

EFFECTS OF TELEVISION FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS ON CHILDREN: A PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Original Article

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Abstract

Advertising is the most persuasive medium which has acquired an important role in moulding our modern day lives. Televised advertising targeted towards children is considered to be one of the controversial areas of discussion among the researchers because such advertising has developed a lot of behavioural and health related issues in children. This has raised questions about the ethicality of such advertisements. This study is intended to find out ethical concerns of television's food advertisements directed towards children from parent's perspective. The methodology which is used for this particular research is semi structured interviews. Three Pakistani TVCs related to children food products are selected and later parents of 3-14 years old children are interviewed to identify the ethical concerns in these ads. The findings prove that most of the parents consider TV advertisements a great instigator in affecting children behavioral patterns. They are of the view that ethical concerns in food advertisements become prominent when such advertisements contribute to the changes in children's eating patterns. A list of recommendations is provided in the end for parents and regulatory authorities to minimize the effects of such unethical advertisements on children's wellbeing.

Keywords: Advertising, Children, Commercials, Consumption, Deceptive, Food Unethicality

Introduction

Advertising field is not very old in Pakistan and some say that it is still evolving. Unlike other countries where proper code of conduct is being devised on government levels, there is no proper code of ethics specified only for the regulation of televised advertising practices in Pakistan. However, PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) established in 2002 is a regulatory authority that included a specific clause of ethics related to (TVCs) Television commercials and there is also a proper code of ethics devised by PTV for the advertisements (Siddique and Siddique, 2016).

Advertisement is a paid form of communication that uses non personal media and is one of the most influential tools to demonstrate a product. Its function is to inform and to persuade the consumers about new innovations in the market. Due to increased competition in advertising field; new techniques are continuously being evolved to persuade and attract potential customers (Singal & Kamra, 2012).

Advertising is a persuasive medium. Advertisements subliminally sell ideas, concepts and beliefs in the facade of products; hence influencing society's attitudes and behaviours. An

advertisement is one of the most powerful tools of communication which tells people how they should think and act like and what product they should use (Nooh, 2012).

According to Ashraf et al (2015) since Televised Advertising is so widespread, its effects on the society are huge because almost every household has television in their homes and different researchers from all over the world have studied televised advertising effects on various segments of the society like advertising effects on children, youth and specific genders etc. According to them, children are the ones who spend most time in watching television and advertising practitioners take advantage of this and target them to buy products which are not meant for them hence children develop bad habits. Ethical concerns in televised advertising are one of the most discussed topics among the researchers because of its huge impact on different segments of the society.

Ethics in advertising is defined as a set of designed rules which guides the communication between the seller, buyer and the advertiser. Since culture varies from country to country the ethical values of advertising industry also vary accordingly because consumers judge advertisements on the basis of relativism which means that an advertisement that is considered ethical in one culture might be considered unethical and offensive in another culture. This is the reason that every country has their own particular code of ethics devised for media as well as for advertisements. There is no such thing as universal code of ethics for advertisements because there isn't a universal culture (Vitell, Saviour, & Barnes, 1993).

Children's marketing is considered to be one of the controversial areas of discussion among the researchers. The effect of televised advertising on children and the question whether advertising targeted towards children is ethical or not is a highly debatable topic among different groups including parents, researchers, government agencies and industry experts since the beginning. Realizing that children are the most vulnerable audience which needs special protection; different associations became active in regulation of television advertisements intended towards children as early as in the 18th century like, American National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) was among the first to adopt its Toy's Advertising Guidelines in 1961 specifically for the regulation of children advertisements to minimize the negative impacts. Other organizations in America like Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also realized the seriousness of ethical concerns in children advertisements in response to different complaints registered. National Advertising Division (NAD) was the second to adopt self-regulatory code for advertisers in 1975 which states that the advertisements intended towards children should be accurate, fair and truthful and should not be deceptive in any manner (Adler, 1977).

Nooh (2012) in his article wrote that among other ethical concerns in television advertising 'Deceptive advertising' is widely talked about in the academic field. Deception refers to 'false or misleading claims' that advertisers make. Such claims when encourage consumers to take actions which are harmful for them are considered unethical because hiding truth purposefully from the customers and encouraging them to take actions which may potentially damage their health are against the basic moral values of humans. Such a phenomenon is considered deceptive unethicality. Talking about deceptive advertising intended towards children; the intensity of unethicality increases ten folds because children are homebound who watch television on daily basis and they are the most vulnerable ones among all the other consumers. Food marketers are highly criticized for unethical televised advertising of nutritionally poor food products for children making false and misleading claims that they are healthy.

Literature Review

Children's market has gained immense popularity among the marketers in the last few years (Moore, 2004; Grad, 2015). According to Puiu (2008) market specialized particularly for children didn't exist 40-50 years ago because back in the days' children didn't have enough money to spend themselves, products like soda drinks, candies and other sugary products were still advertised but this particular market has grown with the growth of children influence on their parents for buying such products.

Children food marketing:

Grad (2015) further explained in his article that marketers are spending great amount of money especially in the food and beverages department in order to reach this segment mainly due to three reasons; firstly children are the most passive audience among the rest because they are unable to make rational decisions themselves so they would act on the message as it is advertised, secondly they are individuals with growing financial powers and thirdly because of the 'kid-fluence' or the 'pester power' which means that children have a strong influence on parent's decisions of purchasing goods by repeatedly asking for the advertised products. Children are the centre of attention for the advertisers to build early brand loyalties among them as Adler (1977) also revealed through a research that 86% of readymade cereal eater children and 84% of candy and snacks consumers usually have a favourite brand which they ask their parents to bring for them that shows the loyalty of children towards these brands which are frequently been advertised on television.

Televised advertising targeted towards children:

Television is considered to be one of the primary mediums through which children become exposed to advertisements related to food and beverages (Boyland & Rosa , 2015). According to researches children watch 24-27 hours of television in a week which makes approximately 4 hours a day and are being exposed to 25,000 commercials in one year (Moore, 2004). However according to Bakir and Vitell (2010) children watch almost 7600 advertisements only about junk food, candies and other sugary products in one year.

Moreover, when children are three years old or less they haven't developed the cognitive skills to separate TV commercials and TV programming; until the age of eight children are still not able to comprehend the persuasive intent of the advertisers. Once a child reaches the age of 12 he starts to understand the sale techniques of the advertisers so it won't be wrong to say that children don't develop cognitive skills (the power to evaluate) once they are under 12 years of age that's when they are the most vulnerable entity to be manipulated by advertisers (Gorton, 2011) and according to Puiu (2012) cognitive development theory of Piagets also provide evidence that children are unable to comprehend the advertising messages which are targeted towards them.

As in the age of 3-8 years' children are homebound and are exposed to television more than any other medium so advertisers tap this opportunity and target children for commercial promotion and advertising of food products globally (Boyland & Rosa) and according to Bakir and Vitell (2010) if children were given the right to choose their own diet then we could see a malnourished unhealthy diet because the influence of food advertisements on children food choices are huge.

Ethical concerns in children food advertisements:

According to Adler (1977) Advertisements that appear on television targeted towards children are limited to few food products like readymade cereals, candies, cookies and soft drinks with a very little nutritional information which is also not accurate. He further said that televised

food advertisements for children are highly deceptive for two reasons; first children are unable to make rational decisions hence the advertisers manipulate their innocence and secondly because of the false nutrition claims that are made through them leading towards obesity, heart diseases and other health related issues among children. According to Puiu (2012) children spend most of their time in front of the television eating the snacks that are being advertised on the same television hence becoming obese in their childhood. He further discusses that food advertisements don't give nutritional information rather they are based on cartoon images and fun.

According to Bakir and Vitell (2010) advertisers are just interested in their profits, they are least concerned about children's health hence they exploit the innocence and psychological immaturity of children by making unrealistic and misleading claims in the advertisements which have no connection with the reality. Haroon et al. (2011) said that advertisers are responsible for creating an obesogenic environment because the problems of obesity and diabetes are becoming common among children day by day as a result of spending a large amount of time in front of the television watching such advertisements.

According to Mahajan and Raheja (2014) major unethical concerns in children food advertisements are use of exaggerations made about the quality of food which can't be proved and are often false as well i-e use of puffery. This unethical practice is most prevalent in fast food advertisements which are actually very low in providing nutritional content and high in unnecessary calories and according to Malik and Garima (2012) obese children are more susceptible to chronic diseases later in life.

Subliminal advertising is also a grave ethical concern in children food advertisements in which they are unable to comprehend the advertising messages. Another ethical concern is knowingly promoting unhealthy food products in colourful packaging and with catchy music which ultimately results in creating a lot of health issues among the children (Mahajan and Raheja, 2014).

Food advertisements are highly criticized because of their deceptive unethicality and due to their negative impacts on children's health, the question arises as whether at all there should be advertising addressed towards children or not because of the huge ethical concerns raised not only by parents but also by health nutritionists and regulatory authorities who completely blame the advertisers for children's deteriorating health (Story & Simone, 2004) however Nooh (2012) said that the advertisers shouldn't be blamed entirely, the fast food and junk food manufacturers and producers should also share the burden of promoting unhealthy eating habits among the children.

According to Puiu (2012) and Gorton (2011) advertisements intended towards children are unethical because children can't separate reality from manipulation. They further elaborated that strict actions were taken against such advertisements in Europe, Canada, Sweden and Norwegian state. In some countries advertisements towards children are completely banned. They are of the view that there shouldn't be any advertisement targeted towards children at all because children are not like other audiences who are able to comprehend advertisers' intentions and a lot of health issues and other problems prevail among the children due to the impact of such advertisements however he also provided the counter argument that banning advertisements for children is bereaving them from their right to know and right to freedom of speech. Moore (2004) also supported the argument that negative impacts of advertisements and children inability to comprehend advertising messages are overly exaggerated because advertisements help children and their parents to make a more informed decision of what to buy and what not to buy.

From all the evidence although discussed in a limited scope suggests that this is a very active and debatable research area in academics because it is changing the dynamics of the whole advertising world.

Research Question

“What are Parents’ ethical concerns regarding the Television food advertisements directed towards children?”

Objectives of the study

- To understand the parental view regarding unethical practices in children food advertisements.
- To discuss whether regulation or banning of television food advertising targeted towards children is required or not.
- To understand the relationship between negative impacts of food advertisements on children’s health and unethical practices in food advertisements.

Methodology

This particular research will be Qualitative in nature. For qualitative method to be exercised various methodologies are employed like case studies, field research, ethnographic studies, in-depth individual interviews, discourse analysis etc. For this particular research parents with children aged 3-14 years are selected and interviewed regarding advertisements targeted towards children specifically. Sample of parents are selected because they are considered to be the gatekeepers before advertising messages reach their children and they are also affected by the advertising messages intended towards their children in the form of ‘kid fluence’ and pester power of children. Three television food advertisements intended towards children are randomly selected which are shown to the parents and are asked some open ended questions regarding ethical concerns of these ads.

- 1st ad is the television ad of McDonalds where the children are seen eating fast food products of McDonalds after getting tired from playing outside. The McDonalds deal which is being advertised in the ad also has a gift toy for children. At the end of the ad some nutritional claims were also made.
- 2nd selected ad is Knorr noodles ad where a young boy of 10-11 years was shown sharing his boring lunch with his cat after coming back from school which he couldn’t finish but after his mother started giving him Knorr noodles as lunch, he finishes his lunch every single day.
- 3rd ad is of candy land’s sugary candies named ‘Puffs Marshmallows’ in which a group of children are seen going into a fantasy world full of colors after eating these candies.

The most prominent appeal used in 1st ad is the toy gift while 2nd and 3rd ads have very catchy jingles to attract children towards these ads. Other than that cartoon characters and appealing colors and visuals are also used in ad no. 2nd and 3rd to create appeals for the children.

Findings

After showing the advertisements, when parents were asked to point out the unethical practices, most of them said that there isn’t anything unethical. Apparently the parents were right because the language, the music everything in these ads were according to the cultural norms and also there wasn’t anything violent in these ads as well but when parents were asked how their kids respond to these ads when they watched them and how much they put pressure on parents when they ask them to buy the advertised food and what they think about the nutritional claims of these advertisements (use of puffery). 85% of parents showed serious concerns regarding unethical practices in children food advertisements and 15% showed no serious interest.

Then almost 85% of the selected sample of parents said that yes these fast food advertisements are changing the behavior patterns and eating habits of their children. One of the parents said that 'when I don't buy or allow my kids to buy these advertised sugary or fast food products then they act aggressively and often misbehave with me. They have turned highly stubborn overtime'. The other 15% of the selected sample of parents didn't agree with the influence these advertisements have on children's health and some of them didn't even know that their children are exposed to such ads on television because they don't have time to watch television with their children.

When parents were specifically asked about the 1st ad of McDonalds then they said that their children often ask to take them to McDonalds. One of the parents said that 'even my 3 years old daughter can't eat burgers but she wants the toy that is being advertised along with the McDonald's deal'.

When parents were asked about the 2nd selected ad of Knor noodles and how often their children eat these advertised noodles, most of them responded that these noodles are a must buy at their monthly grocery shopping and their children eat these noodles very often. One of the parents of a 9 years old child said that 'my son eats noodles every day as a must evening snack and whenever I try giving him fruits or fresh juices as an evening snack he just pushes the fruits around the plate without eating'.

After watching the ads, almost all the parents said that their children of every age group watch television commercial with great interest because of the catchy jingles, colors and cartoon characters that are shown in these ads. Parents were also concerned that children prefer such advertised unhealthy food options over home cooked healthy food. One of the parents said that 'My child brings back his lunch as if I give some homemade sandwiches or snacks and if I give noodles or other readymade snacks he always finishes his lunch and brings back empty lunch box'. Parents were also of the view that such ads make children believe that homemade food is boring and advertise their products as exciting and delicious to eat. One of the parents said 'My child asks for noodles and burgers because she thinks they are delicious and refuses to eat home cooked food'.

Moreover, when parents were asked if their kids have any eating disorder or are obese, some of them (40%) responded that their children are overweight of their age. When they are further asked about their children's eating habits they said that they eat fast food like burgers, chips and cold drinks very often. One of the parents said that they fulfill their children demands because they just can't deal with their constant nagging when they are not given these foods advertised on television.

Few parents were also concerned that their children refuse to consume other less advertised healthy food options because of the way these unhealthy food products are marketed with eye catchy packaging, appealing colors and jingles. Almost all the parents showed grave concerns regarding the ads and say that such ads are the major reason that their children eating patterns are being disturbed because children are the ones who mostly spend their time in front of the television.

Discussion

From the findings it is evident that food marketing targeted towards children are highly unethical because of their false nutritional claims, use of puffery and promotion of unhealthy food products ultimately playing an evident role in changing behavior patterns and eating habits of children from healthy choices to unhealthy ones and leading towards a lot of health related issues among children; obesity being the most prominent one.

The ads raised some serious concerns regarding changes in children behavior and their eating habits because they are promoting unhealthy foods through their ads. If we take an example of instant noodles; it is proven that daily consumption of such noodles is highly unhealthy. According to Sik et al. (2017) instant noodles have artificial flavors, food colors and

other preservatives which have adverse effects on children health. They are rich in fat, sodium and starch which when consumed on daily basis or oftenly results in serious health related issues like heart issues and obesity. Parents should seriously consider their children eating habits and avoid giving them such advertised poorly nutritious food.

According to a research conducted by Stender et al (2007) McDonalds is a food chain which earns by selling fat food especially by targeting children. American Diabetic Association clearly warned McDonalds about the unhealthy food they are selling and consider it responsible for the growing rates of obesity among children and adults in the country. McDonalds attract children by offering toy of famous movie or cartoon character and this toy initiative of McDonalds has been around in America since 1980's. This is highly unethical because it is promoting unhealthy food among children by using toy as bait. A similar study was conducted by Singh and Soni (2014) to discover whether food advertisements should be considered unethical because of their negative impacts on children's health and found similar results.

According to UNICEF's Global report (2016) PEMRA Pakistan has certain regulations regarding advertising to children and it states that no advertisement which frightens children, spread violence, deceptive or misleading should be aired. However, PEMRA regulatory authority has not yet taken any regulation regarding deception particularly in food commercials directed towards children.

This study further justifies the banning of food advertisements directed at children in different countries like in America advertisements are banned on some channels during children's programs. Some food companies have considered the regulatory authorities' warnings and limited food advertising aimed at children and some soft drink companies have even limited sales at schools and colleges. Very strict actions were taken against such advertisements in Europe, Canada, Sweden and Norwegian state as well in response to the researchers conducted which established the link between prevalence of the unethical practices in such commercials and their negative effects on children's health and their behavioural patterns (Stender, Dyerberg, & Astrup 2007).

Conclusion

This study reveals that televised food advertisements intended towards children have a lot of moral implications and ethical concern in the form of changes in eating patterns of children and negative effects on children's health. The findings of this study prove that there is a direct link between negative effects of food advertisements on children's health and the intensity of their deceptive unethicality. This study also implies that frequency with which such ads are advertised should be minimized and it must be ensured that the advertised ingredients don't have adverse effects on children's health.

The findings of this research article justify the need for taking precautionary measures by parents and government regulatory bodies to minimize the negative impacts of these unethical food advertisements.

From all the evidence and findings of this research although discussed in a limited scope suggests that this is a very active and debatable research area in academics because it is changing the dynamics of the whole advertising world as it is targeting the most vulnerable segment of the society which are unable to comprehend the advertising messages properly and are hence most susceptible to its negative effects.

Recommendations and Limitations

Some recommendations to minimize the unethical practices and implication of children food advertisements could be:

- Parents should act as mediators to keep an eye on what their children are watching on television and try to tell them about the health issues that might arise due to fast food consumption.

- Parents themselves should have a knowhow about ethical dilemmas such food advertisements are posing on children's health.
- Parents should not buy children candies and other sugary products just because their children are nagging and asking for such food products. They must convince them that these products are not good for their health.
- Government should also consider the misleading nutritional claims of such food products as unethical practice and should order regulatory bodies to monitor the advertisements addressed towards children.
- More importantly the advertisers should consider it their moral obligation to not target deceptive advertising towards children and don't make false nutritional claims as it is highly unethical and has serious consequences on children's health.

This particular study was limited to interviewing parents to observe the ethical concerns in televised food advertisements and their effects on children; future researchers can conduct experimental researches having children as sample population and observe in great detail the effects these unethical advertisements have on children's health. Also this study is limited only to studying ethical concerns in children televised food advertisements and negative effects they have on children's health but in today's digital age children are exposed to food advertisements on social media and other sources of internet. Future researches should research on that direction as well.

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