of nutrients were sourced from information supplied by products and brands themselves. However, in the Philippines, not all brands routinely share with consumers the nutrient information required for profiling. In these cases, nutrient information was sought from Philippines websites, such as online shopping sites and image searches to find photos of Philippines-originating nutrient panels from product packaging. Nutrition experts and food databases were also consulted if necessary. Where nutrient information could not be identified for some products from a brand range (e.g., sodium values for some potato chips and instant noodle flavours), the ranges and average values were calculated across all available flavours to identify whether any products would be permitted for marketing to children. Where no local nutrient information could be sourced, nutrient information was sourced from the US if the products for that brand were described identically. Finally, some ads feature food brands rather than showcasing specific products. As nutrient profiling requires a product to be identified, the product most visibly featured on the brand's consumer-facing Philippines website was selected for nutrient profiling, as per the guidelines in the [WHO Protocols](#) for monitoring food marketing [16].

Persuasive appeals and messaging

One piece of the social media marketing picture is provided by identifying whether or not marketed foods meet regional WHO guidelines for healthiness, so that they are permitted for marketing to children.

Beyond categorising marketed foods on health grounds, however, it is important also to assess the *messaging* that brands and their advertisers engage in to attract and capture the attention of consumers in the Philippines. The study therefore went on to identify the primary ways in which foods were advertised – the 'persuasive appeals' and marketing strategies that advertisers engage in. Here, the study also followed the processes specified in the [WHO Protocols](#) for monitoring of marketing of food to children and young people in digital media [16].

In total, 20 brands and products with a presence on social media in the Philippines were selected for analysis. These represented a mix of Philippines and global brands and products:

- 3 fast food chain restaurants
- 4 carbonated or powdered flavoured soft drinks
- 4 sweetened flavoured milk and yoghurt-based drinks
- 2 cheese products
- 1 ice cream brand
- 1 potato chips brand
- 1 instant noodle brand
- 1 seasoning brand
- 3 chocolate/cake-based brands and products.

For each brand/product, the Philippines-based Facebook, YouTube and (where available) Instagram accounts were identified, and advertising posts and videos shared on these pages were analysed. The team analysed up to 20 unique ads per brand per platform, or as close to this number as possible, depending on how active the brands were on each site.

Results

Social media posts not permitted for marketing to children

Across all three social media platforms, the study extracted 1035 advertising posts and videos: 453 Facebook advertising posts and videos, 232 Instagram posts and videos, and 350 YouTube videos (Figure 13). Of these, 924 were unique, non-repeated posts. A third were brand ads that promoted the food or beverage brand overall but did not specifically feature a product.

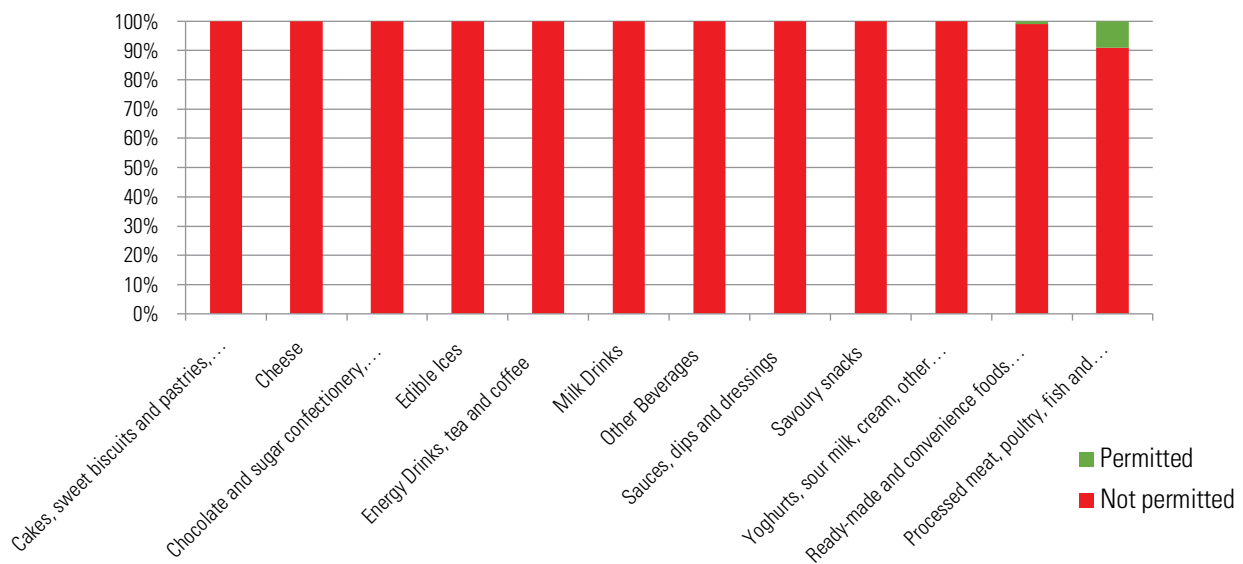
Figure 13: Number of brands (and brand ads assessed by platform)

	Unique	Total (including repeat posts)	N brand ads of total	% total ads that were brand ads
Facebook	405	453	166	37%
Instagram	208	232	97	42%
YouTube	311	350	84	20%
Total	924	1035	347	33.5%

All marketing posts and videos were analysed to identify the profile of nutrients of the products and brands featured, according to WHO Nutrient Profiling criteria for the Region [14]. This involved assessing the fat, sugars, sodium and energy (kcal) in these items according to WHO criteria for different food categories. Almost all posts assessed, 99%, were not permitted for advertising to children (Figure 14).

99% of digital marketing posts are for unhealthy foods not recommended for children. Most are considered unhealthy because they have too much sugar or salt

Figure 14: Ads in each category permitted for advertising to children



According to this analysis of the WHO criteria for the Western Pacific Region, **fewer than 1% of the total 1035 marketing posts analysed were permitted for marketing to children** (Figure 15):

- 0.9% of 453 Facebook ads analysed were permitted;
- 0.3% of 350 YouTube ads were permitted;
- 1.3% of 232 Instagram ads were permitted.

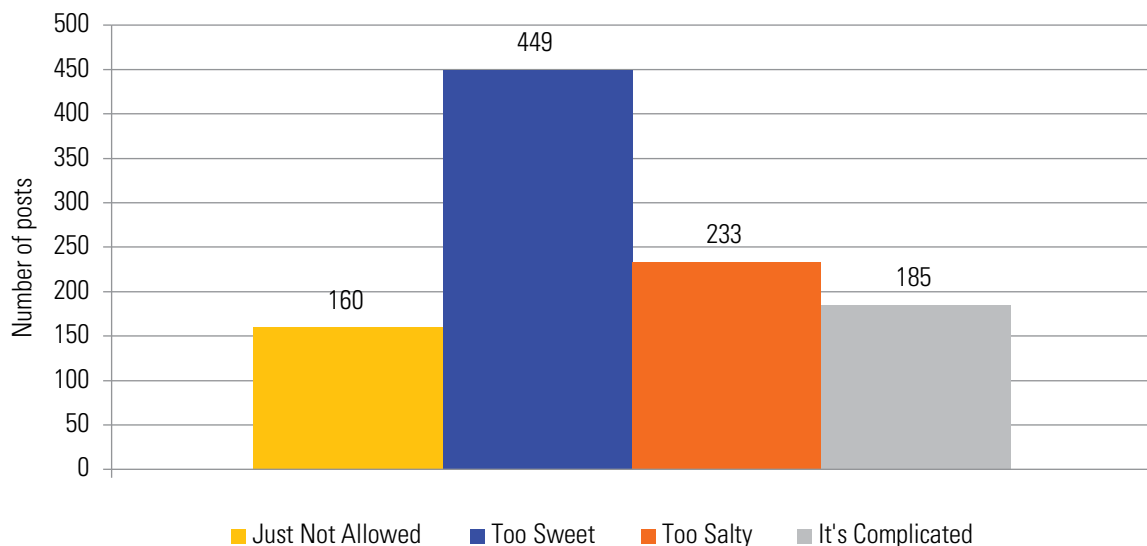
Figure 15: Posts and videos permitted for marketing to children according to WHO criteria

	Unique	Total (with repeats)	Permitted (WHO Western Pacific)	% total ads that were permitted
Facebook	405	453	4	0.9%
Instagram	208	232	3	1.3%
YouTube	311	350	1	0.3%
Total	924	1035	8	0.8%

The **permitted** posts featured small fried chicken drumsticks, chicken and spaghetti with tomato sauce, a beef-based breakfast meal, a burger steak, and some children’s meals where posts or videos did not feature beverages.

The majority of marketing posts were assessed as not permitted for marketing to children due to high levels of sugar, followed by posts for items with too much salt (Figure 16). These products are described in more detail in Box 1.

Figure 16: Nutritional features of ‘not permitted’ products and brands



Box 1

Why are so few ads 'permitted for marketing to children'?

The nutrient profiles of almost every item featured in the marketing posts in this study failed standards set by WHO for permitting marketing to children [21]. This stark finding demonstrates that food brands in the Philippines extensively market items that do not contribute to children's health, due to the presence in particular of high levels of sugar and salt.

- **Chocolates and cakes: Just not allowed.** Three brands and products belonged to a chocolate/cake-based category that is not permitted at all for marketing to children, under the WHO Western Pacific Region Nutrient Profile.
- **Beverages and ice creams: Too sweet.** Nine flavoured beverage and ice cream brands/products were not permitted. All beverages contained added sugars, or added artificial sweeteners, or both. Carbonated or powdered flavoured soft drinks and juices may not contain any added sugar or sweeteners. Milk- and yogurt-based drinks, as well as ice creams, may contain a maximum of 10g of total sugars per 100g; artificial sweeteners are not permitted. On this basis, social media posts for all the flavoured milk drinks, yoghurt-based drinks and ice cream in the study were not permitted for marketing to children.
- **Snacks, noodles, seasonings and cheese: Too salty.** Five of the 20 brands (a potato chips brand, an instant noodle brand, a seasoning brand, and two cheese products) featured products with high levels of sodium that exceeded permitted levels under the WHO Western Pacific criteria. The cheeses also exceeded permitted levels of total fats.
- **It's complicated: Foods and beverages at three chain restaurants.** Almost all the fast food chain items (burgers, fries, nuggets, larger fried chicken items, desserts, coffee and carbonated beverages) were not permitted for marketing to children. The very few social media posts permitted for marketing to children were for a small selection of items sold by fast food chains. According to WHO nutrient profiling, burger steak with rice, spaghetti with tomato sauce and some fried chicken drumstick items are permitted for marketing to children. However, most advertisements in which these items featured were still not permitted, as the ads also included images of not-permitted beverages (sugar- or sweetener-added carbonated drinks).

Frequency of brands posted on social media

Of the three platforms analysed in this study, the food brands examined were most active on Facebook. Here, three fast food chains posted at least daily and one posted up to three times a day. Other brands and products posted from once every 4 days for an energy drink, once weekly for a carbonated beverage, to once every 24 days for a yogurt drink brand.

On the other social media channels, YouTube and Instagram, fast food chains were also the most frequent posters with one fast food chain posting a video on YouTube every ten days and another chain posting twice on Instagram every three days. Some other brands posted very infrequently or not at all on YouTube and Instagram.

Fast food chains posted ads as frequently as once a day on Facebook and a video every 10 days on YouTube.

Social media posts and videos appealing to children and adolescents

The social media brand posts and videos were analysed to identify which age groups they appealed to. For example, if a marketing post focused on an elderly couple, enjoying themselves at a celebration surrounded by younger adults and children, it was identified as appealing to grandparents most, but also to appealing to families including children and adolescents. As most posts appealed to more than one age group, the final analysis focused on the extent to which the posts and videos *appealed to children and adolescents*.

Food marketing posts and videos were found to include many features appealing to children and adolescents. Children or adolescents were featured in posts, as were brand characters, cartoons and bright colours and graphics, enjoyable activities such as games, and parent-child activities or family bonding occasions. Content appealing more to adolescents involved computer gaming scenarios featuring young adults, ads featuring Tiktok videos of young people dancing, and celebrity endorsers who were popular with adolescents. Other ads that appealed to children and adolescents involved family and child-parent scenarios including making or enjoying snacks, meals and drinks, and family fun and food.

Most of the food brand posts and videos recorded for this study were found to be appealing not only to adults but also to adolescents and (only slightly less so) to children as well. Many of these posts employed family-based appeals. On Facebook, of 405 individual posts and videos, 72% (n=292) were assessed as appealing to children and 83% (n=337) as appealing to adolescents. On Instagram, of 208 posts, 74% (n=154) appealed to children and 93% appealed to (n=194) adolescents. On YouTube, of 311 total individual videos, 69% were assessed as appealing to children (n = 215) and 80% (n=249) as appealing to adolescents. In total, 72% of marketing posts appealed to children and 84% appealed to adolescents.

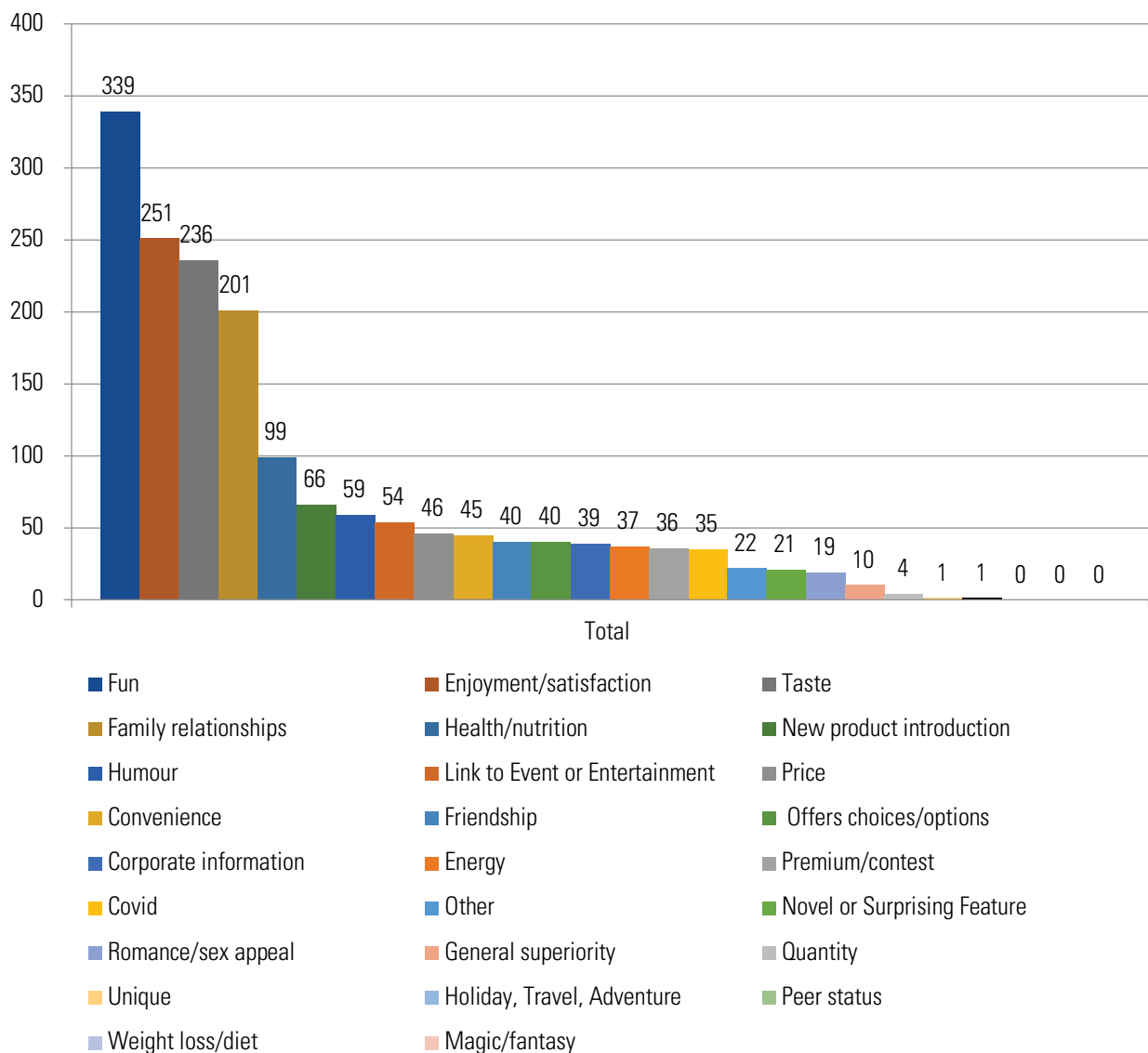
72% of marketing posts appeal to children and 84% to adolescents.

Top marketing strategies used for social media brand posts

The full dataset of 1035 posts and videos included 924 unique posts and videos. Within these, 1701 primary and secondary advertised strategies, or ‘persuasive appeals’, were identified. In addition to these, further marketing strategies were analysed, such as the use of brand characters; a focus on ‘special’ days such as Valentine’s Day or Father’s Day; references to physical activity; and the presence of celebrities meaningful to Filipino audiences.

The food brands assessed in this study employed many effective strategies to appeal to their all-ages Filipino audiences in social media (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Persuasive appeals used in social media ads



Overall, the food marketing strategies on the three platforms were found to be quite similar, though with some differences in emphasis between Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (see Appendix 1). On all platforms, fun was central to how food was shown. It was the most frequently coded marketing strategy, found in between 18% and 24% of the marketing appeals recorded for these social media posts and videos. Taste (11 - 19% posts) and enjoyment/satisfaction (13% - 18% posts) were also frequently occurring themes. Family relationships were particularly featured on Facebook, in 13% of posts, and in 6% of YouTube food brand videos, and price featured in 5% of Facebook items analysed. Health/nutrition, new products/flavours, and links to entertainment or events were also found to feature in over 5% of ads. New flavours were a particular feature in YouTube videos, indicating that this longer form of advertising is popular for introducing new items.

Most marketing posts use 'fun', 'enjoyment' and 'taste' to appeal to children.

Top marketing strategies used in ads to appeal to children and adolescents

When examining the persuasive appeals in those posts and videos that were coded as appealing to children and adolescents, a similar pattern is seen, but with fun gaining even greater focus, followed by taste, enjoyment/satisfaction, and family relationships.

The tactic of 'health-washing' was sometimes employed to create an aura of health around unhealthy food and drinks (Box 2).

Box 2

Physical activity as a marketing strategy

Physical activity was regularly featured in social media advertising (ads appealing to children 15%; ads appealing to adolescents 14%), where sometimes the marketing posts overtly indicated that consuming certain products was associated with energy and sporting success. One flavoured milk brand campaign took the opportunity of lockdown in the Philippines to demonstrate home-based physical activities that could be carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also used inspiring stories of successful Filipino athletes in their marketing strategies. A sugar-added flavoured drink showed children running and playing. A cheese brand linked their product to having the energy to carry out physical activity during the day.

These marketing strategies create conscious and unconscious associations between these products and energy and health. Although physical activity is an important part of healthy living, associating it with unhealthy foods is a recognised food industry tactic to shift the emphasis for tackling obesity from intake of unhealthy advertised foods to greater energy expenditure through exercise. This 'health halo' effect [22] causes consumers to associate positive qualities, such as energy, fitness and health, with the advertised food and has been identified as a 'manipulative marketing' tool [22]. Although physical activity is an important component of a healthy life, it cannot be used to 'outrun' a bad diet [23].

The Covid-19 pandemic offered new marketing opportunities and demonstrated that brands actively marketed during lock-downs (Box 3).

Box 3

Marketing in 2020 during lockdown

Further Covid-19 related advertising was seen in the lockdown marketing strategies of fast food brands in particular in the Philippines.

Fast food companies used the opportunity to feature online sales and delivery offerings in many marketing posts on Facebook, thus increasing the range of opportunities consumers have to access these foods. They also showcased their hygienic restaurant locations and featured influencers and everyday people returning to their stores in Instagram posts in particular. These findings add to a body of global evidence showing that brands remained active during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to market unhealthy foods during the pandemic. [24,25]

The Covid-19 pandemic offered a novel opportunity to market unhealthy food and drink through featuring on-line options and hygienic locations.

In addition, Filipino celebrities of various kinds – athletes, actors, vloggers and others – featured in one in five social media marketing posts appealing to children (21%) and adolescents (21%), such as an instant noodle brand featuring a young Filipino vlogger and model. Some advertising featured crossovers between celebrities and physical activity, such as a flavoured milk featuring successful Filipino athletes, and cheese products featuring a sport/arts couple and their young children.

One in five posts for unhealthy food or drink featured local celebrities well known to children.

Summary and Conclusion

Of a sample of 1035 marketing posts and videos on social media in the Philippines, **over 99% were not suitable for marketing to children according to WHO regional criteria.** Yet the marketing for these brands and products was found to be very appealing to children. Overall, the family-friendly characteristics of social media food marketing in the Philippines mean that 72% of the posts analysed had appeal for children and 84% for adolescents.

Social media food marketing on food brand pages in the Philippines focuses particularly on **fun, taste, enjoyment/satisfaction, family relationships, health and nutrition**, with some reference to new products, price and entertainment and events. Features included brand characters, cartoons and bright colours and graphics, children and adolescents in posts, enjoyable activities such as games, and parent-child or family bonding occasions such as snack and meal preparation and eating together.

These features were found in all marketing on social media analysed in this study, but where ads were identified as particularly appealing to children and to adolescents, the themes of fun, taste, enjoyment/satisfaction, and family relationships came even more strongly into focus. Furthermore, one in five marketing posts appealing to children and adolescents featured Filipino celebrities promoting products not permitted for marketing to children according to WHO criteria for the region due to their levels of sugar, salt and fat.

Overall, therefore, food brands in the Philippines market their products in ways that appeal greatly to children and adolescents. Fun, taste, and enjoyment are typical features of food marketing globally. Of interest in the Philippines sample is the strong family bonding focus; in other regions, friendship features more strongly, particularly in adolescent-appealing advertising in social media.

Notably, one in five posts that appealed to children and adolescents also featured local celebrities ranging from young children to adults, appealing to consumers with interests in sports, media and internet celebrities. These marketing strategies are likely to resonate effectively with Filipino culture. This means that brands and products build their appeal not only with adults, who are more likely to buy foods, but also to children and adolescents so that they learn to form preferences for these unhealthy items, request them, buy them and eat them. This is exposing Filipino children to the risk of ill-health in childhood and later life.

Recommendations

In May 2010, the World Health Assembly unanimously adopted the WHO Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children [1]. These included recommendations that:

- children's exposure to marketing communications as well as the power of such communications should be reduced through policy implementation;
- governments should set clear definitions of marketing;
- policies should be comprehensive, addressing all forms of marketing; and
- monitoring and enforcement should be applied to ensure policies are effectively achieving the stated aims.

Furthermore, in 2021, the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), at its 86th session, adopted its [general comment No. 25 \(2021\) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment](#). According to paragraph 41 of GC25, "States parties should make the best interests of the child a primary consideration when regulating advertising and marketing addressed to and accessible to children."

This study identified that most food brands active in the Philippines adopt digital marketing strategies that appeal to children and adolescents, and that is addressed to them or accessible by them. In line with global recommendations, four recommendations are proposed to the Government of Philippines that will protect children's rights, support healthy diets and prevent overweight and obesity.

- 1. Enact legal regulations** to restrict media marketing of unhealthy items and brands to children including adolescents, in line with the 'best interests' principle of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child.
- 2. Ensure regulations are comprehensive** and address key digital media marketing strategies such as influencer marketing.
- 3. Monitor and enforce regulations** in all forms of media including digital media.
- 4. Promote nutrition and media literacy** among professionals and families, to increase awareness about the impact of unhealthy food marketing on the attitudes, preferences, eating and health of children, adolescents and families. Literacy is important, but it cannot protect children and families from the impact of advertising exposure.

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Appendix 1: Tables of persuasive appeals

Persuasive appeals – all ads

Appeal		
Facebook	Of 740 main appeals in 405 ads	
Fun	143	19%
Taste	103	14%
Family relationships	94	13%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	95	13%
Price	38	5%

Instagram	Of 366 main appeals in 208 ads	
Fun	89	24%
Taste	68	19%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	47	13%
Health/nutrition	33	9%
Family relationships	22	6%
Link to entertainment/event	17	5%

YouTube	Of 595 main appeals in 311 ads	
Fun	107	18%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	109	18%
Taste	65	11%
New product	45	8%
Health/nutrition	33	6%

Persuasive appeals – ad appeals to children

Appeal		
Facebook	Of 550 main appeals in 292 ads	
Fun	116	21%
Taste	81	15%
Family relationships	88	16%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	68	12%
Health/nutrition	33	6%

Instagram	Of 281 main appeals in 154 ads	
Fun	70	25%
Taste	59	21%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	42	15%
Health/nutrition	33	12%
Family relationships	21	7%

YouTube	Of 430 main appeals in 215 ads	
Enjoyment/satisfaction	75	18%
Family relationships	70	17%
Fun	68	16%
Taste	46	11%
New product	31	7%

Persuasive appeals – ad appeals to adolescents

Appeal		
Facebook	Of 613 main appeals in 337 ads	
Fun	120	20%
Taste	85	14%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	80	13%
Family relationships	65	11%
Price	36	6%

Instagram	Of 338 main appeals in 194 ads	
Fun	76	22%
Taste	63	19%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	42	12%
Health/nutrition	33	10%
Family relationships	21	6%

YouTube	Of 474 main appeals in 249 ads	
Fun	86	18%
Enjoyment/satisfaction	82	17%
Family relationships	59	12%
Taste	44	9%
New product	44	9%

“I ask mama to buy
the Nissin noodles I
saw on the internet
next time we go to
the grocery”

6 year old from Cebu



for every child

UNICEF Philippines Country Office

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