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Analysis of Chilean children's perceptions of commercial content on TikTok: "I ate a commercial"

Análisis de las percepciones de los menores chilenos sobre el contenido comercial en TikTok: "Me comí un anuncio"

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Abstract

In the context of the high digitization of childhood, advertising on social networks becomes an ideal location for brands and advertisers to meet this audience profile. However, in the debate, no space has been given to how boys and girls perceive these advertising strategies. Therefore, this work aims to qualitatively explore the discourses related to the experience of using TikTok with a focus on advertising. For this, 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with minors between 11 and 14 years old who are users of this platform in Santiago, Chile. The results indicate that the platform is perceived as an entertainment space, especially for the segment of children and young people. Regarding advertising, the participants agree that, although it may be intrusive and not necessarily appropriate to their interests, if it complies with the rules of the application -brief, with humor, and music- it is tolerated and even welcomed by its users. However, this does not happen when there is a covert, deceptive or repetitive advertising intent. Added to these elements is their control over the advertisement and the possibility of interaction with the brand.

Keywords

Advertising; social networks; TikTok; children; entertainment; interaction

Resumen

En un contexto de alta digitalización de la infancia, la publicidad en redes sociales se convierte en emplazamientos ideales para que las marcas y anunciantes puedan salir al encuentro de este perfil de audiencia. Sin embargo, en el debate no se ha dado espacio a cómo menores perciben estas estrategias publicitarias. Por ello, este trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar cualitativamente los discursos relacionados a la experiencia del uso de TikTok con foco en la publicidad. Para ello se realizaron 32 entrevistas en profundidad a menores entre 11 y 14 años que son usuarios de esta plataforma en Santiago, Chile. Los resultados apuntan a que la plataforma es percibida como un espacio de entretenimiento especialmente para el segmento de niños y jóvenes. Respecto a la publicidad, los participantes concuerdan en que, si bien puede ser intrusiva y no necesariamente adecuada a sus intereses, si cumple las reglas de la aplicación -breve, con humor, y música- entonces es tolerada e incluso bienvenida por los usuarios. Sin embargo, esto no sucede cuando hay una intención publicitaria encubierta, engañosa o repetitiva. A estos elementos se suman el control que pueden ejercer sobre el aviso y la posibilidad de interacción con la marca.

Palabras clave

Publicidad; redes sociales; TikTok; menores; entretenimiento; interacción

1. Advertising on social media

Each era and generation is marked by moments and events that turn individuals into groups that coalesce around their habits and consumption patterns (Álvarez, Heredia and Romero, 2019). Social media platforms have become a key element of media consumption for young people in the 21st century. Children and teens organize their consumption of social media to meet their socialization and entertainment needs (García-Jiménez, López-de-Ayala and Montes-Vozmediano, 2020). Although social media platforms are not designed for children and adolescents (hereinafter NNA), and TikTok in particular is not meant to be used by children under the age of 16 (Martín-Ramadall and Ruiz-Mondaza, 2022), social media represent a large percentage of Internet usage time of NNA and have become an ideal space for advertisers targeting this demographic (Sánchez-Amboage et al., 2022).

The incorporation of brands and advertisers into social media platforms can lead to bilaterality and dialogue. Such activities focus on creating communities rather than winning over customers. They are meant to foster conversation with users instead of merely disseminating advertising messages (Llorente-Barroso, García-Guardia and Kolotouchkina, 2019). The public, and especially NNA, expects this type of interaction when they encounter a brand on social media. They seek to engage in more casual communication that is not appropriate in other corporate contexts. In addition, there is always the possibility that content shared on social media, including commercials, will go viral. The goal is engagement (Benavides-Almarza and García-Béjar, 2021), which is key for measuring the effectiveness of a brand strategy on social media given that it is synonymous with loyalty and has a positive impact on purchasing decisions (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; Su et al., 2020).

Although social media platforms can successfully establish micro-segments for messaging and offer new forms of communication relevant to users (Sánchez and Pintado, 2018), only 26% of users like to see advertising on social media that is based on their interests and 57% report that the commercial messages that they have seen did not meet their expectations (IAB, 2022). According to the latest reports on social media use published by the consulting firm IAB, brand following is waning on these platforms (2022).

Brands mainly use social media to answer questions, sell products, create a name for themselves and provide customer service. For their part, users want to have private conversations with customer service and technical support teams (IAB, 2022).

Based on the approach advocated by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Atkinson (2013) highlights three basic pillars that advertisers must consider when using these new communication channels: institutional trust, participation and the identification of opinion leaders/brand ambassadors. Indeed, it is no longer enough to adapt an advertising message to social media. Companies must foster consumer participation. This has pushed the advertising sector to redefine its strategies and focus on more digital, more participatory, and less intrusive actions.

In the academic discussion of whether children can develop a bond with brands at an early age beyond recognition, Ji (2002: 372) proposes a clear criterion: "that children keep in their memory memories of their interaction with brands." One could argue that the strategies that companies use to reach this audience in the digital environment are able to create these memories (Murphy et al., 2020) more easily by using hybrid formats that generate positive experiences with a significant social component. In the context of social media platforms, companies seek out attractive formulas that allow them to reach the youngest audiences by engaging them through games and entertainment and empathizing with them on an emotional level (Del Moral, Villalustre and Neira, 2016). All of this is possible thanks to the interactivity and connectivity derived from the interrelationship with their contacts on social media.

2. The relationship between minors and advertising on social media platforms

Social media platforms have become an important source of information for NNA (Alonso-López, and Sidorenko-Bautista, 2022; Martínez-Sanz, Buitrago and Martín-García, 2023). This is especially true of TikTok. Although watching videos is the main activity of NNA on these platforms (96%), the second most popular activity is researching information or content that is of interest to them (91%). Social media platforms allow companies to engage consumers in conversation without generating saturation (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022a). It is also much easier to interact with advertising messages on social media, where users are more open to participation (Díaz, 2011). The positive feeling generated in the user by the context is transferred to the advertisement and the brand (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). New audiences have grown accustomed to consuming on-demand content, which triggers them to be discriminating viewers with a low tolerance for interruption. They do not have a negative perception of the phenomenon and do not dislike it as long as they have control over it and it creates added value for them. Advertising as content is interesting to NNA because it can provide new information; it only bothers them when it interrupts their activities or becomes repetitive and excessive (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022b). Today's NNA pay more attention to advertising content that really interests them than members of

previous generations did. They also respond more positively to content that provides added value in the form of promotions, discounts, contests, prizes, the use of effects, immersive resources, or content that features celebrities. This was confirmed by an independent study conducted in 2019 by the companies Kargo and Eye Tracking Tobli Pro. Promotions lead the results in terms of both the most popular content for companies to create for social media and the level of interaction that they inspire in audience members ahead of other options such as branding or contests and sweepstakes (Iab Spain, 2022). It is also interesting to note that the level of use and familiarity that NNA have with a platform (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) has a proportional impact on the credibility they give it as a source of advertising. The more they use it, the more they trust it (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021). In conclusion, the platform also plays a key role in minors' response to digital advertising, as noted in other studies (Feijoo, Sádaba and Bugueño, 2020; Ramallal and Belda, 2021). Moreover, the level of interaction maintained with a digital ad depends on the platform used. Ads on social media platforms generally yield more visual interaction with NNA with the exception of YouTube, which tends to achieve a higher click-through rate (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022a).

3. TikTok's penetration in Chile

According to recent market studies in Chile, during the first half of 2022, Instagram was the most used application. Together with YouTube and Facebook, it is responsible for 51% of the mobile data traffic registered in the period for the entire country (Entel, 2022). However, analyses of growth of social media platforms in Chile should consider the TikTok boom. This platform had 8.55 million users in Chile in 2021, an increase of 524.3% over the previous year (Digital Global Overview Report, 2022). Only Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have more followers than TikTok, which has become the fourth most used social network by Chileans (Kantar Ibope Media, 2022) with a higher penetration among young Internet users (Han, 2020; Murphy, et. al., 2020). Its popularity is slowly growing among other audiences as well. Two out of every five people over the age of 45 report that they have used Tik Tok in the last 30 days (Kantar Ibope Media, 2022).

On average, Chilean Tik Tok users spend between 90 minutes and two hours on the platform. It has a more female users than male users and is used for entertainment (humor with sound, dances and choreographies; classes and tutorials) and as a source of information (Dias and Duarte, 2022; Du et al., 2022; Jelly, 2022).

According to the latest Digital Radiography report conducted by the television operator VTR in collaboration with the Undersecretary of Telecommunications, the Children's Ombudsman's Office and UNICEF, 94% of Chilean children use YouTube, 79% use WhatsApp, 64% use TikTok and 47% use Instagram (VTR, 2022). Although the most popular networks continue to be WhatsApp and YouTube among NNA in Chile, the numbers for those platforms are lower than they were the previous year. Only TikTok, Twitch and Discord increased their penetration among this age group after the pandemic, while Instagram, saw a 9-point decrease in use between 2020 and 2021 and YouTube reported the greatest loss of 17 points.

Recent academic research (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; Zozaya, Feijoo and Sádaba, 2023) has highlighted the penetration of TikTok among NNAs and has found that their main focus is entertainment. This led the authors of this study to pose the following research question:

RQ1: How do Chilean NNAs view TikTok and why do they use it?

Regarding the relationship between users and brands with a presence on TikTok, almost 65% of users recognize that seeing advertising content on TikTok positively changed their perception of that brand (Jelly, 2022). When asked whether they prefer famous or native TikTokers, 66.2% say they prefer the former.

Researchers have explored the idea that advertising has taken on a new role as a game for members of Gen Z on TikTok, as the audience tends to be more receptive (Ramallal and Belda, 2021). Along the same lines, Cristancho-Triana, Cardozo-Morales and Camacho-Gómez (2022) found that young people report that advertising is annoying but appreciate the interaction with brands.

Given this context, it seems logical to ask how Chilean NNA view TikTok in terms of advertising given that it is an application with a great capacity to reach this demographic. Moreover, these responses end up being transferred to the content consumed through it. This led us to our second research question:

RQ2: What characteristics do Chilean NNAs highlight in the commercial messages received through TikTok?

4. Methods

The main goal of this exploratory study is to learn about the perception of TikTok among Chilean NNA. This study is designed to determine who the platform is used by, which aspects of it are gratifying to them and how they react to the ads that they consume through it.

Since this is an emerging topic and little academic research in Spanish has been done on it (see Ramallal and Belda, 2021; Cristancho-Triana, Cardozo-Morales and Camacho-Gómez, 2022), this initial approach to NNA was performed qualitatively through semi-structured interviews. We thus approached the phenomenon holistically, appealing to the participant's experience and giving him/her a voice (Estebert, 2002). This method also gives researchers access to experiences that are linked to and facilitate an understanding of phenomena that have previously received little attention (Bryman, 2012). The interviews with NNA gave them the opportunity to verbalize their own understanding of the world and how it relates to the phenomenon (Kvale and Brickman, 2009).

We interviewed 19 boys and 13 girls (total N=32) between the ages of 11 and 14 who have an account on and are active users of TikTok. They all attend schools in the Metropolitan Region. They were recruited using a purposive sample by convenience (Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández, and Baptista, 2018) that followed the snowball model (Hernández-Sampieri, 2018). This strategy yielded a relatively diverse sample, as no siblings or relatives were found. Regarding ethical considerations, an informed consent form was signed by a parent and by the participant.

The interviews, which lasted an average of 45-50 minutes, were conducted in the children's homes in the presence of a family member or responsible adult and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Out of respect for anonymity and confidentiality, the children are only referred to by their gender and age in the transcriptions and text. The guidelines used were semi-structured and covered the following topics: (1) access to and use of TikTok, (2) motivation, (3) content creation, (4) challenges, and (5) advertising and branding.

The analysis was systematized using NVivo software and a three-level thematic coding process (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The first stage of coding the transcripts were performed to classify the stories based on whether they contributed to clarifying aspects related to access and use of the platform, experiences, access to advertising, brand recall and other related emerging themes. The codes were then condensed to operationalize them as elements that contribute to explaining the phenomenon. Finally, an interpretation stage was carried out in parallel by two researchers and then discussed with another researcher in order to compare their perspectives and the contributions of the data and the literature.

5. Discussion and results

5.1 Minors and their relationship with TikTok

As recent research has shown (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; García-Jiménez, López-de-Ayala and Montes-Vozmediano, 2020), participants use social media platforms and TikTok for entertainment and leisure. One of the reasons they prefer it over other popular platforms such as Instagram is the age range of users. Study participants view TikTok as a space where there are "people your age" and where they will not encounter their parents or other adults. For example, participants stated that they started using the platform as a result of the direct influence of their peers, including friends, siblings and classmates. They would hear comments about how fun the platform was and about natives who were starting to become famous. For example, Niño (12) explained that he started using TikTok "because everyone started to use it. (I did it) to be able to talk more about it and feel that I was part of it."

This platform is also considered to be safer than others and primarily used by teenagers and young people. They report that they value the fact that they have not seen their parents or older people using it, as occurs on platforms like Instagram. Regarding their reason for using TikTok, the participants note that they mainly seek entertainment and a way to spend their free time. They did not discuss specific objectives or report searching for specific content. These responses align with previous findings (Jelly, 2022). As such, participants report that they are more open to following strangers or those who have common interests, but do not seek to form friendships, as is the case in other networks. Niña (13) explains, "I see more people I don't know on TikTok and I follow people I do know on Instagram." This variety diversifies the content that users receive (i.e., from different sources) but focuses it on topics that are of interest to them. Participants said that they believe that the "algorithm" ensures that they will never get bored and can spend many hours scrolling. As Niño (14) put it:

It (the platform) has everything. You never get bored. There are a thousand different things. It's like an Instagram, but at some point on Instagram you run out of things to see. That doesn't happen on TikTok. It's like an Instagram that never ends.

Another unique characteristic of TikTok is the dynamic content, i.e., animated or edited videos or photos with filters that participants cannot skip or rewind and which are of a short and limited duration. The users interviewed for this study agree that this makes the social media platform more "dynamic" and encourages them to pay attention. In some cases, they also connect it to learning in the broad sense of the word, reporting that they can access information that is relevant and useful to them through tutorials.

In regard to how they interact with the platform, i.e., creating and uploading videos or just browsing other users' content, the responses are mixed and align with the profiles that have been described in the previous literature (see González-Reyes, 2021): content producers and consumers. The former is perceived as people for whom showing aspects of themselves to others and eliciting audience feedback are important, as exemplified by the following case:

[I make videos because I want] people to see me, to tell me my TikTok videos are cool. I also use TikTok because it is fun. I like to make my videos better and upload them (...). I like it when people see them and give them likes and comment. I love that. It makes me feel good (Girl, 13).

As other researchers have noted (Serrano-Puche, 2017), this type of user is responsive to the 'likes' they receive. That feedback is a direct incentive to continue to engage in that behavior. NNA TikTok users see the platform as a space to highlight your abilities. One female participant described this when discussing her interest in the dance-themed challenges:

When they are dance themed, I learn them, do them and tag the person doing the challenge. I love to do them because I am a great dancer, and I like that my friends see me or people at school call me 'seca' (expert) (...). I used to go to (the dance studio) Power Peralta, and then I would show off my dance here [on TikTok] (Girl, 13).

While the number of 'likes' and amount of feedback are key for these users, they also recognize fear of what they consider failure and anxiety over being criticized or not receiving enough approval. Users who mostly consume videos point to that same anxiety. They tend to describe themselves as shy and report making limited use of other social media platforms.

5.2. The role (and opportunity) of advertising

The evidence suggests that young people consider digital advertising an annoying distraction that is mitigated if they can control the content (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022b). However, our participants' appraisals were mediated by what they consider to be useful or appropriate advertising based on their interests. This perception benefits from the presence of influencers, TikTokers or faces that, in their opinion, give credibility to the product they promote and generate interest.

"Sometimes I watch them and sometimes I don't. It depends on what it is. It also depends on the TikToker. If I know them, I stay and watch it.... Because some are more creative and make you want it. There are others that are very boring² and I skip them (Boy, 14).

Curiosity and entertainment also play an important role. Added to this is the possibility of interaction between the brand and the audience, which is especially valued. As a male participant (14) explains, "Interaction is important because you can comment on the commercial and the brand can respond." This aligns with previous findings that speak to the importance of interacting with brands (Cristancho-Triana, Cardozo-Morales and Camacho-Gómez, 2022). This is offered in part by what Feijoo and Sádaba (2022b) describe as the opportunity to engage in conversation with the audience and gain notoriety without overwhelming them.

Moreover, participants give advertising a chance if it meets certain characteristics, among them: (1) The quality of the ad and its content are considered attractive. That is, it must be edited and produced with the style and rhythm of the TikTok platform. (2) The face or influencer involved must be consistent with the content to be validated by the audience. Niño (11) explains, "For example, an athlete who makes a commercial about McDonalds, I don't think so." (3) Another key factor is interest, since it is the first time they are confronted with advertising. In other words, if they have not seen it, they give it a chance. If it is familiar or often repeated, most the participants report that they avoid it. (4) Participants report that honesty is important to them. In this sense, users recognize that they can identify covert commercials, since "when they don't say it, you can still tell." When the opposite happens, i.e., companies include covert advertising in the content, participants turn against the brand and let it be known in the comments. As Niño (13) says, "In fact, people say, 'I ate a commercial.'"

In this sense, the platform is valued because advertising tends to be seen as non-invasive (Han, 2020), in the words of two of the participants: "More than avoiding it, I just take it out. It doesn't interest me because it's always the same" (Girl, 12). "When it comes out for the first time, yes, but when it comes out a lot it's boring (...). Sometimes I watch them [the ads], but when they are repetitive, they start to be flat and annoying" (Boy, 13).

Thus, participants recognize that there is advertising, but they do not necessarily resent it or actively avoid it, as they do on other platforms (Han, 2020). Moreover, in the stories there is a naturalization or apparent habituation to the fact that advertising is part of accessing and using of the platform. Niño (12) explains, "When I'm interested, I look at it and if I'm not, I skip it. It depends. If it hooks me, I watch it." Niña (13) adds, "[Advertising] does not bother me, but I don't like it. It is neutral, a 15-second video is not boring either."

As recent studies have shown, these young audiences do not reject advertising a priori, but rather have a rather positive and interested attitude towards such content (see Kargo and Eye Tracking Tobli Pro, 2019). Moreover, younger users even see advertising can as an entertainment opportunity. As Niña (age 12) put it, "I usually feel good [about advertising], and sometimes I like it, depending on the topic that comes up for me." This may happen, in part, because the app is perceived as entertaining and brands adapt to the format, thus benefiting from the essence of the platform conceived as a source of recreation and leisure, qualities that end up being transferred to the commercial content (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). However, the characteristic of novelty is also important, because younger users reject repetitive content or material that appears on other platforms.

6. Conclusions

Social media platforms are the most important digital spaces for the youngest users. They use them to satisfy their main content demands, which are linked to being entertained, informed, and even educated (Alonso-López, and Sidorenko-Bautista, 2022; Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022a; García-Jiménez López-de-Ayala and Montes-Vozmediano, 2020). Moreover, this ecosystem that is increasingly used by this segment of the population and gratifying to them (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). In Chile, the research context, after the pandemic, TikTok has become the fastest growing social media platform this year in terms of the number of users and has already positioned itself as the fourth most used social media platform by all age segments (Digital Global Overview Report, 2022). Such platforms become ideal venues for brands and advertisers to reach this audience profile. Furthermore, social media make it possible to micro-segment audiences, offering highly customizable ads, which young people value (Cristancho-Triana, Cardozo-Morales and Camacho-Gómez, 2022; Ramallal and Belda, 2021).

The results are consistent with previous research, which shows that this social media platform is valued by children and adolescents because of its users' age range (Han, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020). They see this platform as characteristic of their age, and have moved away from others, such as Instagram, which they consider to be saturated by adults. This is consistent with the findings presented in previous studies (Kantar Ibope Media, 2022). Research participants view TikTok as a dynamic space for audiovisual entertainment and serendipitous and fleeting consumption (Dias and Duarte, 2022). It is also a social media platform, so it has to provide an opportunity for interaction. Advertisers must therefore respect these "rules of the game" and integrate their persuasive messages into this context.

Therefore, commercial content created by influencers is a persuasive communication tool that achieves is more acceptable to this user profile on social media (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2022), as it integrates advertising into entertainment content without being invasive. In addition, this format stands out because it provides value and enhances audience engagement (Xiao, Li and Zhang, 2023) as long as there is consistency between the influencer profile and the product. However, this hybridization of advertising and entertainment on TikTok may make it more difficult for minors to recognize the persuasive intentionality. This issue that should be addressed in future studies on TikTok as an advertising space as such practices relate to young audiences.

One of the main findings is that the perception of Chilean children and adolescents of advertising on TikTok can be summarized as follows: (1) consistency with the content format of the platform, (2) consistency of the influencer and product advertised (Haenlein et al., 2020), (3) entertainment, expressed as the curiosity and interest inspired by the advertisement (Araujo et al., 2022) and (4) the honesty of the objective of the video as it is an advertisement (Ngo et al., 2022). To these elements we can add the control they can exert over the advertisement and the personalization of the content.

Any persuasive content that does not add value for the user leads to low tolerance. Interruptions, repetition or ads that lie beyond their immediate interests generate a feeling of saturation, helplessness and frustration. Users who see the same advertising content numerous time report that they "skip" it. This sends a clear message to brands and advertisers about making their promotional work more effective.

This and the ability of young people to decide whether to skip the advertisement without wait times, improve their perception of the ads.

Along these same lines, we determined that if minors feel that they control commercials, their fear of missing out on something important wanes. This could be related to FOMO (fear of missing out) syndrome (D'Lima and Higgins, 2021), and this possibility should be further explored in subsequent research.

NNA expect to be able to manage the advertising they consumer on TikTok and to see ads that truly interest them and are related to their tastes and concerns. The message and the engagement it generates could be improved, which would in turn improve the indicators of the account on this social media platform, specifically in branded content (Su et al., 2020).

These results are not intended to be conclusive given the limitations of this research. One of those limitations is the approach used in the study, which is qualitative in nature and is based on a non-representative sample when prioritizing the reasons for using TikTok and perceptions of the NNAs in relation to advertising on the platform. Furthermore, this study is limited to a specific country and socioeconomic reality. Complementing these results with a quantitative approach would lead to a broader understanding of the topic. Future research could also address specific questions regarding the signaling of advertising on TikTok, especially advertising related to or promoted by influencers.

7. Specific contribution of each signatory

Contribution	Signers
Conception and design of the work	Signer 1 and Signer 2
Documentary research	Signer 1
Data collection	Signer 2, Signer 3
Data analysis and critical interpretation	Signer 1, Signer 2 and Signer 3
Review and approval of versions	Signer 1, Signer 2 and Signer 3

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9. Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Notes

1. The term "seco" in Chilean slang means 'expert' (Brennan, 2006).
2. The term "fome" in Chilean slang means boring.
3. The term "chato" in Chilean slang means frustrated or sick of something.