

# Promotion and use of pacifiers on Instagram: posts by mothers and commercial establishments

Promoção e uso de chupetas no Instagram: postagem de mães e estabelecimentos comerciais

Promoción y uso de chupetes en Instagram: publicaciones de madres y establecimientos comerciales

Monyse Silva de Oliveira<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2009-2574>

Isabella de Queiroz Vila<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3457-4018>

Aurea Tamami Minagawa Toriyama<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3646-4133>

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Identificar a promoção do uso de chupetas em postagens relacionadas à maternidade no Instagram.

**Métodos:** Estudo qualitativo a partir de dados coletados de postagens públicas no Instagram, com o auxílio de “hashtags” previamente selecionadas, em que seus conteúdos foram explorados pela Análise de Conteúdo de Bardin (2009), tendo como referência a Norma Brasileira para Comercialização de Alimentos para Lactentes e Crianças de Primeira Infância e de Bicos, Chupetas e Mamadeiras (NBCAL) e o Código de Defesa do Consumidor (CDC).

**Resultados:** Coletou-se 37 materiais, entre postagens e comentários, de mães e lojas “online”, separados nos grupos “Relatos maternos sobre a experiência com a chupeta”, em que as mães compartilharam suas experiências positivas ou negativas, visões, conselhos e angústias com o uso da chupeta, e “Marketing infrator da NBCAL”, com promoção comercial e publicidade enganosa. Os supostos benefícios da chupeta são amplamente divulgados por mães e lojas. As mães estabelecem entre si uma rede de apoio virtual, incentivando o uso de chupeta como tranquilizadora. Já as lojas praticam marketing nocivo às mães em situação de vulnerabilidade e insegurança quanto ao cuidado de seus filhos.

**Conclusão:** O uso de chupetas em postagens no Instagram foi amplamente promovido tanto por mães quanto por estabelecimentos comerciais. Ficou evidente a urgência de divulgação da NBCAL e a promoção e a proteção da amamentação, por meio de políticas públicas, ações de profissionais da saúde e da sociedade civil.

## Abstract

**Objective:** To identify the promotion of pacifier use in posts related to motherhood on Instagram.

**Methods:** Qualitative study based on data collected from public posts on Instagram, with the help of previously selected hashtags, in which their contents were explored by Bardin's Content Analysis (2009), using the Brazilian Standard for the Marketing of Food for Infants and Young Children and Nipples, Pacifiers and Bottles (NBCAL) and the Consumer Defense Code (CDC) as reference.

**Results:** Thirty-seven materials were collected, including posts and comments, from mothers and online stores, separated into the groups “Maternal reports on pacifier experiences”, in which mothers shared their positive or negative experiences, views, advice and anxieties with the use of the pacifier, and “NBCAL-infringing marketing”, with commercial promotion and misleading advertising. The supposed benefits of the pacifier are widely publicized by mothers and stores. Mothers establish a virtual support network among themselves, encouraging the use of pacifiers as a reassuring agent. Stores are also engaged in marketing that is harmful to mothers who are vulnerable and insecure about caring for their children.

**Conclusion:** The use of pacifiers in Instagram posts was widely promoted by both mothers and commercial establishments. The urgent need to publicize NBCAL and promote and protect breastfeeding through public policies, actions by health professionals and civil society became clear.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Identificar la promoción del uso del chupete en publicaciones relacionadas con la maternidad en Instagram.

**Métodos:** Estudio cualitativo basado en datos recolectados de publicaciones públicas en Instagram, con ayuda de hashtags previamente seleccionados, en los que se exploraron sus contenidos mediante el Análisis de Contenido de Bardin (2009), tomando como referencia la Norma Brasileña para la Comercialización de Alimentos para Lactantes y Niños Pequeños y de Tetinas, Chupetes y Biberones (NBCAL) y el Código de Defensa del Consumidor (CDC).

**Resultados:** Se recogieron 37 materiales, entre posts y comentarios, de madres y tiendas online, separados en los grupos “Relatos maternos sobre la experiencia con el chupete”, en el que las madres compartieron sus experiencias positivas o negativas, opiniones, consejos y ansiedades con el uso del chupete, y “Marketing infractor de NBCAL”,

## Keywords

Breastfeeding; Pacifiers; Child health; Food legislation; Pediatric nursing

## Descritores

Aleitamento materno; Chupetas; Saúde da criança; Legislação sobre alimentos; Enfermagem pediátrica

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<sup>1</sup>Escola de Enfermagem, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

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**Autor correspondente:** Aurea Tamami Minagawa Toriyama | E-mail: aureatmt@usp.br

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con promoción comercial y publicidad engañosa. Los supuestos beneficios de los chupetes son ampliamente publicitados por las madres y las tiendas. Las madres establecen una red de apoyo virtual entre ellas, fomentando el uso del chupete como agente tranquilizador. Las tiendas ya están practicando una comercialización perjudicial dirigida a las madres en situaciones vulnerables e inseguras sobre el cuidado de sus hijos.

**Conclusión:** El uso de chupetes en publicaciones de Instagram fue ampliamente promovido tanto por madres como por establecimientos comerciales. Se hizo evidente la urgencia de difundir la NBCAL y promover y proteger la lactancia materna a través de políticas públicas, acciones de los profesionales de la salud y de la sociedad civil.

## Introduction

Despite all the proven benefits, breastfeeding (BF) is far from being unanimous among families. The 2019 National Study on Infant Feeding and Nutrition (Portuguese acronym: ENANI, *Estudo Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição Infantil*) showed that the average prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) among infants under six months is 45.8%. The prevalence of continued breastfeeding in children under two years is 60.9%.<sup>(1)</sup> Brazil has the Brazilian Standard for the Marketing of Foods for Infants and Young Children and Nipples, Pacifiers, and Bottles (Portuguese acronym: NBCAL, *Norma Brasileira para a Comercialização de Alimentos para Lactentes e Crianças de Primeira Infância e de Bicos, Chupetas e Mamadeiras*) to legally protect breastfeeding.<sup>(2)</sup> The NBCAL is an important instrument in protecting against marketing strategies of the food, baby bottle, pacifier and nipple industry. The legislation has been updated (in 1992, 2001, and 2002), became a national law in 2006 and is still known as the NBCAL.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

The aggressive marketing from both the infant formula industry and the artificial nipple industry is a powerful negative influence on breastfeeding practices.<sup>(5)</sup> Even before the WHO Code for the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes was published in 1981 (which inspired the NBCAL), civil society and public policies had already been discussing issues of labeling, the promotion of human milk superiority, the harms of bottle-feeding, and the duty of healthcare professionals to promote and protect breastfeeding, and to respect and publicize the legislation.<sup>(2,6)</sup>

Even though the NBCAL has been a national law for 15 years, it is still unknown by most people it aims to protect, i.e., mothers, healthcare professionals, and retailers of regulated products.

Considering nursing's role, especially in child health and pediatric nursing, it is essential to promote and support initiatives that disseminate the NBCAL, ensuring that families are aware of the Standard and

conscious of marketing strategies that may influence their decision to breastfeed or not.

The aim of this study is to analyze the promotion of pacifiers by mothers and online stores on the social network Instagram in posts related to motherhood.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted on the social network Instagram using its hashtag tool for data collection. Instagram is a popular platform designed for mobile use and considered an accessible social network. Furthermore, it allows direct purchases, a feature added in 2018 that has driven the creation of virtual stores and accompanied the growth of e-commerce and digital marketing.

Data to capture meanings and individual interpretations were collected from public posts where mothers shared their experiences with pacifiers on Instagram and the marketing related to pacifier sales from the perspective of the NBCAL.

Posts that met the objectives of the study were selected for each hashtag. The collected posts were made by mothers and online retailers of baby products. However, posts related to pacifiers that did not belong to these groups were excluded from the study.

Data were collected between August and November 2021, focusing on posts related to motherhood and pacifier promotion, using preselected hashtags. Hashtags were chosen because they group similar posts and are added and created by users themselves.

The posts and comments with the most content, total number of posts and engagement of mothers (greater number of responses or comments), healthcare professionals and stores in the posts, and thematic relevance for the study objective were considered in the selection of the hashtags and excerpts to be analyzed. A total of 37 publications were collected and the following hashtags were chosen: #bebecalmo, #chupeta, #chupetaavent, #chupetacalmante, #cuidadosco-

mobebe, #desmame, #maternidadereal e #rotinadobebe. Additional hashtags, such as #chupetacomnome, #chupetadeluxo, and #chupetapersonalizada were briefly analyzed, but quickly became saturated for having marketing content only.

Spelling corrections were not made to preserve the authenticity of posts, but names of babies or other individuals were concealed.

Data collection ceased when saturation was reached, meaning new data did not provide additional insights, making further collection unnecessary.

Initially, results were grouped into “Maternal reports on pacifier experiences” and “NBCAL-infringing marketing”. In the second stage, excerpts relevant to the study’s objectives were selected. The two groups were analyzed differently: categories emerged from the themes present on maternal posts; and categories were based on NBCAL definitions on marketing-related posts.

According to Resolution Number 510, 7 April, 2016, of the Ministry of Health, which governs research in Human and Social Sciences and others that use methods from these areas, studies using publicly accessible information or public domain do not require Ethics Committee approval (Brazil, 2016).<sup>(7)</sup> The collected posts were public and from public Instagram profiles available online at the time of data collection, hence exempt from approval by the Research Ethics Committee.

Content Analysis, a method that systematically and objectively interprets textual data, was used<sup>(8)</sup> in data analysis. Post excerpts or comments were classified by similarity, grouping them into categories based on common topics or models.<sup>(8)</sup>

## Results

Table 1 presents hashtags, the number of posts collected under each, the number of comments, and the authors of posts.

All hashtags considered posts from both mothers and stores. Of the 74 posts, duplicates, highly similar marketing posts, and those related to feeder pacifiers were excluded. Of the 59 collected comments, those containing only emojis, short phrases agreeing with the post, or lacking sufficient detail for analysis were

**Table 1.** Hashtags, total number of posts and comments collected, and authors of Instagram posts

Hashtags	Posts	Comments	Authors
#bebecalmo	5	25	stores and mothers
#chupeta	17	3	stores and mothers
#chupetaavent	15	3	stores and mothers
#chupetacalmante	6	18	stores and mothers
#cuidadoscomobebe	1	0	store
#desmame	3	9	mothers
#maternidadereal	1	0	mothers
#rotinadobebe	3	1	stores and mothers

excluded, leaving 37 materials, including posts and comments. These consisted of 19 maternal reports sharing positive or negative experiences, insights, advice, and concerns about pacifier use and 18 regarding inappropriate marketing practices for pacifier sales. The posts were divided into two broad groups: “Maternal reports on pacifier experiences” and “NBCAL-infringing marketing”. Table 2 shows the categories and themes that emerged from maternal publications.

**Table 2.** Categories and number of excerpts analyzed in maternal reports on the experience with pacifiers on Instagram

Categories	Total excerpts
Pacifier: an ally to soothe the baby	8
Pacifier: other benefits	5
Pacifier: possible negative impacts	6
Pacifier: a milestone to be celebrated	3
Pacifier: contradictions in use	9
Pacifier: baby’s refusal and maternal frustration	3

In the category “Pacifier: an ally to soothe the baby”, most excerpts refer to the pacifier’s ability to soothe the baby’s crying, with testimonies such as “being a fan of the pacifier”, “very important,” “relieves crying,” and even “pacifier is life!”. Another frequently mentioned aspect by mothers is the lack of understanding from others who “don’t want the child to use a pacifier” but are not present “at crying time” or “at bedtime”. It was possible to notice that pacifier use is associated with moments of pain and separation, as well as fulfilling the need for non-nutritive sucking.

In the category “Pacifier: other benefits”, mothers recommend it for preventing sudden infant death syndrome, during painful procedures, to avoid the habit of thumb-sucking and prevent the baby from “using the breast as a pacifier”. Additionally, it helps in creating bonds with other caregivers.

In the category “Possible negative impacts,” early weaning, changes in the child’s speech development, facial and dental alterations, emotional dependence, and difficulty in maintaining sleep are considered consequences of pacifier use.

In the category “A milestone to be celebrated”, mothers share their distressing experiences until the moment of relief when the baby finally accepts the pacifier. They give advice to other mothers facing the same problem and reported a moment of relief and joy when the baby “finally” took the pacifier. Common advice includes “respect the child’s timing”, “never give up”, and “offer the pacifier when the baby is hungry”.

In the category “Contradictions in use”, three types of reports were observed. In the first, mothers acknowledge the risks of the pacifier but choose to use it anyway (“I know the risks”). In the second, mothers who were not initially against using the pacifier now deal with its negative consequences (“...it was once a good thing, now it’s a villain (...) it caused huge emotional dependence”). In the third type of report, mothers disagreed with pacifier use but found no other alternative to soothe the baby.

Consistently, the category “Baby’s refusal and maternal frustration” shows the distress of mothers who cannot get their babies to use the pacifier: “He absolutely hates it and throws it away, never keeping the damn thing in his mouth for more than a minute”. Mothers described themselves as “desperate”.

Regarding the second group of categories, “NBCAL-infringing marketing”, the study analyzed digital marketing behavior concerning pacifier sales, a product regulated by NBCAL. Commercial establishments and manufacturers were responsible for these advertising posts, which were classified into two categories of infringing marketing: “Special presentation” with five excerpts, and “Illegal and/or misleading advertising”.

Besides these categories, posts featuring images of babies using branded pacifiers with captions such as “Pacifier soothes” were found. Others showed promotional packages, pacifier kits with additional products, and discounts or reduced prices. Cases of pacifier imports by individuals for resale, with labels not complying with Brazilian regulations, were also identified. These posts were classified under the “Special presentation” category. In the “Illegal and/or mislead-

ing advertising” category, references portraying pacifiers as “magical”, claiming that all babies accept them and immediately calm down with that specific pacifier were found. Some advertisements also suggested the pacifier was similar to the mother’s breast, ensuring it would not interfere with oral development or breastfeeding. Thus, it was possible to identify pacifier-related posts selected based on the chosen hashtags.

## Discussion

The data collection on the social network Instagram enabled a valuable study of interactions between mothers, mothers and commercial establishments, and mothers and manufacturers of products covered by the NBCAL, reflecting communication in the virtual environment about the legislation that protects breastfeeding.

According to digital marketing and commerce research, Instagram is one of the most widely used social networks in Brazil and worldwide. The “Digital in 2020” report highlighted that approximately 140 million Brazilians are active social media users, spending an average of nine hours online. It indicated that 90% of internet users had visited an online store, and 70% had purchased a product online in the previous month.<sup>(9)</sup> Another study found that the use of WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram increased by about 40% during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>(10)</sup> The 2016 Brazilian Media Survey showed that 26-49% of respondents use the internet as an information source, and 26-29% access it for more than 300 minutes daily.<sup>(11)</sup> Thus, mothers are highly exposed to illegal advertisements, easy purchases, and interactions that encourage pacifier use, which is known to be harmful to breastfeeding. Adding to this is the general perception of the pacifier as an “ally to soothe the baby.”

A study using theoretical assumptions of social representations found that “the pacifier symbolizes the child”, is culturally inherent to the baby and a habit passed down through generations. “The pacifier is a calming tool for the child and a help for the mother”. It is an accessory used when the mother cannot or does not want to breastfeed or to keep the child calm, less fussy, and able to fall asleep more easily.<sup>(12)</sup>

An example of the “other benefits” of pacifiers (second category) found in the posts was non-nutri-

tive sucking, which helps the child tolerating painful experiences better. In infants up to three months old, the association with a sugary solution yielded even more positive results.<sup>(13,14)</sup> Another argument from mothers for using pacifiers was the prevention of sudden infant death syndrome, although there is no consensus on this. The Brazilian Society of Pediatrics states that pacifier use is associated with lower rates of sudden death (Regina E, 2017), but literature also supports that breastfeeding alone is sufficient (Victora et al., 2016).<sup>(15,16)</sup>

Regarding the “possible negative impacts” of pacifiers (third category), mothers acknowledge that they harm breastfeeding. There is evidence of a direct relationship between pacifier use and breastfeeding discontinuation. Additionally, other harms reported by both mothers and the literature include speech difficulties, orthodontic problems, ear infections, emotional dependence, and sleep difficulties.<sup>(17,18)</sup> However, the effects of pacifier use are known to be influenced by duration, frequency, and intensity of use.<sup>(19-21)</sup>

Maternal posts also reported distress when a baby refused the pacifier. These mothers seek advice from others who, only after persistent attempts, managed to get their children to accept the accessory, forming the category “a milestone to be celebrated”.

It stands out that mothers’ posts do not constitute violations of the NBCAL but rather reflect their experiences with regulated products. They mention questionable benefits and recognize well-established harms found in the literature.

The World Health Organization updated the “Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding”. In the 1989 version, the recommendation was that pacifiers (bottles and other artificial nipples) should not be offered to breastfed babies. In 2018, the updated recommendation was that mothers should be informed about the use of pacifier and its risks.<sup>(22)</sup>

In the second group of categories, advertisements found in online store posts almost always included some aspect that violated the NBCAL: discounts and offers, as well as imported products without proper labeling and packaging in compliance with Brazilian laws. The NBCAL establishes packaging and labeling standards through normative acts, covering all parties involved from product manufacturing to commercialization.<sup>(23)</sup> Regarding kits, a violation was noted when

pacifiers were sold alongside other products not covered by the law, such as sunglasses and baby shoes.

The Consumer Defense Code (Portuguese acronym: CDC, *Código de Defesa do Consumidor*) defines and prohibits misleading advertising as “... information or communication (...) capable of misleading consumers regarding the nature, characteristics, quality, quantity, properties (...)”.<sup>(24)</sup> Many publications described pacifiers as ideal for babies, adaptable to all children, soothing, promoting better sleep, and even “anti-colic”. Such terms can be considered persuasive and lead to purchases as a solution to family challenges.

There were also advertisements claiming that pacifiers resemble the “mother’s breast” and, therefore, do not cause weaning. Another advertisement suggested that pacifiers were orthodontic and would not harm oral development. However, the literature indicates that even so-called orthodontic pacifiers can cause oral dysfunctions.<sup>(19,21)</sup>

Using photos of babies with misleading and deceptive phrases violates both the NBCAL and the CDC.<sup>(3,24)</sup> The NBCAL prohibits the use of baby photos or images in packaging or advertisements for regulated products. Manufacturers circumvent this rule by using childlike figures, characters with baby accessories, which do not technically violate the norm but simulate a baby and create an emotional association for the audience.

Although Brazil has a model legislation recognized worldwide, there is no effective enforcement. Only the IBFAN Network (International Baby Food Action Network) monitors the NBCAL compliance annually and forwards complaints to regulatory bodies such as the Ministry of Health, ANVISA, Procon, and state and municipal health departments.

Breastfeeding protection is a duty of society as a whole. The NBCAL should be widely disseminated among consumers, healthcare professionals, and commercial establishments to enable the monitoring of norm compliance, including by mothers themselves.

On social media in particular, it is crucial to recognize that “at the technological level of contemporary times, power relations have surpassed physical interaction spaces and forcefully reached digital environments”.<sup>(25)</sup> Communication and interaction have become faster and more global. Comments and advertisements reach audiences with greater speed and scope.

The same should happen with scientific information, but competition with professional marketing and the investment of large pharmacy chains and pacifier manufacturers is unfair. A field nurse will rarely have the resources to invest in social media posts as impactful as those created by professional advertising and marketing teams. Nevertheless, the fundamental role of pediatric nursing in health promotion and education is undeniable. Nurses must recognize social media as a space for sharing knowledge and experiences with the potential to promote health.

Nursing must ensure the dissemination of accurate knowledge so that mothers can make informed and conscious decisions about pacifier use, infant feeding, and care.

A limitation of this study was the impossibility to validate with mothers the excerpts taken from their posts or comments. Additionally, publications made by commercial establishments were not subject to such validation either.

## Conclusion

The promotion of pacifier use on Instagram is easily found and its supposed benefits are widely disseminated by mothers, manufacturers, and sellers. Mothers establish a virtual support network among themselves, sharing the advantages of using pacifiers, tips for introducing the accessory, and frustrations when babies refuse it. Marketing and sales posts on pacifiers can be extremely harmful to mothers, as they are vulnerable to marketing influences, especially first-time mothers. This highlights the importance of nursing in ensuring that these mothers have access to reliable information and receive appropriate support during the breastfeeding process. A stricter monitoring of marketing practices related to pacifiers on social media is necessary, considering the significant impact these strategies can have on shaping maternal beliefs and behaviors. Furthermore, it is crucial to strengthen educational initiatives that promote high-quality, scientifically based information, providing support for mothers so they can make informed and conscious decisions about using this accessory.

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## Contributions

Oliveira MS, Vila IQ and Toriyama ATM declare that they contributed to conception of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, manuscript writing, critical review of relevant intellectual content, and approval of the final version to be published.

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