

The Effects of Marketing Strategies on Parents' Buying Behavior. Case Study: Baby Food Market

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Abstract

The food market for children and babies is a dynamic and constantly expanding segment, influenced by the growing concerns of parents for healthy nutrition and food safety of their little ones. Every day, parents must make informed choices to select healthy and nutritious products suitable for the needs of their children. At the same time, they are exposed to various marketing strategies used by manufacturers to attract, influence, and retain consumers. This article analyzes the marketing strategies applied in this sector and highlights their impact on parents' decisions. For this purpose, a quantitative marketing study was conducted among Romanian parents.

Key words: children, food market, marketing strategies, quantitative market research, buying behavior

J.E.L. classification: M31, D12, L66, C83

1. Introduction

The market encompasses any investment opportunity and any moment in which potential business partners, sellers, or buyers of products or services can connect. It appears as a network of interpersonal relationships and business relationships that arise inevitably between almost all categories of agents in society.

Today, no one doubts the necessity of product promotion strategies. However, not only are these important, but also the product strategies, noting the permanent need for innovation and updating, the price strategies, and the distribution strategies (in this case, continuous research of the various distribution channels must be done so that the company and its products can reach the target market). The elaboration of marketing strategies does not consider the market in general, but a certain market well determined from a spatial, temporal, social-demographic, and economic point of view. Economic strategy is a complex concept that establishes how to achieve the objectives adopted by the company, the actions to be taken, how to allocate resources, how to respond optimally to changes in the environment, and to be competitive with competing companies (Negricea, 2009, p.114).

The strategy aims to place the company in a position from which it can compete effectively and survive in the market. The strategy can be defined as the set of major long-term objectives of the organization, the main ways to achieve them, along with the resources allocated to obtain the competitive advantage according to the mission of the organization (Nicolescu, 2002, p.104).

The food market for infants and children in Europe is very developed and currently offers a wide range of products: infant formula (0 - 1 year), breast milk for young children (from one year up), infant cereals, purees, juices, biscuits, desserts, and teas. Even so, most of the producers on the market sell only a small assortment of their international portfolio, depending on the country, a strategy directly in line with the market's demand and level of development. Any product that, through its properties, meets the needs of other people than its producers is called a commodity. Food commodities are part of the immediate-need goods group; without them, man cannot live (Madar et

al, 2004, p.21-37).

The competition is very fierce in the food market for children and infants, so in order to survive and develop, companies must know their market well and operate and develop different marketing strategies. Recently, a new concept has emerged, that of "green marketing", which involves specific strategies, with the purpose of not only bolstering their reputation but also of improving their awareness, increasing their trust or enhancing the target groups' appeal for the company. These actions will help customers see the company in a better light. Once a proper, positive, and proactive image develops in consumers' minds, the chance of gaining their loyalty is significantly increased, thus leading to a greater competitiveness of the company and higher effectiveness in approaching the target market (Dabija et al, 2013, p.8; Wood et al, 2021, p.9).

This article aims to identify the marketing strategies applied in the food market for children and to provide a clear picture of the impact of marketing strategies and techniques on attracting and influencing parents. In this regard, quantitative marketing research was conducted on 630 parents aged between 20 and 50. The obtained results reveal that the parents, although they do not realize it, are influenced by the marketing strategies applied in this market.

2. Analysis of marketing strategies applied on the infant's food market

Marketing strategies define how to achieve specific marketing objectives. First, it is essential to establish the strategy, followed by preparing the component action plans and specific action plans of the marketing plan (Butkovic et al, 2014, p.508; Morgan et al, 2019, p.4). Within the strategic plan, we can identify market strategies corresponding to each marketing environment element (product, price, distribution, and promotion) (Kumar et al, 2012, p.482). The marketing strategy represents the main directions of activity towards which the enterprise is oriented (Keller, 2008, p.24). It aims at a set of "long-term" actions that mobilize human, financial, and material resources, in order to achieve, in a specific period, the objectives set and, implicitly, to strengthen the company's market position. It is implemented with the help of tactics, techniques, and a well-defined instrumentation (Kotler, 2008, p.47). The marketing strategy is a plan that helps coordinate and improve long-term marketing efforts. It aligns with marketing policy principles to achieve market objectives effectively (Varadarajan, 2015, p.80; Sheth, 2021, p.3).

Regarding product strategies, the following strategies can be identified that companies can choose:

- Strategies regarding the size of the assortment range: these allow the diversification, maintenance, or restriction of the assortment range of the company according to its needs;
- Strategies regarding the quality of the products and services offered: these are the following: qualitative adaptation strategy, qualitative differentiation strategy, qualitative stability strategy
- Strategies regarding the degree of novelty of the products and services offered, depending on the degree of novelty, the strategic options that a company can opt for are: the strategy of assimilating new products, the strategy of perfecting the products, and the strategy of maintaining the degree of novelty;
- Strategies regarding how to approach local preferences, these target companies that operate in several markets, raise the issue of choosing between standardization and adapting products to local preferences (Ionescu, 2007, p.7).

Unlike the product's characteristic attributes and arrangements made with the distribution channels, the price can be changed in a very short time. Price can make the product more tangible by conveying perceptions of quality, reducing variability through appropriate strategic differentiation, and mitigating the effects of perishability and inseparability (Kotler et al, 2008, p.419). In the organization of a business, price flexibility is an essential mechanism that stimulates the creation of goods and removes bottlenecks caused by overproduction (Lefter et al, 2006, p. 454).

The promotion policy aims to communicate to the target markets through various promotional techniques and media, and the promotion strategies are the steps that ensure the achievement of the objectives of the promotion policy within the marketing policy and the organization's global policy (Ivanov, 2012, p.53).

The main criteria according to which promotional strategies can be structured are the global objectives of the promotional activity, how it is carried out over time, the role of the promotional activity, its position in relation to the market structures, the location of the promotional activity, and the type of motivation (Petrescu, 2009, p.114).

In the case of international marketing, there are two strategies:

- standardized advertisement;
- adapted advertising.

Standardized advertising uses the same ads at home and abroad, providing a consistent message in all markets the company wants to enter. In contrast, adapted advertising changes the message to suit the cultural needs of specific markets where the company operates (Cervellon et al, 2000, p.429).

Although it seems stable, the market for baby products is quite unpredictable, given that birth fluctuations can increase or decrease the number of consumers and sales of specific products. Unlike other products, the baby food category shows neither seasonality nor regionality. Instead, producers are talking about a differentiation in the market's growth rate. Factors influencing development are the area's economic growth, the expansion of modern retail, and access to information. Naturally, this category enjoys a higher degree of penetration and consumption in large cities.

The food market for infants and children in Romania has developed rapidly in recent years. It offers a wide range of products: milk formulas for infants (0-1 years), growing milk for young children (from one year to above), baby cereals, purees, juices, biscuits, desserts, and teas. Even so, most of the manufacturers present on the market only sell a limited assortment from their international portfolio, a strategy directly in line with the demand and the level of development of the market.

Analyzing the market for products for infants and children from the point of view of the main producers, it can be said that it is homogeneous, divided mainly between names and internationally renowned brands. The main players on the market are Nestlé, Milupa (with the brands Milupa, Aptamil, Milumil, and Bebelac), Humana, Hipp, and Parmalat. In addition, there are also smaller players on the market, some even locally.

The strategy for compiling the assortment range differs from case to case, some manufacturers rely on a wide and varied range, on the principle that it is very important to have products for any type of need and for each stage of development (such as Milupa), and other companies rely on organic marketing strategies, for example, by going for an offer of exclusively organic products (such as Topfer). Even so, if in some European countries such as France or Spain the range of a large producer can include 200 assortments, in other European countries, it sells only about a quarter of the products.

Existing European nutrition legislation regulates promotion issues, based on recommendations made by the World Health Organization (WHO). The measures aim to stop the declining trend in the importance and duration of breastfeeding, a trend influenced by both socio-cultural factors and promotion campaigns of substitute producers, who are obliged to educate and inform buyers about the superior benefits of breastfeeding.

Companies in this market use different strategies to promote products, especially through media channels (Madar, 2018, p.178; Cairns et al, 2013, p.214). Nestlé supports numerous campaigns to communicate, educate, and inform mothers through direct communication channels for mothers with infants over 6 months, in the case of diversification products, and young children over 1 year, in the case of breast milk formulas. At the same time, Nestlé constantly provides the latest scientific information to doctors, pharmacists, nutritionists, other scientists, and provides a basis for discussions between specialists around the world through the Nestlé Nutrition Institute, which provides them with a website dedicated to specialists, workshops, books, magazines, etc.

The level of education of young mothers also influences their perception of the products and their costs. Thus, the Milupa Romania company adapted its product portfolio according to the children's nutritional pyramid, built according to the different stages of growth and the related needs. In terms of innovations, Milupa also launched Aptamil Junior 2 years + with Immunofortis. The packaging is innovative, designed as an easy-to-use pack that mothers can handle with one hand, while also being safe from a hygiene perspective.

For example, Milupa offers baby food in the premium price segments with the Milupa and Aptamil ranges and in the mainstream with the Bebelac brand. The portfolio includes over 34 teas, milk formulas, and cereal products.

In terms of distribution, most companies in this market target both pharmacy chains and Key Account channels. Because mothers trust the advice of a specialist, they go to pharmacies to ask for information about baby products. Here, together with the pharmacist, the recommended dose is determined, and the product is bought. In the next acquisitions, out of the desire to pay a more advantageous price, they are oriented towards modern retail. That is why the big players in this market, such as Milupa and Nestle, focus on promotions in store chains.

Satisfying the consumption needs of the population in a civilized society implies the existence of a wide range of products.

Therefore, design and aesthetic elements in the packaging of infant products play an important role in product strategies (Neacsu, 2019, p.284).

3. Research methodology

The research conducted and presented in this article was quantitative in nature. It aimed to identify and analyze how marketing strategies influence parents' decisions to buy baby food.

The paper's main objective is to clearly illustrate how parents perceive companies' marketing strategies in the children's food market.

The quantitative research method used was a survey-based investigation, and the basic instrument with which the data was obtained was the questionnaire.

The specific objectives based on which the research was designed were:

- Identifying respondents' opinions on child nutrition;
- Determining the reasons why adults choose to buy certain brands of food for their children;
- Identifying the influence of marketing strategies in the choice of food by parents for their children;
- Identifying the influence that promotion has in the choice of food by parents for their children.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 22 questions (2 filter questions, 15 core questions, and 5 identification questions).

The sample included a number of 630 people, who met the necessary conditions to achieve the purpose and objectives of the research. The eliminatory condition was that the respondents had babies or infants. The sample was structured as follows: 61.9% from the urban environment and 38.1% from the rural environment. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents (31.23%) are between 36 and 50 years old, followed by those aged between 25 and 35 (23.42%).

Tabel no. 1 Descriptive information of survey participants

Categories	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 20 - 25 years	88	13.97	13.97	13.97
26 - 30 years	127	20.14	20.14	34.11
31 - 35 years	176	27.94	27.94	62.05
36 - 40 years	153	24.29	24.29	86.34
41 - 45 years	68	10.8	10.8	97.14
46 - 50 years	18	2.86	2.86	100.0
Total	630	100.0	100.0	

Source: Authors' own research

Due to the significant geographical dispersion of the respondents and for easier data collection, the survey was conducted through Google Forms using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). The survey was conducted between April 10 and May 10, 2024.

The collected data were entered into a manually coded database and analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In order to understand how parents perceive the marketing strategies applied by companies in the children's food market, the analysis focused on descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations.

4. Results and discussion

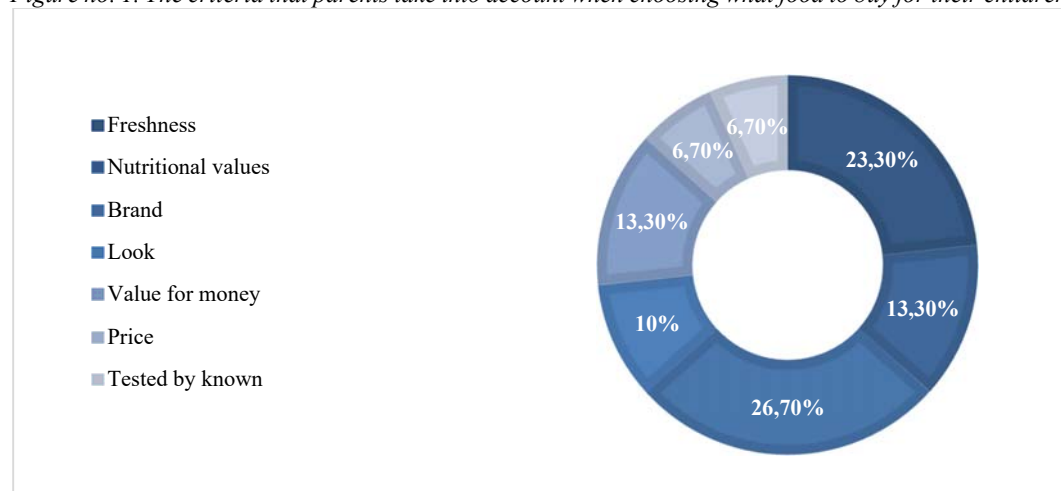
The results of the research were analyzed and are structured on the four specific objectives.

Objective 1. Identifying respondents' opinions on child nutrition

The respondents are aware that a healthy diet for young children should include fresh, natural, home-cooked meals. They believe that children should have three meals a day, with a focus on food diversification. Nutrition should be part of a healthy lifestyle that also includes physical activity for the little ones, helping to prevent health issues caused by a lack of exercise. Participants were also asked to identify potential health problems in infants that could result from poor nutrition. Diabetes and obesity are the conditions identified by the interviewed subjects. Diabetes in children is often genetically inherited, but can also be caused by excessive sweets.

The main criteria according to which respondents choose products for feeding children are freshness (23.3%), nutritional values (13.3%), brand (26.7%), appearance (10%), value for money (13.3%), and price (6.7%), but also whether they have been previously tested by them or close ones (6.7%). As shown in Figure 1, respondents primarily choose food for their children based on the brand and the product's freshness.

Figure no. 1. The criteria that parents take into account when choosing what food to buy for their children



Source: Authors' own research

Most respondents mentioned that they mostly prepare children's food at home but that they sometimes also use ready-made food due to a lack of time. Although the subjects know the rules of a healthy diet for children, due to lack of time they choose to buy less healthy foods, most subjects (58%) although they are aware that semi-prepared foods are not as healthy as those prepared at home, choose to buy these products due to lack of time. The other respondents offered options such as: healthy food that they prepare quickly, vegetables to cook on the grill, ready-made purees, choose foods to make soup even if they do not have much time.

The respondents stated that they choose the best, organic, natural food with the most nutrients for their children, which ensures a high intake of vitamins, especially for their age, as recommended by the doctor. These statements, however, contradict the moment when they do not have enough time to cook healthily and choose ready-made products or to satisfy certain pleasures of their children.

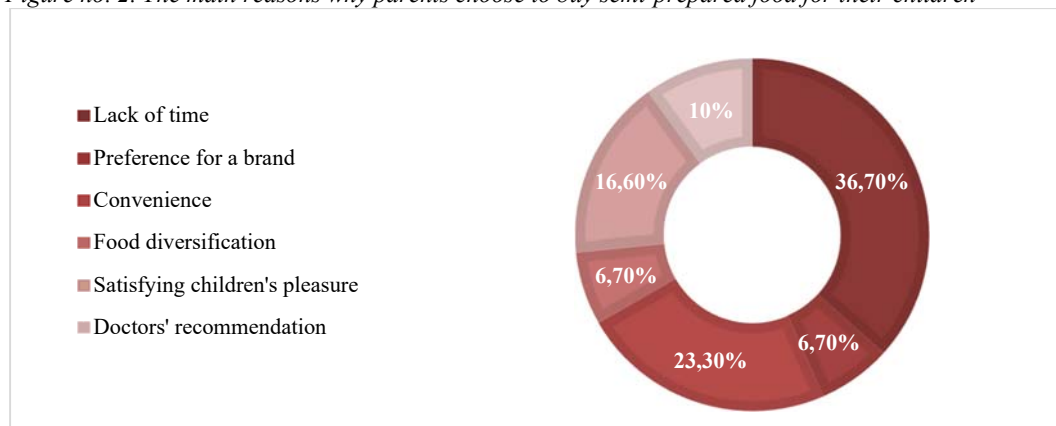
Another topic was that of the food chosen for the child up to two years old. Most subjects chose the powdered milk option for their baby. The reasons listed were that they did not have breast milk for too long, it is healthier than cow's milk, the doctor recommends it, and it helps the baby's normal development. Those who opted for breast milk, instead of powdered milk, pointed out that it ensures babies' immunity, or that the baby did not accept the bottle. Respondents said that semi-prepared food is sometimes useful because they do not always have time to cook, although it is unhealthy and creates health problems, as it does not have the necessary intake of nutrients and has additives. At the same time, the semi-prepared food is the joy of the little ones because it tastes good.

For children over the age of two, most respondents (72%) said that at breakfast, they offer their child milk with cereal, fruit puree with biscuits, fruit and vegetable juice, toast with jam, butter, and tea.

Objective 2. Determining the reasons why adults choose to buy certain brands of food for their children

The main reasons (Figure 2) for which respondents buy ready-made food for babies are: lack of time (36.7%), preference for a brand (6.7%), convenience (23.3%), food diversification (6.7%), children's pleasure satisfaction (16.6%), doctors' recommendation (10%).

Figure no. 2. The main reasons why parents choose to buy semi-prepared food for their children



Source: Authors' own research

Regarding food safety, the subjects, especially mothers, mentioned an interesting aspect, namely that baby foods are safe being pre-tested and recommended by doctors, as opposed to those for preschool children, which are not so safe, they contain additives and, in addition, do not have the same nutritional values as those made at home.

Among the companies producing baby food, the respondents listed: Nestle on the first (36%), followed by Milupa with 22%, Aptamil (which also belongs to Milupa) and Hipp, both with 11% and on the last place Topfer (10%) and Humana (10%).

Objective 3. Identifying the influence of marketing strategies in the choice of food by parents for their children

First, this topic was about finding out where parents buy food for their children. The supermarket option came in first place with a score of 75%, and in second place with a score of 25%, the respondents answered that they buy food for their children from pharmacies. The authors aimed to determine whether price influences the decision to purchase baby food. Thus, 37.5% of the subjects stated that the price does not matter when they choose food for their children, mentioning that they always choose what is best and what the doctor recommends to them regardless of price, and 62.5% of the respondents stated that in the purchase process they also take into account the price. Among the reasons mentioned in this last statement is the lack of a large budget to choose the most expensive products, but also the fact that they can buy more products if they choose a lower price or buy at a promotion.

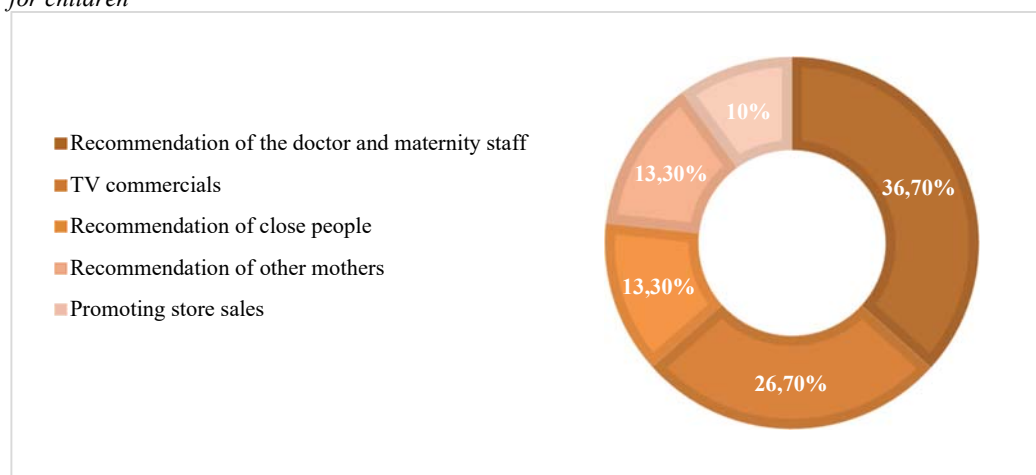
In relation to the product itself, the aim was to determine which characteristic is most important when choosing food for infants and young children. The most frequently mentioned aspect was the packaging. Respondents preferred packaging that is as transparent as possible, allowing them to see the contents. They also valued packaging that is easy to transport and store, and they paid close attention to the information displayed on the label, especially elements that highlight features distinguishing the product from competitors. The degree of novelty was another important feature for mothers when choosing a baby food product, the new products being often superior to the others in their range, with new and improved properties. The label is also important, the ingredients must be written clearly, looking for natural products, without additives, dyes, and artificial preservatives,

and the label also looks for the expiration date written clearly. Respondents also mentioned quality and brand, expressing a preference for well-known products that are easily recognizable and of superior quality.

Objective 4. Identifying the influence that promotion has in the choice of food by parents for their children.

For most subjects, the decisive factor that led them to choose a certain food company for babies was the recommendation of the doctor and the maternity staff (36.7%), followed by TV commercials (26.7%), the recommendation of close people (13.3%), recommending other mothers with whom they interact (13.3%) and promoting sales in stores (10%) (Figure 3). We can deduce that the subjects take into account, first of all, the recommendations of the qualified staff when choosing the food for their children, and then the rest of the factors, so the companies present should turn their attention to family doctors, pediatricians, and maternity staff to increase sales volume.

Figure no. 3. The decisive factor that contributed to the choice by the subjects of a certain brand of food for children



Source: Authors' own research

The companies best rated by the interviewed subjects are: Nestle, followed by Hipp, Aptamil, Milupa, Humana, and Topfer. The subjects stated that promotion is essential when buying a company's products, taking into account primarily the recommendations of family doctors, maternity staff, pediatricians, TV commercials, promoting sales in stores and pharmacies, and recommendations of friends. Moreover, the other mothers he comes in contact with. 75% of respondents stated that they buy baby food from the supermarket and only 25% buy it from pharmacies and of these 62.5% are influenced by the price of the products and only 37.5% consider that price is not a criterion when choosing food for their children, buying what they recommend qualified staff regardless of price.

In the current conditions of economic and social dynamism, the successful presence of a company on the market is increasingly difficult. Competition is extreme in most fields of activity, so to survive and develop, the company must know its market well. To achieve this, the company must communicate with the market, it must inform its potential customers about its existence, about the ways in which the products it offers can come into their possession, but also about the characteristics of the products sold and the price, but also to and set very well the strategies for achieving the goals.

Establishing a marketing strategy is probably the most complex marketing activity any company must undertake. The process must evaluate the company's current situation, establish the objectives that the company proposes, and concretely achieve them using the existing resources and those available in the future, realistically estimated (material, human, competitive advantages), in the most efficient way possible.

Analyzing the market of products for infants and children from the point of view of the main manufacturers, we can say that it is a homogeneous one, mainly divided between names and brands of international renown. The first five manufacturers present in the market, through their representation or importers, are Nestlé, Milupa Romania (with the Milupa, Aptamil, Milumil, and Bebelac brands), Humana (Vavian Pharma importer), Hipp (Consumer Product Network importer), and Parmalat. The brands Hamé (Hamé Romania), Hero (Ulker), Topfer, or Nutriben (Romagra Distribution) can also be found on the shelf.

Firms in this market use different strategies to promote products, primarily through media channels. Nestlé supports numerous campaigns to communicate, educate and inform mothers through direct communication channels for mothers with infants over 6 months, in the case of diversification products, and young children over 1 year, in the case of growth milk formulas. At the same time, Nestlé constantly provides doctors, pharmacists, nutritionists, and other scientists with the latest scientific information and provides a basis for discussions between specialists from around the world through the Nestlé Nutrition Institute, which provides them with a website dedicated to specialists, workshop books, magazines, etc.

Young mothers' education level also influences their perception of products and costs. Thus, the Milupa Romania company adapted its product portfolio according to the children's nutritional pyramid, built according to the different stages of growth and related needs. In terms of price, the Milupa company entered the Romanian baby food market in the premium price segments with the Milupa and Aptamil ranges, and the mainstream, with the Bebelac brand

Following the research, the company most chosen by the interviewed buyers is Nestle, followed by Hipp, Aptamil, Milupa, Humana, and Topfer. Mothers stated that promotion is very important when they decide to purchase a company's products, primarily taking into account the recommendations of family doctors, maternity staff and pediatricians, but also TV commercials, sales promotion in stores and pharmacies and recommendations of friends and other mothers with whom they come into contact. Regarding the product itself, the most important feature identified is the packaging that must be transparent and easy to transport and store, the degree of novelty of the products, but also the label, brand, and quality of the products.

Thus, companies must produce products that are as natural as possible, without artificial E and dyes, that have an average price but are manufactured according to the latest quality standards, that have transparent packaging and appropriate labeling that can be observed to show product benefits. These products must be intensively promoted in maternity hospitals and through specialized doctors, TV commercials, and supermarkets where they buy the most.

The hypothesis that at least 60% of the respondents consider branded food products to be quality products was tested using the Student's t-test.

Tabel no. 2 Data obtained after applying the Student t test

	Test Value = 0.6					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Branded food products for babies are quality products	2.689	59	.009	.217	.06	.38

Source: Authors' own research

The results indicate that, with 95% confidence, less than 60% of the respondents believe that branded food products are of high quality.

The research aimed to determine if parents buy food products for babies and children, how much they know them, how they appreciate specific characteristics of these products, and if they are influenced by the new products displayed on the shelf or by promotions. Considering the fact that parents can easily inform themselves about how they can choose their child's nutrition through the

multitude of mass media, it is important for any company to know the preferences of mothers in conditions where the market is saturated with such products.

The main place where parents buy baby food is the supermarket, followed by pharmacies and hypermarkets. 63.3% of respondents agree with the statement that branded baby food products are good quality, and 25% showed indifference. Regarding the second statement (for me, choosing more expensive food products reveals the fact that they are healthier for the baby), 48.3% showed indifference, and 41.7% agreed.

Of the responses, 70% said they do not usually change the brand of food products for babies, and 30% stated that they do. Of those who answered "yes", 72.2% do this less often than 2 months, and 27.8% once every 2 months. The main reason mentioned for changing the brand of the products is related to the health problems caused by the child.

Regarding the extent to which the new products marked on the shelf influence the purchase of food products for babies, 35% of the respondents opted for level 3 of the scale, which represents the not a little/not much option. 11.7% mentioned that they are determined a lot by the new products displayed on the shelf in the purchase process, 30% are determined a little, and 23.3% are determined very little.

30% of the respondents mentioned that advertising influences the buying process a lot, and 33.3% mentioned that advertising does not influence the buying process either much or a little. Promoting baby foods is considered low by 63.3% of the respondents and normal by 36.7%.

Given that today's mothers are increasingly suspicious of ready-made baby food products, companies should offer the opportunity for mothers to taste the products in the store, thus offering the possibility of knowing the contents before purchase. Companies should try to innovate smart packaging, placing more emphasis on their safety and creating it in such a way as to allow food to be kept fresh for as long as possible, but also to be stored and transported easily and safely.

In the chapter of news at the level of purchasing behavior, manufacturers speak of a greater awareness of the fact that babies have different needs than adults and therefore need an appropriate diet. Buyers understand that baby food products, unlike home-made ones, have the optimal dose of each ingredient required for balanced nutrition.

Unlike other product categories, baby food exhibits neither seasonality nor regionality. However, manufacturers talk about a differentiation in the market's growth rate. The factors that influence the development are the respective area's economic growth, the expansion of modern retail, and access to information. Naturally, this category enjoys higher penetration and consumption in big cities.

5. Conclusions

Among the most important criteria in the purchase decision are advice from an authorized person, such as a pediatrician, the stage of the baby's development, aroma, and the ease of use of these products.

Most parents know what a healthy diet means and try to give their children the best. However, they admit that there are times when they give their children ready-made food bought in stores due to a lack of time, sometimes convenience, but also to satisfy certain pleasures of children. Mothers know almost all the health problems their children could have due to a poor diet.

Firms must provide products that are as natural as possible, without additives, that are manufactured according to the latest quality standards, with packaging that is as transparent as possible and appropriate labeling on which the benefits of the products can be observed. These products must be intensely promoted primarily in maternity hospitals and through specialized doctors, through TV commercials, but also in supermarkets where they are bought the most.

In order to face the increasingly fierce competition and meet consumers' desires, more and more companies in the market for baby food have begun to apply "green marketing" strategies, offering organic products with natural ingredients without additives. Even if they are more expensive, these products are preferred by parents, who want safe, healthy products for their children and who, due to a lack of time, cannot prepare them at home and buy the semi-prepared ones.

A limitation of the research is the statistical validation of the sample and the extrapolation of the results to the entire researched population. This limitation stems from the inability to implement random sampling techniques, but this limitation does not make the paper any less valuable.

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