



DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES IN FAST FOOD CHAINS IN COLOMBIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

CAMILO MAURICIO GRILLO TORRES¹, CATALINA ROCÍO VEGA¹

¹ University Corporation of Asturias, Colombia

PALABRAS CLAV

Digital Marketing
Social Media
Digital Content
Communication Strategies
Audience Interaction

CONSUMERS AND USERS

SUMMARY

This study examines how fast food chains in Colombia utilize social media in their digital marketing efforts. It explores the strategies and content of the most active chains, employing a mixed-methods approach. The findings reveal a predominant use of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with a primary focus on product promotion, though exhibiting limited technological innovation. The conclusion underscores the necessity of enhancing digital communication to maximize the potential of social media within the sector.

Received: 02/ 10 / 2024

Accepted: 20/ 10 / 2024

1. Introduction

The growing importance of social media in the digital marketing strategies of fast food chains in Colombia has been a topic of great interest over the past decade. In an increasingly connected and digital world, these chains have faced significant challenges that have driven them to adapt and develop innovative strategies for online engagement and shared experiences.

These strategies have emerged as crucial factors influencing consumer buying decisions (Bernal-González et al., 2023; Cabrera-Córdova et al., 2023; Harun et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Suazo, 2018; Verma et al., 2023). Particularly in Colombia, fast food chains have demonstrated exceptional effectiveness in leveraging social media as pivotal tools in their digital marketing efforts. This success is attributed to the strategic implementation of digital communication actions and the effective management of information technologies (Grillo Torres et al., 2023; Kushwaha & Singh, 2020; Molina et al., 2023; Nuseir et al., 2022; Rafael-Baltazar et al., 2023).

Technological globalization has created a wide array of unique opportunities and challenges, driving fast food chains to innovate in the advertising, promotion, and sales of their products (Grillo Torres, 2022; He & Zhang, 2022; Moreno-Lopez et al., 2023; Olsen et al., 2022).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate which fast food chains in Colombia are most active on social media, analyze the content they share, and evaluate their communication strategies to determine whether they effectively engage with their audience. This highlights a significant area where these companies could improve (Grillo Torres, 2021; Grillo Torres & Vega, 2020; Kwayu et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide insights into the most effective strategies and practices fast food chains can adopt to enhance their social media presence and ultimately boost their competitiveness in Colombia's food market.

1.1. Background

The relevance of social media in the digital marketing strategies of fast food chains has been a subject of research in various contexts. Authors such as Celimli & Adanacioglu (2021) have emphasized the importance of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok in the digital marketing strategies of food companies.

Other researchers have underscored how social media provides food establishments with the opportunity to interact directly with their audience, creating an emotional connection (Aspirant Revollar et al., 2023; Sung et al., 2023; Vaičiukynaitė & Gatautis, 2018; Zahoor, 2022). Additionally, studies have shown that creative and original posts generate higher engagement on social media (Dolan et al., 2019; Voorveld et al., 2018), suggesting that the communication style of a fast food chain can significantly impact its effectiveness on these platforms.

Research by Puspaningrum (2020) has identified brands such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and KFC as examples of successful social media strategies that go beyond merely promoting products. There has also been a growing trend in the use of videos and live streams in social media marketing (Rein & Venturini, 2018; Yuan & Lee, 2023). Furthermore, studies have analyzed the reach, posting frequency, engagement levels, and content quality on the social media profiles of food establishments.

In this regard, Seifert & Kwon (2020) and Song et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of analyzing comments and posts, as these can provide critical insights into audience perception of a particular brand. Moreover, research highlights that personalized content and timely responses to comments are key factors in fostering interaction on social media (Nasir et al., 2021; Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

1.2. Influence of Communication Strategies on Social Networks in the Fast Food Sector

The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in a variety of perspectives derived from previous studies. It examines key concepts related to digital marketing, corporate communication, and interactions on social networks.

Notably, the integration of tools such as blogs, videos, and podcasts into marketing strategies has demonstrated significant impact (Chakraborty et al., 2023; Haushalter et al., 2023; Tien et al., 2019).

Similarly, Melović et al. (2020) emphasize that combining a robust digital environment with an active presence on social media profiles contributes significantly to brand positioning and recognition.

Regarding communication and interaction between companies and customers, it is critical to analyze and refine strategies within digital communication plans. Various studies highlight how social media interactions strengthen customer relationships and drive the adoption of products or services (Feng & Johansson, 2019; Kusumasondjaja, 2018; Papa et al., 2018).

Moreover, the selection of appropriate social media platforms and the ability to adapt to cultural and economic shifts are pivotal for ensuring effective engagement, as noted by Peco-Torres et al. (2021) and Singh (2019). The perception of brand identity in the digital sphere is vital, as interactions on social media profiles serve as a critical touchpoint between organizations and users, facilitating the exchange of information and an understanding of expectations and needs. Researchers such as Langaro et al. (2018) and Houghton et al. (2020) have underscored the significance of these interactions.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize the role of social media in the digital communication strategies of fast food chains operating in the Colombian market. These strategies have a profound impact on operational efficiency within the target market and on organizational performance in the digital domain (Arias Hanco, 2022; Lafuente et al., 2020).

1.3. Objective

To examine how fast food chains in Colombia utilize social media platforms. The objective is to identify user profiles, frequency of posts or communications, types of shared content, and the level of audience engagement. Furthermore, the study will assess whether these interactions are reciprocal, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the effectiveness of communication strategies and audience responses.

1.4. Justification.

This study distinguishes itself by focusing on the social media communication strategies employed by restaurants and fast food chains in Colombia. Unlike previous research that emphasized the overall impact of social media on marketing, this study explores how these entities address the demands of strategic planning in digital marketing. Specifically, it examines the implementation and outcomes of their digital communication strategies, a topic that has thus far received limited academic attention.

The innovative contribution of this research lies in its ability to evaluate how these practices enhance competitiveness and corporate image in the digital landscape. Furthermore, it offers practical significance by improving digital communication strategies, enabling fast food chains in Colombia to optimize their social media profiles for more effective consumer engagement. Additionally, it enriches academic knowledge in digital marketing and corporate communication, providing actionable insights for the growth and competitiveness of these establishments in today's market.

2. Design and Method

This study focuses on examining the dynamics of social media utilized by fast food chains in Colombia, specifically analyzing their influence on customer interactions. A methodological framework integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches is employed to conduct a detailed evaluation of the chains' digital communication and online presence. This approach enables a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of social media communication strategies and their impact on consumer perceptions and behavior.

2. 2.1. Research approach

To address the issue in question, a mixed methodology combining qualitative and quantitative elements has been adopted. This approach enables a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the communication tactics employed and their tangible impact on user interaction.

From a qualitative perspective, this study examines the characteristics of the websites and social media presence of fast food chains subject to scrutiny. A comprehensive and detailed analysis of published content, communicative engagement, and the degree of technological innovation across various social platforms is conducted, with particular attention paid to how these chains interact with

their customers and the effectiveness of their communication strategies. This examination includes reviewing profiles on 13 different social platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube.

On the quantitative side, the research employs a binary coding and data analysis system, adding objectivity to the findings. This quantitative approach complements the qualitative results with statistical and numerical insights, enabling a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness, scope, and outreach of the social media strategies implemented by the fast-food chains under study.

2.2. Field of research

This study focuses on the fast food industry in Colombia. Its main objective is to examine the strategies employed by chains in this sector within the realm of social media, emphasizing their use as a digital marketing tool and their impact on user interaction. The analysis is limited to the year 2022, ensuring a contemporary and relevant perspective. Geographically, the study is centered on Colombia, allowing for a more precise and contextually relevant analysis within the country.

2.3. Sample selection

The study sample comprised a total of 15 fast food restaurant chains operating in Colombia. The selection was conducted using a non-probabilistic convenience sampling approach, as outlined in the methodology proposed by Otzen and Manterola (2017). This sampling method involves selecting easily accessible units that are relevant to the purpose of the study, rather than aiming for a sample that accurately represents the entire population.

The criteria for selecting these fast food chains were based on several factors, one of which was a significant increase in their revenues during 2022, as detailed in the 'Standard Sector Report 2023: Fast Food Chains and Restaurants,' published by lanota.com. In addition to this financial criterion, other aspects were considered, including their market position, presence on digital platforms, and the diversity of their menu offerings.

This rigorous selection process enabled the researchers to identify and select the most relevant fast food chains for the study, ensuring that the results obtained were both meaningful and applicable to the study's primary objective: analyzing the use of social networks within the specific context of the fast food sector in Colombia.

2.4. Variables of analysis.

The variables examined in this study are classified into two primary categories:

- **Website characteristics and social media presence:** This variable focuses on analyzing how quick-service restaurant chains use their websites and social media platforms to communicate their message and project their brand identity. This analysis encompasses aspects such as design, usability, the offered content, and its alignment with the company's marketing objectives.
- **Evaluation of Individual Social Media Platforms:** This phase of the research focuses on assessing specific aspects of various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. It analyzes how communication is built and maintained with the audience, the nature of the shared content, and how technology is leveraged to enhance user engagement on each platform.

2.4. Research methods

In this study, specific methods were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the information collected. These methodologies include:

First, a non-probabilistic convenience sampling approach was employed, based on the guidelines proposed by Otzen and Manterola (2017). This approach was deemed suitable for exploratory or descriptive studies where emphasis is placed on the accessibility and relevance of sampling units rather than their representativeness. This enabled the selection of sampling units that were both convenient and accessible within the research context.

To maintain objectivity and consistency in data collection and analysis for both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, two coding guides were developed in accordance with the standards set by Badell (2015) and Neuendorf (2017). The first guide focused on the characteristics of websites and social media presence, while the second targeted individual social platforms, examining elements such as participatory communication, published content, and technological innovation. A binary coding approach was implemented, ensuring consistent and objective results.

The study included an extensive analysis of fast food chains' profiles across 13 social platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, among others. These methods were particularly relevant given the study's focus on the use of social media by fast food chains in the Colombian context. A flexible and adaptable approach was essential to conduct an in-depth examination of the digital communication practices employed by these companies. The non-probabilistic convenience sampling facilitated the selection of pertinent fast food chains, while the coding guides ensured objectivity and consistency in analyzing the data gathered from social media platforms and websites.

3. Fieldwork and data analysis

The research was conducted in two stages during 2023. The first phase, spanning from January to June, involved an exhaustive review of the websites of various selected fast food chains. Subsequently, their social media profiles were meticulously examined. The information collected was then systematically coded and documented in specific coding manuals. A rigorous emphasis was placed on adhering to ethical standards during data collection, following established guidelines and ensuring that the use of information was strictly limited to research purposes, always respecting the privacy of social media users.

In the second phase, which took place during the second half of the year, from July to November, a detailed analysis of the data was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study evaluated the type of information shared by these fast food chains on their social media profiles, the level of interaction they maintained with their audience, and the degree of innovation reflected in the content they shared. This comprehensive data analysis provided deep insights into the digital communication strategies employed by fast food chains, representing a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge in this field of study.

4. Results

The study conducted reveals that 80% of the 15 fast food chains analyzed have a presence on social media platforms. Conversely, 20% do not actively engage in these digital spaces. In Colombia, fast food chains predominantly prefer Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for digital promotion, followed by YouTube and LinkedIn. Specifically, 80% of these chains use Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, while 53% opt for YouTube, 46% for LinkedIn, and 40% for TikTok. Table 1 illustrates this distribution, comparing the use of these platforms with less popular or inactive ones.

In this context, the 15 chains studied in Colombia use an average of three social media platforms each. Frisby, with six profiles, and Andrés Carne de Res, with five, stand out. Regarding their websites, 86% of these chains have their own site, while 14% lack this digital tool. Among those with a website, only 8% offer bilingual content in Spanish and English.

Additionally, 84% of chains with websites include direct links to their social media profiles, facilitating user navigation to these platforms. Regarding direct interaction, 80% of these websites provide links for online inquiries; however, only 16% include a channel for submitting requests, complaints, claims, or suggestions.

Table 1. Presence of fast food chains on social media in Colombia

Social Media	Frequency	%
Facebook	12	80%

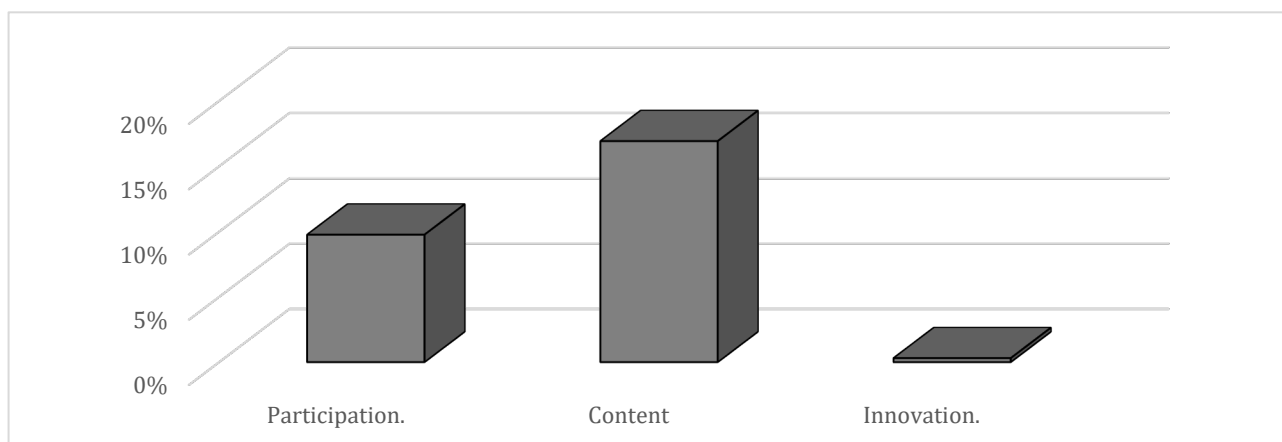
Instagram	12	80%
X (Twitter)	12	80%
Tiktok	6	40%
Youtube	8	53%
Pinterest	0	0%
Snapchap	0	0%
Vimeo	0	0%
Linkedin	7	46%
Foursquare	0	0%
Delicious	0	0%
BeqBe	0	0%
Spotify	0	0%

Source(s): Authors, 2024

In relation to the communication strategies implemented by fast food chains in Colombia, the data presented in Figure 1 show a clear tendency to focus on content promotion. While efforts to encourage audience participation and collaboration are acknowledged, technological innovation in communication has been identified as a weakness.

A comparative analysis of the various social media platforms used by these chains reveals no substantial differences between them. Communication is predominantly used for informational and promotional purposes. Furthermore, a noticeable degree of technological innovation can be observed in the interactions of these fast food chains.

Figure 1. Fast Food Chains' Communication on Social Media



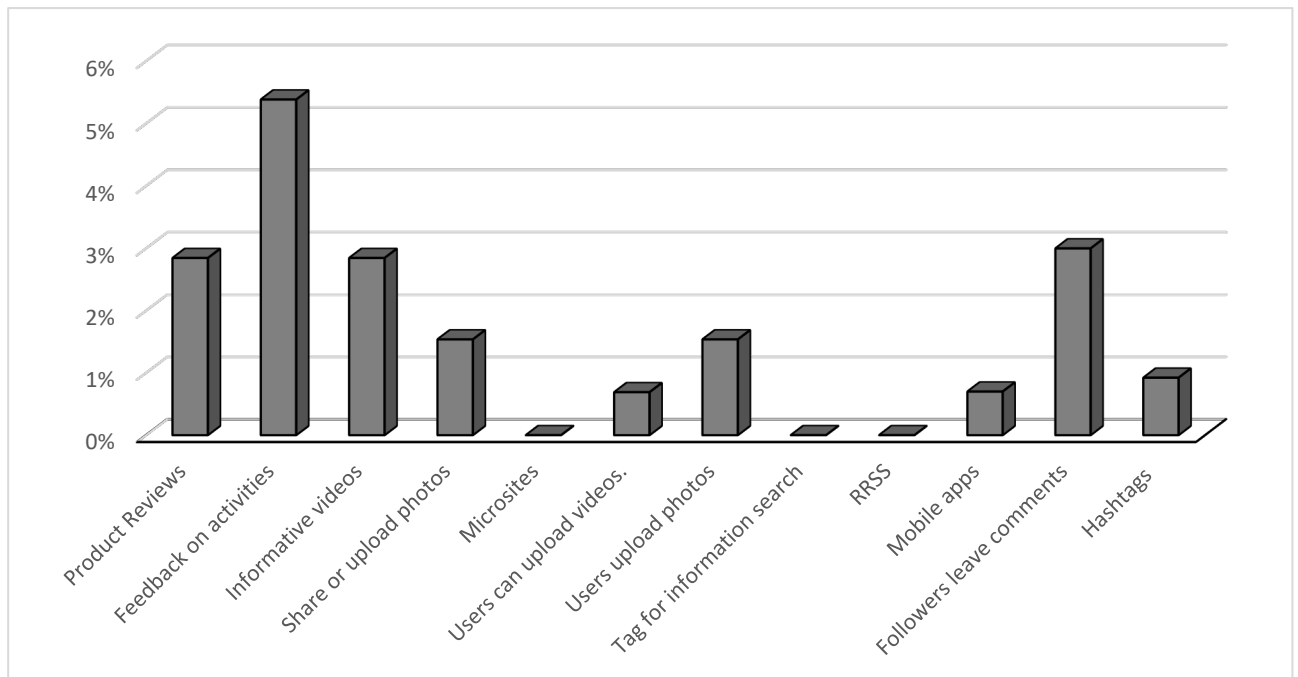
Source(s): Authors, 2024

When analyzing the results obtained from social networks regarding communication aimed at collaborating with users and consumers, interesting trends emerge. In Figure 2, it is clear that communication primarily emphasizes the dissemination of information, focusing on promoting products and services. A noticeable predominance of audiovisual content and comments about promotional offers was observed. However, it is important to highlight the limited presence of communications fostering more dynamic interaction with users and consumers. This is evident in the lack of "tags" that facilitate users' search for and access to specific information, as well as the scarcity of "Social Media" platforms that enable users to interact and share content online. Additionally, the low participation of users in generating content related to fast food chains stands out, whether by posting videos or sharing photographs.

Highlighted practices in mobile applications include the free apps by Frisby and McDonald's Colombia, which allow users to browse products, place personalized orders, and locate nearby points of sale. In terms of social media engagement, a noteworthy example is the hashtag #LaDivinaBurger by Andrés Carne de Res, which garnered 259 likes, 29 comments, and 12 shares. Upon closer examination,

no significant differences were identified among the social profiles of these companies. Facebook is commonly used to share broad information, while Twitter focuses on specific updates and reminders.

Figure 2. Communication with Collaborative Goals

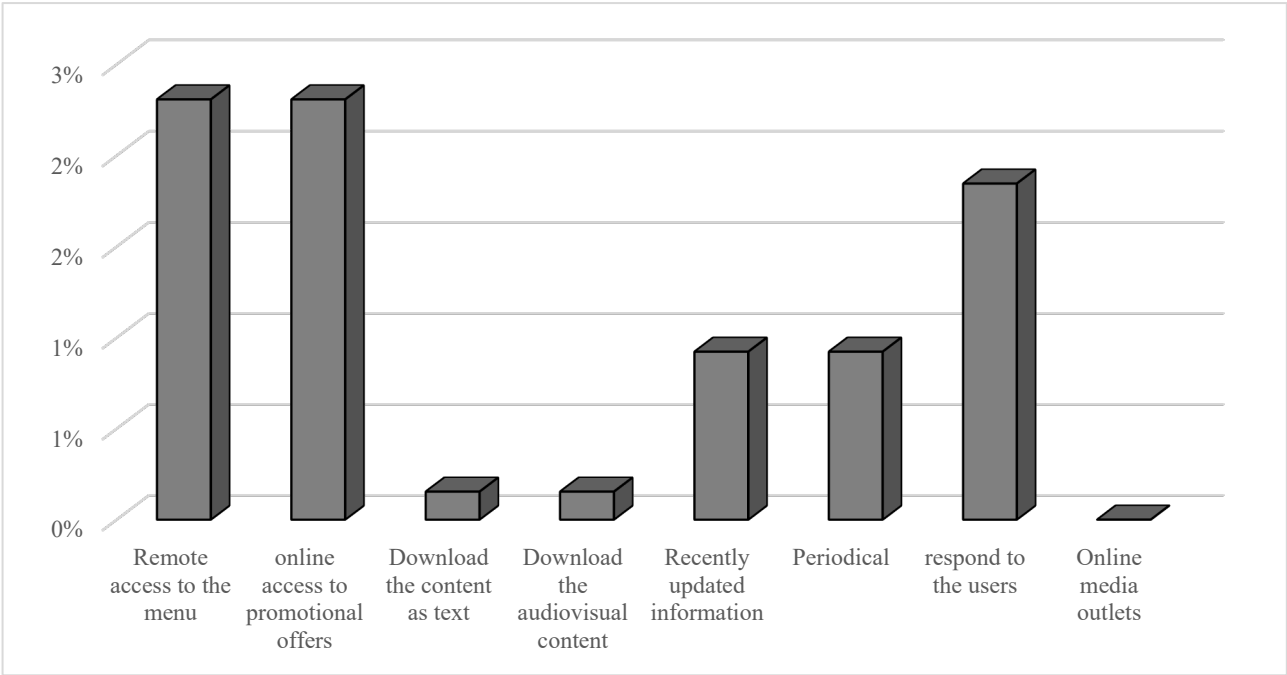


Source(s): Authors, 2024

The analysis of communication content, as illustrated in Figure 3, reveals that fast food chains are focusing their efforts on ensuring information accessibility for their users and customers. Menus and promotions are commonly available online from these chains. However, it is important to note that while content is abundant, it is not always up to date, as updates typically occur approximately every 15 days.

A significant need has been identified to increase the availability of both text and audiovisual content. Moreover, it is essential to enhance the development of online digital press media to foster stronger interaction with the public. Avesco Kokorico exemplifies effective content management practices, as it updates its materials on a weekly basis. Similarly, the photo gallery of the El Corral hamburger chain is remarkable for showcasing its products, promotions, and environmental campaigns. These findings underscore the critical role of active social media engagement by fast food chains in Colombia to effectively promote their product offerings.

Figure 3. Knowledge Dissemination Communication



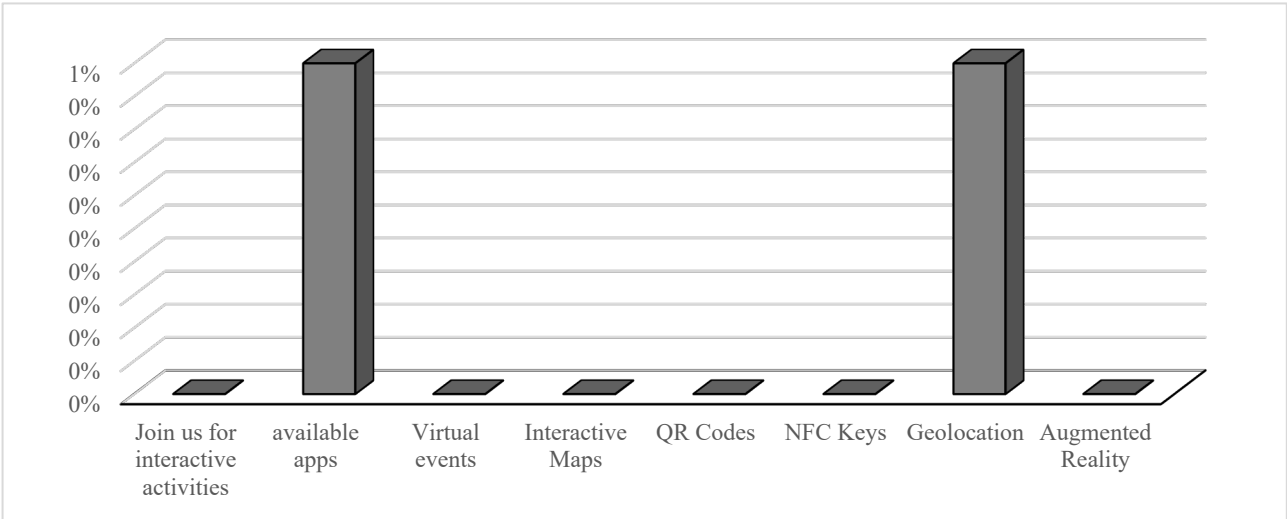
Source(s): Authors, 2024

The adoption and integration of technological innovations in Colombia's fast food chains, particularly within the realm of social media, reveals certain developmental limitations. As shown in Figure 4, the most notable technological implementation is geolocation. While some chains have already adopted mobile applications, a significant technological gap remains evident overall.

This situation is particularly relevant given the broad array of modern technological tools available, including interactive maps, QR codes, and NFC technology. These tools possess significant potential to enhance the user experience across various dimensions. However, the analysis conducted in this study indicates that fast food chains have yet to fully leverage these opportunities.

This highlights the necessity of placing greater emphasis on the effective utilization of these technologies to improve customer satisfaction and service quality. It is crucial for fast food chains to recognize the added value these tools can bring and to focus on their effective implementation. By doing so, they can offer more enhanced and personalized experiences to their customers.

Figure 4. Technological Innovation in Communications



Source(s): Authors, 2024

Finally, various data related to social media presence, including the number of followers, engagement metrics, posting frequency, and communication tone, were analyzed. Among social media platforms, Facebook stands out as the most frequently used. Within this platform, the most popular brand is Juan Valdez, a well-known coffee chain, boasting an impressive 3.9 million followers and an equivalent number of positive reactions, commonly referred to as "likes." In second place, Crepes & Waffles has 772,000 followers and 745,000 likes. The third position is held by Hamburguesas El Corral, with 520,000 followers and 504,000 likes.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of strategies and social media profiles of fast-food chains in Colombia reveals significant insights. These chains predominantly operate on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, aligning with the findings of Grillo Torres and Moreno López (2022). However, this approach contrasts with Graciyal and Viswam (2021), who highlight the importance of building emotional connections beyond the selection of specific platforms.

Regarding the frequency and type of communication, the chains mainly focus on promotional content. This observation aligns with Raji et al. (2019), who underscore a strategy centered on product promotions and offers. However, this differs from Md Saad and Yaacob (2021), who advocate for strategies that extend beyond mere promotion, incorporating greater interaction and personalized communication with followers.

The study also reveals that fast food chains in Colombia primarily adopt an informative and promotional approach to shared content, consistent with the findings of Kurniawan et al. (2022). Nevertheless, this contrasts with Shanahan et al. (2019), who emphasize the importance of personalization and timely responses to enhance audience engagement.

When evaluating the effectiveness of these communication strategies and audience responses, moderate effectiveness is observed, consistent with Muller and Peres (2019). However, this differs from Pilař et al. (2019), who advocate for a more robust focus on strengthening customer relationships through social media.

In conclusion, fast food chains in Colombia have adopted social media profiles as digital communication tools to engage with audiences and promote their products. Despite sharing diverse content, not all chains fully leverage the potential of these digital platforms. While collaboration and interaction with followers are encouraged, there is a notable lack of technological innovation in communication strategies. Additionally, user-generated content related to fast food chains remains limited, despite efforts to engage audiences through comments and interactions.

Research indicates that 80% of these chains maintain a strong online presence, utilizing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This reflects their understanding of social media's importance in reaching audiences. However, their interactions are primarily focused on sharing information, such as promotions and menu updates, rather than fostering meaningful dialogue. These efforts remain heavily focused on the "attract" phase, with significant progress needed in the "convert," "close," and "delight" stages. Similarly, they are predominantly in the "branding" and "online presence" phases, awaiting further development in "inbound marketing," "automation," and "lead generation."

On average, these chains use three distinct platforms for digital communication, showcasing their intent to reach diverse audiences. However, this presents an opportunity to consolidate strategies and messaging across these platforms. The study also highlights unexplored potential in technological innovation. Interactive tools could significantly enhance user experiences and drive online engagement. Furthermore, improving personalization in digital strategies tailoring content and offers to individual preferences could significantly boost customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Lastly, the varying styles of online communication influence users' brand perceptions. Future research should explore how these styles shape brand image and how they can be optimized to establish stronger connections with consumers. This underscores the need for further studies into the development of digital marketing strategies in this crucial sector.

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