

Digital marketing of breast-milk substitutes and foods for infants and young children to pregnant women and mothers

Summary of study results in
Armenia and Portugal



Background

The purpose of this pilot study was to provide insight into the exposure of digital marketing of breast-milk substitutes (BMS) on pregnant women and mothers in some countries of the WHO European Region and test the framework implemented for this purpose.

In 1981, WHO adopted the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, an international health policy framework to regulate the marketing of BMS in order to protect breastfeeding (1). WHO recommends exclusively breastfeeding until six months of age, which means that the infant does not receive any other food or liquid except breast-milk, alongside appropriate complementary foods up to two years of age or beyond (2). Evidence suggests that breastfeeding protects against child infections, has a positive impact on child intelligence, and reduces the development of type-II diabetes, as well as overweight and obesity (3,4). Nevertheless, globally, the rates of breastfeeding remain low, with only 41% of infants under six months of age being exclusively breastfed and only 45% continuing breastfeeding for two years (5). The first year of a child's life is one of the most vulnerable stages of the life cycle and encompasses the 1000 days from conception until two years old. Delayed interventions, especially in relation to nutrition, are one of the greatest threats to human health and development due to their effect on growth, neurocognitive development and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) (4).

The aggressive marketing of BMS affects families' ability to make informed decisions regarding their child's feeding. Considering that this issue still represents an important and underappreciated risk to infants' and children's health, WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) commissioned a series of studies to understand the scope and impact of digital marketing of BMS (6,7).

Within these studies, WHO headquarters requested the support of the WHO Regional Office for Europe to test the CLICK framework for BMS purposes. The CLICK monitoring framework was developed by the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases for monitoring and evaluating digital marketing (8). The CLICK framework supports countries to collect data on digital marketing ecosystems and children's exposure to unhealthy advertisements. The five steps focus on different areas of digital marketing with the overall goal to enable policy-makers to implement strict regulations concerning the digital marketing of unhealthy products to children.

For this project, the CLICK monitoring framework was applied to explore the exposure of pregnant women and mothers to the digital marketing of BMS and baby foods.

Methods

The study was based on the study protocol developed by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, which is available on the WHO website.

To assess the participants' exposure to the digital marketing of BMS and foods for infants and young children (FIYC), the app Reality Meter developed by RealityMine was used. This app collects data on paid-for advertisements that the participants were exposed to while navigating social media platforms. The app was installed in the mobile phones of the women who agreed to participate in the study, collecting data from some social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Youtube). The app collects information on the advertisement title, description of the ad content, advertiser, day and time of the exposure, and duration of the exposure (for YouTube only), as well as in which app the exposure occurred.

The participants were requested to keep the app installed for four weeks for collecting data on exposure to paid digital advertising. The baby food products were categorized and classified according to the nutrient and promotion profile model of food products for infants and young children 6–36 months in the WHO European Region (WHO NPPM) (9).

National context

Armenia

Portugal

Exclusive breastfeeding rates (until 6 months of age)

45%

Demographic Health Survey
2015-2016 (10)

22%

Childhood Obesity Surveillance
Initiative 2022 (11)

Policy/Regulation in place

2014

“Law on Breastfeeding promotion and regulation of marketing of infant food”. The law covers a broad spectrum of baby foods, including infant formulas, young child formulas, and complementary foods for infants and young children up to three years of age, as well as related products, such as feeding bottles, teats and pacifiers. It includes comprehensive prohibitions on public promotion, advertising, sponsorship and donation of equipment to health-care facilities. Labelling provisions are extensive and include a ban on claims and a prohibition against labels of other products being similar to labels of infant formula in order to prevent cross-promotion. The ban for health and nutrition claims (WHA Resolution 58.32 (2005)) is also covered. The Law bans BMS promotional activities, but does not specifically mention digital marketing.

The BMS and child and infant foods are not permitted to be marketed according to the International Code and The Law of the Republic of Armenia.

2013

EU Regulation 609/2013

2016

Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2016/127 of 25 September 2015 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 609/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the specific compositional and information requirements for infant formula and follow-on formula and as regards requirements on information relating to infant and young child feeding

Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2016/128 of 25 September 2015 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 609/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the specific compositional and information requirements for food for special medical purposes

2017

Decree-Law no. 62/2017, of June 9, of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development, which establishes the regime applicable to the composition, labelling and marketing of milk, milk-derived products and products extracted from milk, transposing Directive (EU) 2015/2203 - Chapter applicable to the composition, labelling, advertising and marketing of infant formula and follow-on formula.

Legal status of the International Code of Marketing of BMS (10)

Substantially aligned
with the Code

Score **90 out of 100**



Some provisions of
the Code included

Score **32 out of 100**



Armenia

Summary of study results

CLICK step

Investigate exposure

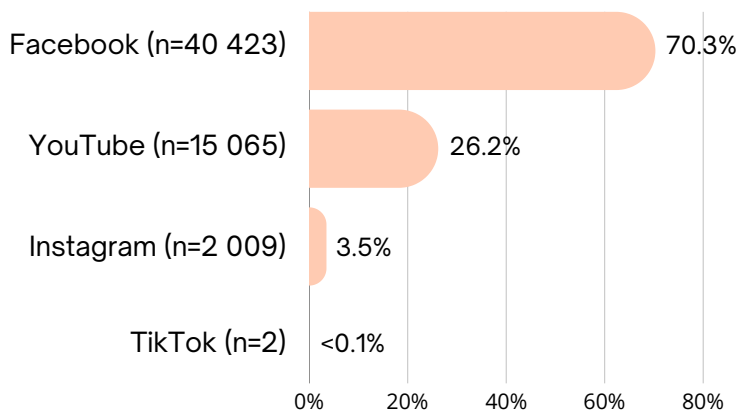
Date and duration of the study

1 August–31 December 2023

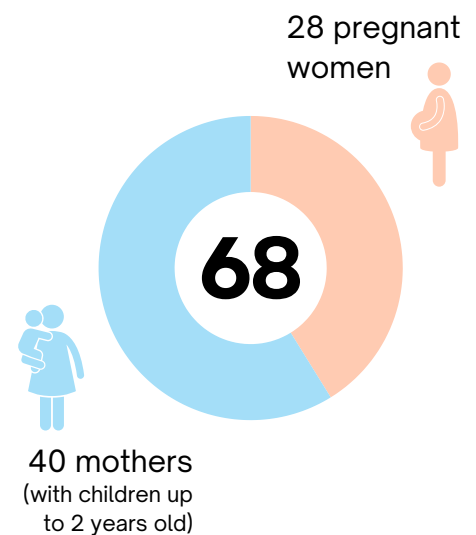
Investigated platforms

YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok

Proportion of captured adverts per platform n=57 499



Number of study participants



Total number of adverts

57 499 

Number of adverts per day

Average

28

Pregnant women _____ 33

Mothers _____ 27

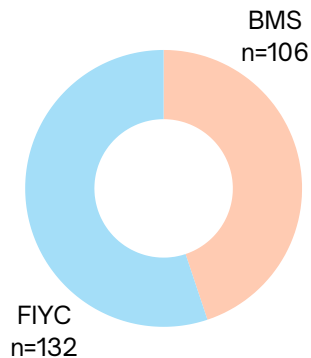
BMS and FIYC adverts

305 adverts related to infant feeding and associated products*

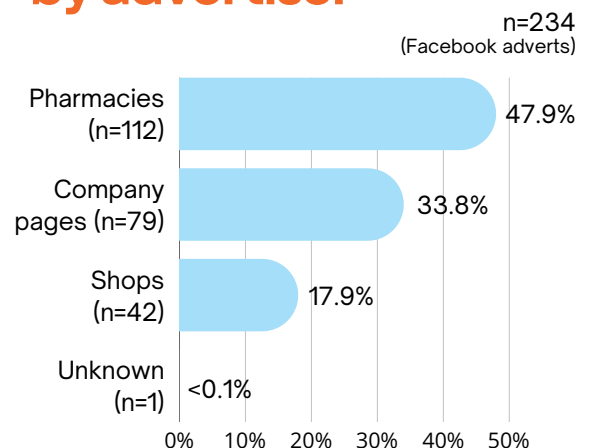
238

adverts directly promoted BMS and FIYC

(234 on Facebook and 4 on Instagram)



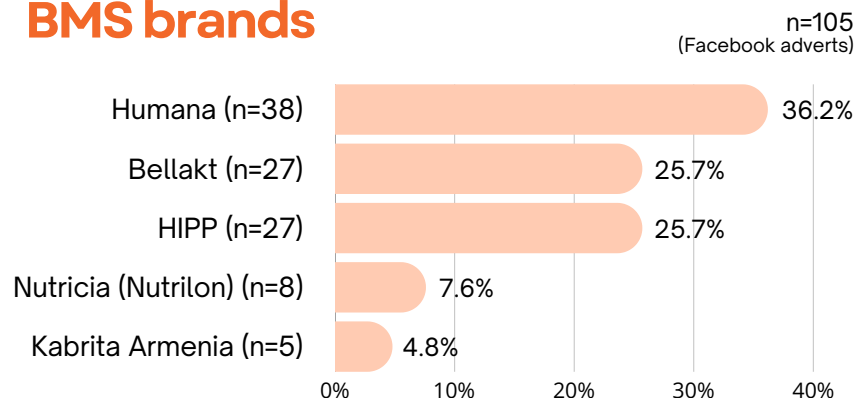
BMS/FIYC adverts by advertiser



BMS



BMS brands



Owing to methodological limitations, in most cases it was not possible to identify the exact product, only the brand. The Armenian team went to brand websites to try to identify the product, based on the slogan of the advert that women were exposed to. Below, some examples are given of the type of products and claims found; however, it was not possible to quantify these precisely.

Types of BMS products

- Infant formula (0+ months)
- Follow-up/on formula (6+ months)
- Growing-up milk (12+ months)

BMS claims

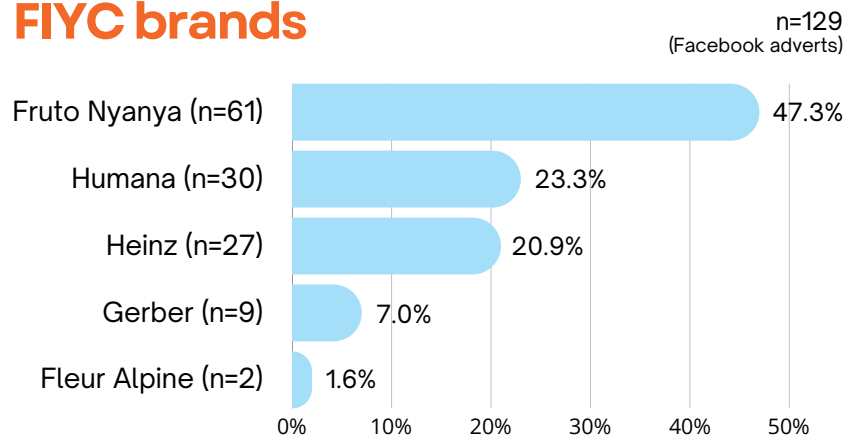
- Harmonious growth and development
- Easy digestion
- No palm oil
- Ideal to complement breastfeeding
- With all the important nutrients and the best ingredients nature has to offer

*The RealityMeter application successfully captured brand and/or product names in 42.3% of cases. Therefore, it was not possible to analyse 57.7% of the captured adverts. Furthermore, the application did not capture any substantial data from YouTube for inclusion in the study.

FIYC



FIYC brands



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Types of FIYC products

- Cereals with cow milk, goat milk, or without milk
- Fruit and vegetable purées with age indications starting from 4+ months
- Baby biscuits
- Chocolate biscuits
- Juice cookies
- Baby olive oil
- Non-dairy multigrain porridge
- Specific products such as gluten-free pasta

FIYC claims

- Takes care of healthy food for babies, offering only the highest quality, natural, and healthy food
- Healthy food for your baby at the best value
- Baby porridges are made from natural fruits and berries that contain ...
- 100% natural
- It's very important that the baby's food is not only tasty but also safe

Age suggested for introduction

4+ months, 5+ months, 6+ months

None of the FIYC adverts comply with the law of the Republic of Armenia on "Breastfeeding Promotion and Regulation of Marketing of Baby Food"



Portugal

Summary of study results

CLICK step

Investigate exposure

Date and duration of the study

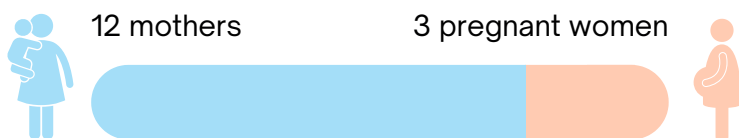
15 December 2021–21 April 2022

Investigated platforms

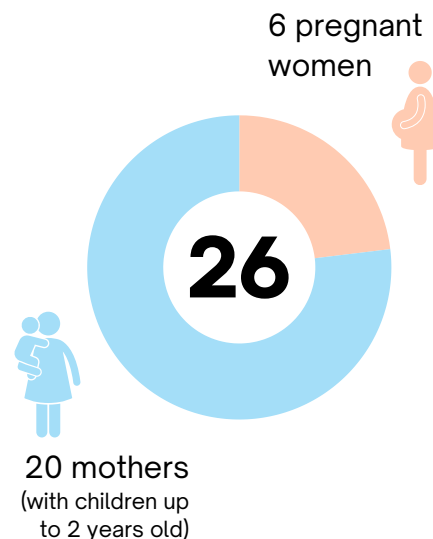
YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok

Exposure to BMS/FIYC adverts

58% of study participants were exposed to adverts related to BMS or FIYC



Number of study participants



Total number of adverts

15 108



BMS and FIYC adverts

245 adverts related to infant feeding brands

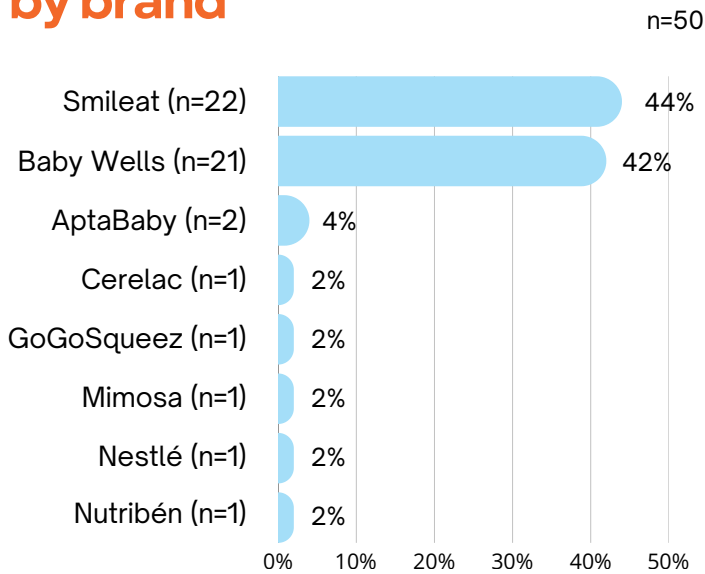
50 adverts that were possible to identify* directly promoted BMS and/or FIYC

41 FIYC products were promoted

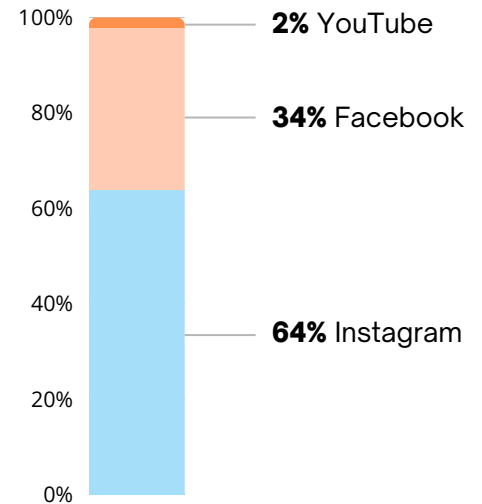
13 BMS products were promoted

*In 16% of the adverts, the product was identified using Reality Mine data, and in 84% the product was identified through social media, using the advert title, date and time.

BMS/FIYC adverts by brand



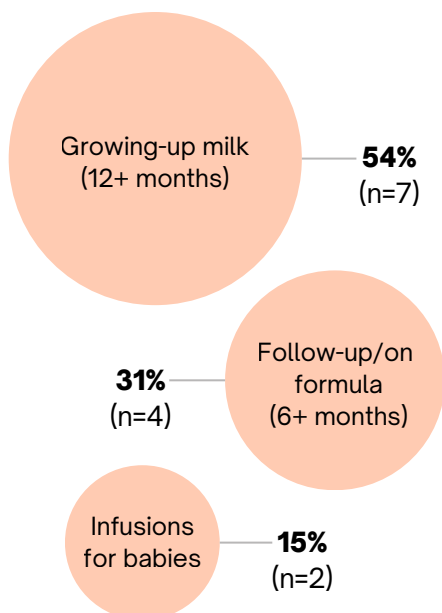
BMS/FIYC adverts per platform



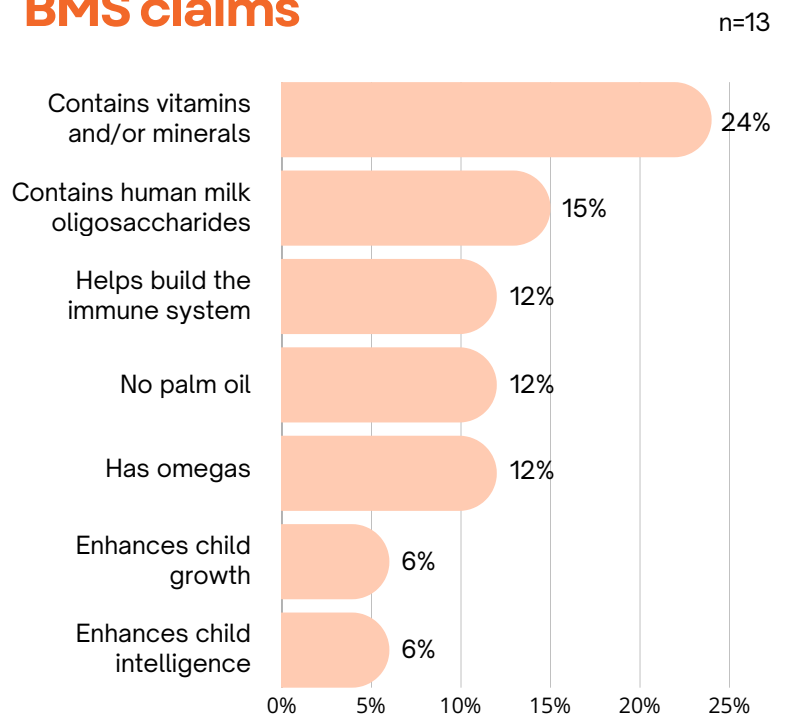
BMS



Types of BMS products



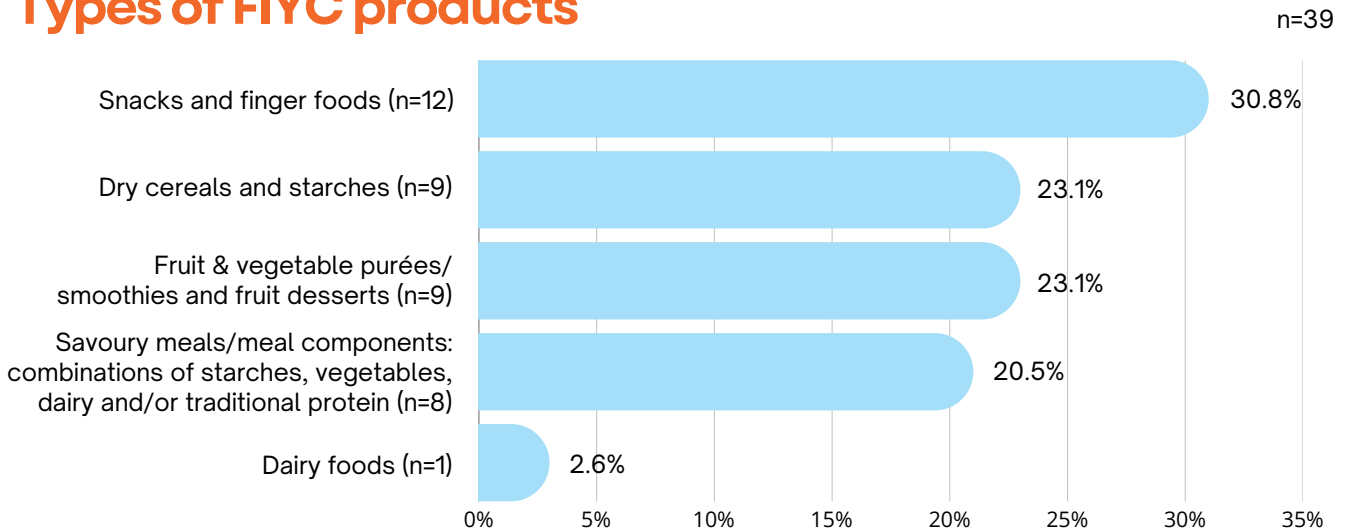
BMS claims



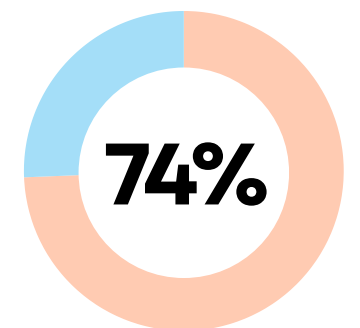
FIYC



Types of FIYC products



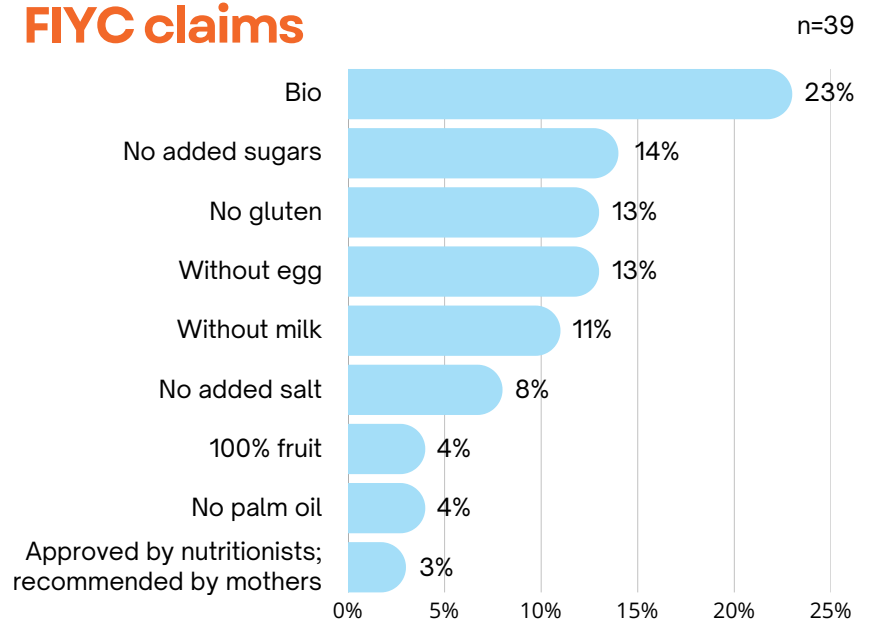
WHO NPPM



(n=29)

of adverts did **not** comply with the WHO NPPM

FIYC claims



Age suggested for introduction



3%

(n=1) of adverts suggested **<6 months** as the age appropriate for the consumption of the product

Conclusion

This short report presents the comparison of the results from the WHO Regional Office for Europe BMS project in Portugal and Armenia. Portugal is a Member State of the European Union and Armenia is a Member State of the Eurasian Economic Union. These countries have different legislations and measures in place; however, in both countries, the participating women were exposed to digital marketing of BMS and FIYC.

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