

A stakeholder marketing approach to supporting, protecting and promoting infant feeding: An Irish Study

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In this paper, the term “infant feeding” refers to both breastfeeding and infant feeding with human milk, including human milk donated by lactating mothers other than the biological mother. It is also important to acknowledge that commercial milk formula products are essential when human milk is not available for reasons related to the health or circumstances of the mother or baby.

Introduction

Infant feeding is associated with lower infectious morbidity and mortality among infants compared with those who do not receive human milk or receive it only for short periods (Victora et al., 2016). Among mothers, it is also associated with a decreased risk of reproductive (breast and ovarian) cancers and other non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Victora et al., 2016; Tschiderer et al., 2022). Extensive studies also overwhelmingly demonstrate the social, economic and environmental benefits of infant feeding practices (e.g., Bakers et al., 2023; Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2023). However, only 48% of infants (aged ≤ 12 months) and young children (aged 12–36 months) globally are infant-fed in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization (Rollins et al., 2023; Doherty et al., 2023).

Ireland has one of the lowest infant feeding rates in the world, with only 36.8% of babies born in 2021 still exclusively infant-fed by day three of their lives (WBTi, 2023). In this context, the WBTi asserts that “[f]ormula feeding via bottle is the prevailing cultural norm in Ireland” (2023, p.14). Furthermore, Ireland’s formula-feeding culture and low infant feeding initiation rates have been noted in multiple scientific publications (e.g., Leahy-Warren et al., 2017; Hauck et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2016; Philip et al., 2023). It should also be acknowledged that routine exclusive infant feeding data in Ireland are not collected beyond three months.

A World Health Organization (2024) report has found that while countries are increasingly protecting infant feeding through legal measures (e.g., the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant World Health Assembly resolutions), significant gaps in national legislation remain. For instance, Ireland has no such measures prohibiting the use of healthcare facilities for the promotion of human milk substitutes. The World Health Organization (2020) further reports that 51% of surveyed parents have been targeted by commercial milk formula marketing, whose survey further finds that commercial milk formula companies use a range of marketing tactics to engage women via online and offline platforms. These marketing tactics have been found to be pervasive, personalized and powerful but also to use distorted science to manipulate and exploit mothers’ anxieties, undermining their confidence in breastfeeding (The Lancet, 2023). As Hastings et al. (2020, p.12) note, “[j]ust as formula is being normalised, so too is formula marketing.”

Mothers’ decisions about infant feeding are complex and influenced by a variety of sociodemographic factors, including ethnicity, maternal age, income, education, geographic location, employment status and the proximity of extended family. In addition, institutional

and national factors, such as hospital policies and procedures, as well as government policy, can all impact on these decisions (Gengler et al., 1999). The complexity of mothers' decisions warrants a holistic approach that reflects a broad range of these influential aspects. Health professionals have urged all government sectors and stakeholders with economic influence to fulfil their responsibilities and use this influence to promote, protect and support infant feeding practices and to prioritize the well-being of children and families over commercial interests. Pérez-Escamilla et al. (2023) advocate that infant feeding practices can be rapidly improved through multilevel and multicomponent interventions across the socioecological model and settings. One recent innovation has involved the development of the Green Feeding Climate Action Tool, which assesses the environmental impact of commercial milk formula and proposes infant feeding support interventions as carbon offsets (Smith et al., 2024). In addition, the timing of mothers' infant feeding decisions is significant, an examination of which researchers have also called for (Gengler et al., 1999).

Research Objectives

Based on the stakeholder marketing framework, the main aim of this paper is examine the role of stakeholders in influencing mothers' infant feeding decisions by applying a novel digital diary method. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the most influential stakeholder groups that affect mothers' infant feeding initiation and duration choices.
2. To identify the most significant timing of these decisions.
3. To explore when and how stakeholders can effectively support, protect and promote mothers' infant feeding practices.

Stakeholder Marketing

Stakeholder marketing can be defined as involving “activities within a system of social institutions and processes for facilitating and maintaining value through exchange relationships with multiple stakeholders” (Hult et al., 2011, p.57). The marketing literature on stakeholders has predominantly treated stakeholder networks as discrete multiplicities, i.e., as independent of each other. However, an emerging marketing literature views these networks as continuous multiplicities and focuses on the interrelatedness of stakeholders (Hillebrand et al., 2015). This vision constitutes the foundation of stakeholder marketing, which recognizes that stakeholders interact directly or indirectly with each other (Neville and Menguc, 2006) and that addressing a specific stakeholder's needs may simultaneously impact the relationship with other stakeholders (Hillebrand et al., 2015). As such, stakeholder marketing requires the application of systems thinking (Hillebrand et al., 2015), a model used to leverage coordinated systemic change across groups of interacting individuals in relation to a complex problem. In a social context, systems thinking entails breaking down silos and transforming communities, organisations and societies to co-create solutions for coordinated, multilevel and systemic change (Domegan et al., 2016). Akosy et al. (2022) recently developed a stakeholder engagement framework comprising three dimensions of stakeholder engagement strategies: stakeholder recognition, support and dialogue. Using this framework, the project aims to identify those stakeholder groups that influence mothers' infant-feeding decisions at a number of crucial stages and highlight how stakeholders can support mothers' decisions in a timely manner. The proposed research questions (RQ) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Stakeholder marketing approach

	Stakeholder Recognition
RQ1	Which are the most influential stakeholder groups that affect mothers' infant feeding choices? When are these milestone decisions likely to be made?
	Stakeholder Support
RQ2	What support, and from which stakeholder groups, does the mother feel to be most helpful in supporting her infant feeding practices?
	Stakeholder Dialogue
RQ3	How is the bi-directional sharing of information between the mother and the stakeholder groups to be facilitated?

Methodology: A Qualitative Longitudinal Digital Diary

Diary studies is a research methodology in which people provide frequent reports on the events and experiences of their daily lives. As a method of documenting the minutiae of individuals' lived reality, diaries are "self-report instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences [and] offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes within everyday situations" (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 580). A fundamental benefit of this approach is that it allows researchers to observe and record reported events and experiences in their authentic, spontaneous context, offering insights that complement those gained from more traditional research designs (Bolger et al., 2003; Alaszewski, 2006). Researchers across various disciplines have successfully applied diary methods (e.g., Houtgraaf, 2023; Bolger et al., 2003). In this study, a qualitative longitudinal digital diary research design will be applied to investigate the research questions. Using a snowball sampling approach, the study plans to recruit 20 mothers to record the diary for three months, using the app DearScholar (Kruyen, 2020; Houtgraaf, 2023) or MetricWire, subject to availability.

Significance of project for Ireland and field

The proposed study is significant for the field for two main reasons. First, mothers' infant feeding choices are a highly personal consumer decision and are influenced by the complex interrelatedness of multiple stakeholder groups. Deploying the stakeholder marketing framework, the proposed project takes the novel approach of using mothers' digital diaries to gain insights into their infant-feeding decisions at crucial milestone decision times and to identify which stakeholder groups can effectively support mothers' infant feeding practices in a timely manner. Second, Ireland has one of the world's lowest infant feeding rates. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to embrace all stakeholder groups to support, protect and promote infant feeding. On the basis of its long-term commitment, the proposed project can have a significant impact in several key domains, including economics (reduction of family expenditure), social equality and inclusion (easier access to infant feeding support and education for low-income and marginalized communities), education (stakeholder engagement training programs and public awareness), policy and regulation (the influencing and driving of policy change to support and promote infant feeding) and environmental sustainability (reduced packaging waste and lower carbon footprint compared to formula production).

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