

A Review on Food and Beverages Advertisements on Television aimed at Children

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Abstract - Food advertisements on television aimed at children is a public health issue for many countries because it directly affects the healthy behavior of the children. This is a narrative review of published articles. Due to the lack of information on food advertisements on television in the Asian countries, there is an urgent priority for researchers to evaluate the food and beverages related advertisements on television aimed at children in countries in Asia will help the policy makers formulate policies for better restrictions.

Index Terms- Advertisements, Children, Food, Television.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood Obesity is a serious public health problem, as it is known that it increases morbidity, mortality and has long term economic and social implications, not only for the individual but also for the family and the society. Worldwide incidence of childhood obesity is about 10%[1]. The marketing of energy dense nutrient poor foods to children is considered to contribute to the overweight or obesity of children. Food marketing is one of the main factors that have found to be responsible for the increase in childhood obesity. It targets children who are too young to perceive the truth in advertising. Thus it strongly influences children's food preferences, requests which is known as “pester power” and consumption [2].

The first television advertisement was broadcasted in America in 1941. Since then, a strong influx of advertisements has been promoting food and beverages specially aimed at children. Animated kids characters like “The Flintstones” were even used to promote cigarettes. Since 1960, advertisers promoted unhealthy or “junk foods” targeting children. Television advertisements even have a history of producing a series of advertisements such as the “Pepsi Vs Cola War”. Few countries have decided that the evidence on the influence of advertisements on children is strong enough to take policy actions. Sweden is one of such countries, which has banned advertisements on television and radio programmes targeted at children less than 12 years of age, whereas Australia too has banned food and beverages advertisements for preschool children. Belgium has also prohibited advertisements during peak

hours and in children’s programmes. Quebec, a province in Canada also banned fast food advertisements on television. A study which assessed the impact of this ban in Quebec, estimated a US\$ 88 million reduction per year in fast food consumption [3].

This, it is very obvious that television continues to be the main channel used by food marketers to reach children. Therefore, advertising food for children needs closer scrutiny than as being done at present. Many advertisers are able to get away after engaging in unfair practices despite laws being enacted to curb such practices.

I. METHODS

Search strategy

A review of the published literature was performed. This involved searching databases using the search terms advertisements, television, food and beverages and children. The published year was not an exclusion criteria. Restrictions on language were imposed during the search strategy to English.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Any study that assessed the advertisements advertised on Television targeting children was included. Studies which focused solely on smoking and alcohol were excluded.

II. FINDINGS

A. Food items promoted on television

The review by Hasting concludes that the big fives of food promotion; pre-sugared breakfast cereals, soft-drinks, confectionary, savory snacks and fast food outlets are most commonly advertised in television [2]. Half of the food advertisements broadcast during children’s viewing hours were for high-fat or high-sugar foods, with the most advertised food categories being confectionery and fast food restaurants, and the least advertised being fruit and vegetables [4].

A case study from the Galle district in Sri Lanka showed that beverages and Noodles were the most common advertisements on television. However, there are methodological issues in this study as the number of

advertisements recorded, hours of recording, television channels and the ways of selecting the food items are not mentioned [5].

The study by Batada et al, was the first study from America which assessed the nutritional quality of foods advertised on television using quantitative, nutrient-based standards. These standards were based on guidelines for responsible food marketing to children and on the dietary guidelines for Americans [6].

One of the very first studies, which used television ratings data to describe the nutritional content of foods that were advertised on television, describes that nearly 98% of all food products that were advertised were high in fat, sugar or salt. The bias was other languages, such as Spanish programmes were not included in the analysis, which could either decrease or increase the results of the study [7].

A study by Jenkin et al, used the UK nutrition profile to analyse the advertisements in New Zealand. It clearly showed that 53% of advertisements were ruled by the major food franchises which promoted mixed meals high in both fats and salt. Other foods such as cereals, confectionery and carbonated beverages were also promoted frequently. The methodological limitations in this study was that the mixed meals could have been divided into different components in analysis and the study was limited to one particular channel [8].

Kelly et al, compared the channels in Australia with the advertising regulations in the Children's Television Standards. The Study reports that advertisements for high fat/ high-sugar foods during popular children's programmes, contribute to 65.9% of all food advertisements [9].

Against all these advertisements, Barroso et al, studied the advertisements aired only on Saturday mornings between 7 am to 10.30 am, along the Texas Mexican border, in which he reports that 82.7% were non-food related (82.7%,) while only 17.3% were food related [10].

B. Time spent on food and beverages advertisements on television

A study in Singapore showed that the food related advertisements per hour was higher during the afternoon on weekdays and in the morning on weekends, when the kids were at home [11]. However the time that the advertisements were recorded coincided with one of the most popular circus shows shown at that time. This could have either reduced the number of advertisements as the show was heavily advertised or it the advertisements targeted at children could have increased if this circus was sponsored by one of them. Another limitation that was

noted in the study was that only the children's programmes were recorded and not the adult programmes, and the criteria for differentiating the programmes were not laid down.

It was also pointed out by Chestnutt et al, that if an Australian child would be exposed to 11 advertisements, if the child watches 2.5 hours of television per day, and also showed that these advertisements were fast food ads which were high in fats or sugar [12].

A study from Australia showed the trend of the of food advertisements in consecutive years. The mean hours of food related advertisements increased by 0.3 per hour in a year. The increase was seen on fast food related advertisements, while a decrease was seen on beverages and confectionaries. The mean hours of advertisements excluded holidays and special events, which would lead to a bias in the mean number of advertisements, as it has been shown that such advertisements are promoted more during such seasons [13].

One of the few studies from Asia shows that on an average 10% of children in India and 30% of children from Malaysia watch more than 8 hours of television per day. Further in the same countries more than 15 minutes of advertisements are advertised in an hour, which were targeted at commercials on soft drink, fast foods, chocolates and noodles [13].

The Mexican advertisements had a different point of view. The promotion not only targeted the children, but also targeted the adults on children related foods. Four hours of food related advertisements were shown for a day, of which 2 hours were dedicated for the children, of which 50% (one hour) was for the big fives. This recording was only from one channel, which was a bias in the study, as it is shown on studies that children switch channels when they watch television [14].

Promotion of the big fives have been targeted during children's programmes rather than the prime time television programmes. Among a total of 3236 advertisements, 72.4% of these were advertised during children's programmes. Further, within these advertisements, 62.5% were targeting the big fives [2]. Another study from Australia emphasis on this issue and shows clearly shows that children's television programmes were targeted nearly three times more than the adult television programmes [4].

The first study performed in UK after it introduced statutory scheduling restrictions of food advertisements in 2007 to children, showed that after full implementation of

the scheduling restrictions, 55.7% of television food advertising seen by children was for high fats and salt foods. One of the few limitations in the study was, using the manufacturers' data to estimate the nutritional content of advertised foods. As such foods are constantly reformulated this could have underestimated the proportion specially with the restriction of advertisements [15].

An interesting fact by Kelly et al, was that although the food advertisements viewed on Australian television occurred in similar proportions during children's viewing hours and adult's viewing hours, higher rate of high-fat/high-sugar food advertisements were viewed during children's viewing hours which was found to be statistically significant [9].

C. Strategies used for promotion of food and beverages on television

The Hasting's review points out that Health and nutrition were never the main themes, but rather the provision of free gifts with the purchase is used to promote the products on television to children [2]. Television strategy in Singapore also uses this technique widely, of which one advertisement goes to the extent of offering a free soft drink with the purchase of raw rice. Such advertisements not only confuse the children's perception on healthy and unhealthy foods but also always make the child associate rice with soft drink. Some advertisements use toys to promote the fast food [7].

The study in 2008 from America, should that there was an improvement in the advertisements and that 42% of them had a health or nutrition message [6]. It should be noted that the study had recorded all advertisements on a Saturday morning, which covers most of the advertisements but the hours of recorded advertisements were 27 hours, which is much less than the hours of recording in other studies.

Content analysis on advertisements advertised in Britain were coded into 14 categories; Health benefits, Disclaimers, Scientific information, Price, Reality versus fantasy, Use of cartoons, Presence of celebrities, Setting, Food type, Voice, Central figure, Parent-child interactions, Voice and Central figure. The bias in this study was that the advertisements were recorded during Christmas time in one channel in Britain. Further the advertisements that were advertised before 9.30am and the weekend advertisements were not considered. Among the advertisements recorded in 45 hours, most were repeated, which led to a small sample of advertisements to be analyzed [16].

Another study from Australia overcame the above said limitations. The researchers recorded advertisements from three commercial stations from seven to nine pm on weekends and weekdays. The advertisements were categorized into health and unhealthy according to Australian Guide to Healthy Eating [17].

In America television media, Connor reports that among all child oriented food advertisements 55% contained spokes characters [18]

Kelly et al in 2008, studied the cartoon and competition strategy used in television of which 21.4% of food advertisements contained promotional characters and another 7.3% used premiums offers. Further, these promotional characters were viewed during the children's peak viewing periods. To supplement this the non-core foods were also found to be higher in the advertisements with the promotional characters [19].

D. Promotion channels for food and beverages advertisements

The most common promotion channel in many studies was the children's channels or programmes. Some of the promotion channels not only targeted the children's programmes but also targeted the more affluent population. Research shows that in Australia's metropolitan area the advertisements were advertised in significantly higher proportions than in the other areas [14].

III.CONCLUSION

The major issue that was found was that the studies from the Asian and more specifically from the South East Asian countries were meager. We need more research to go forth with what other developed countries like Sweden and Quebec have achieved. Due to the paucity of information on food advertisements on television, there is a urgent priority need to evaluate the food and beverages related advertisements aimed at children in Asia, which will help all Asian countries. Filling these gaps in research, will help the policy makers formulate policies.

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