

## Television food commercials to children: Focus on impact, parental attitude; potential ill-effects on oral and general health

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### ABSTRACT

Media is one of the rapidly growing sectors of technology. Television in particular, through its food, Commercials is influencing younger generation and their food request pattern, **Aim:** To assess, 1. The impact of food commercials on food request and consumption pattern in children., 2. The parental attitude towards food commercials and food purchase pattern for their children., **Methodology:** Fifty health care professionals having a single child aged between 6-12 years, were interviewed through the questionnaire, **Statistical Analysis:** Chi-Square test, **Results:** 72% of the children were influenced by the food advertisements and insisted their parents for purchase. 56% of the children requested for food/beverage seen in the commercials, especially for the gifts and tattoos tied-up with the product, despite parents having been informed their child about the potential ill-effects of the advertised food/beverage products on general and oral health as well. 78% of them wanted the food/beverage commercials to be banned in the children's channel., **Conclusion:** Food commercials, an important factor contributing for the change in food request and consumption pattern in children may affect their general and oral health. Parents have to take prime lead in helping children make right food choice, for their harmonious growth and development.,

**Key-Words:** Television, Commercials, Health, Obesity

### INTRODUCTION

Television is one among the most powerful visible media and has been the subject of greater attention in the later years. The food and the beverage industries opt for television advertisement as their first choice of marketing strategy. The commercials (advertisements) in the television inform the potential purchaser of a product, its existence and attributes; thereby directly influence their choice, behaviour and

attitude. Undoubtedly, advertisements through its visual clues and non-verbal communications confuse children and target them as receptive consumers. Zipper et al, Psychologist Dale Kunkel and Brian Wilcox stated that children do not have the cognitive ability to comprehend or evaluate advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased, and therefore are easy targets for commercial persuasion.<sup>1,2</sup>

Food/beverage commercials is of greater concern as general and oral health of children is deteriorating with the intense and aggressive marketing of high energy, low nutritional, food/beverage product having high fat, sugar/salt content. Advertised food most often exceeds recommended daily values of fat, saturated fats and sodium, yet fail to provide fibres and certain vitamins and minerals.<sup>3</sup> Heavy marketing of fast food outlets and energy-dense,

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micronutrient-poor foods and beverages to children have significantly contributed to childhood obesity.<sup>2, 4</sup> Also the artificial colours effect the concentration capabilities, resulting in learning disabilities.

Advertised snack food mainly consisting of fermentable carbohydrates like sucrose, simple sugars (mono and disaccharide), starches, sugars (extrinsic) and increased frequency of consumption are associated with increased risk of dental caries. Young children with poor eating habits (those eating no breakfast and less than 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day) were more likely to have dental caries than those with more nutritious eating habits. Aerated/carbonated beverages may also displace milk from children's diet and negatively associated with calcium consumption and positively associated with increased risk of bone fracture and osteoporosis. These soft drinks and juices also contain acids, such as phosphoric / citric acid, that can demineralized dental enamel (dental erosion) when consumed frequently.<sup>5</sup>

Children being innocent persuaders often are susceptible to deception and lack of cognitive development retards information processing approach. Studies have revealed that child's ability to comprehend advertisement is influenced by their parents.<sup>1</sup> Parental factors like education, interaction and time devoted to their children designs the eating as well as food purchase behaviour in their children. Advertisements leave a mark on the living style of children as well as they lead the children to select material objects over nutritional alternatives. Realizing the stupendous effect of television food commercials on disseminating oral and general health in children, a need was felt to study the impact of television advertisements on food consumption pattern in children, parental attitude for their food requests and influence of the child towards food purchase pattern.

## METHOD

For this study, fifty health care professionals of Yenepoya Dental and Medical College Hospital, Mangalore, Karnataka, India having a single child were selected. Participants were parenting single child between the age group of 6-12 years, possessing a television set were interviewed through the questionnaire, after obtaining approval of the Ethical Committee of the institution. Prior to the study commencement each participant was given a letter outlining the basis of the study along with a consent form for the participation.

A self-complete, pre-structured questionnaire was developed based upon the findings of a number of semi-structured interviews with parents and from questionnaires used in the previous television advertising surveys involving parents. The questionnaire aimed to assess

1. Television viewing practice prevalent among children between 6-12 years
2. Relationship between television viewing of food advertisements and food request pattern in their child
3. Attitude of the parents towards the food/beverage advertisements and food purchase pattern for their child's request

## RESULTS

Fifty participants parenting 30 male and 20 female children between the age of 6-12 years (Cued Processors able to process strategic information, only if cues are provided) were selected and were grouped as follows

Group I 6-8 years

Group II -8-10 year

Group III- 10-12 years

Results were statistically analyzed with chi-square tests ( $X^2$ ). The study reveals that majority of the children between the age of 6-12 years viewed

television between 6-8pm for an average of 3 hours in a day, i.e. in the after school hours. There was no statistically significant difference between the gender and the age group of the children in relation with the television viewing duration, as shown in table I and II respectively.

72% of the children were influenced by the food advertisements and insisted their parents for its purchase. 56% of the children requested for food/beverage seen in the commercials, especially for the gifts and tattoos tied-up with the product, as represented in Graph I.

Participants' being the health care professionals, in this study, it was observed that the child's request for the advertised food product was occasionally fulfilled. Parents had informed their child about the potential ill-effects of the advertised food/beverage products on general and oral health as well. All of the participants had a check on the ingredient list, (including calories, preservatives, expiry date) before the product purchase for their child. 78% of them wanted the food/beverage commercials to be banned in the children's channel

## DISCUSSION

This study reveals that children in 6-12 years viewed television for one to three hours in a day and the duration increased upto five hour especially on weekends and holidays. The prime time was found to be between 6-8 pm. The most popular channels were Pogo and Cartoon network. It is estimated in a studies that a child views as many as 40,000 commercials each year and food commercials accounts for the 50% of all the advertisements. On an average a child views one food commercial every five minute and as many as 3 hours of food commercials each week<sup>1</sup>. In a study conducted by Rodd HD and Patel V, throughout the 41 hours of recording of all the programs and adverts transmitted, there was only

one advertisement for an oral hygiene product. Significantly higher percent (95.3%) were for the products with high sugars and / or acid content. Equally concerning was the total absence of advertisements for non cariogenic/ non erosive items such as fruits, vegetables, milk and plain water.<sup>6</sup> This is a clear evidence to show that children are bombarded with sugar and acid rich advertisements.

Food/beverages marketed through the television commercials consists of sugar rich food, potato wafers, aerated sweetened beverages, candies, cakes, biscuits; often tempting, having lingering taste and addictive. These are predominantly low in nutritional values and high in empty calorie fat and / or sugar and are termed as 'junk food'. Junk foods provide suboptimal nutrition with excessive fat, sugar or sodium per kilocalorie.<sup>7</sup> This will result in less meal eating and greater overall calorie consumption, but do not substitute balanced meal. Childhood years are the steady period of growth, when the nutrition is of high priority. Poor diet can slow the growth, sow seeds to diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardiac problems, osteoporosis, teeth decay and promote obesity. In this study, 72% of the children were influenced by the food advertisements and insisted their parents for purchase, despite having been told about their ill-effects.

Television commercials adopt multiple techniques of "product innovations" like free gifts & tattoos, good photography, glaring clippings attractive models, catchy music, can lure the kids to buy and eat junk food<sup>8</sup>. In our study, the number one abuse was the tie-in (gifts & tattoos) in 56% of the children

## PARENTAL ATTITUDE

All the participants in this study belong to

health care profession, with a mean working hour of 9±2. Majority of the parents expressed that their child pester them to buy products advertised in the television. "Pester power" has become advertisers dream and parent's nightmare! Indeed, McLellan states that marketing philosophies aim to 'teach kids to influence their parents purchase'.<sup>9</sup> Though in this study Child's demands was met occasionally, long working hours and time pressure on parents made 12% of the parents say "yes", to these wanting machines, inspite of knowing the potential ill-effects. Parents also reported "Child-Parent conflict", resulted from denial to their child's demands.

Children do not have the cognitive ability to comprehend or evaluate advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased, and therefore are easy targets for commercial persuasion.<sup>1</sup> Thus, a task force of the American Psychological Association (APA) has recommended that advertising targeting children under the age of eight to be restricted.<sup>2</sup> However, educated parents

were able to explain the intensions of commercials and also examined their exposure to food messages.

In this study, 70% of the participant parent claims to have read the ingredient list, expiry date, coloring agents and food preservatives before purchasing the food/beverage product for their child and parents conceded to the demands for the purchase of items that they consider healthy and safe. 78% of the parents wanted food/beverage commercials to be banned in the children's channels and during the prime hours of viewing. But total banning would be difficult to implement as it creates substantial revenue to the broadcasting companies

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps, it would be difficult to prove that television advertising has a direct effect on

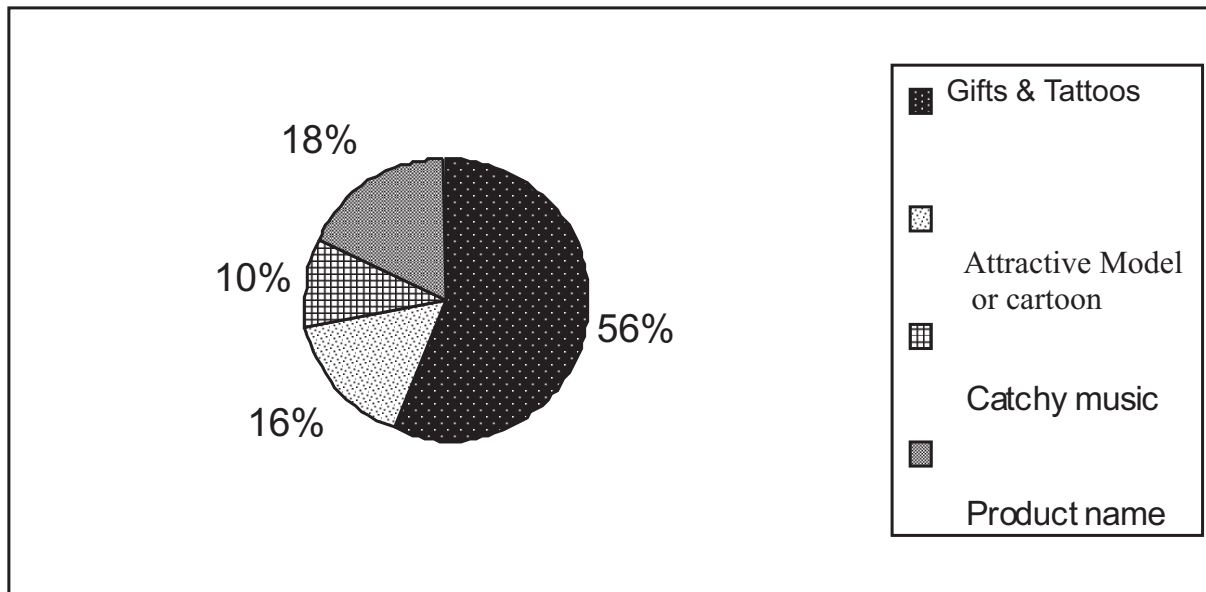
**Table I: Comparison of television viewing duration between genders**

No. of Hours	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
< 2	10 33.3%	4 20%	14 28%
2-5	10 33.3%	9 45%	19 38%
> 5	10 33.3%	7 35%	17 34%
Total	30 100%	20 100%	50 100%
X <sup>2</sup> = 1.202      p = 0.548 (Not Significant)			

**Table II: Comparison of television viewing duration among children**

No. of Hours	Age Group			Total
	Group I 6-8 yrs	Group II 8-10 Year	Group III 10-12 years	
< 2	11	1	2	14
Percentage	31.4 %	20%	20%	28%
2-5	14	2	3	19
Percentage	40%	40%	30%	38%
> 5	10	2	5	17
Percentage	28.6%	40%	50%	34%
Total	35	5	10	50
	100%	100%	100%	100%
X <sup>2</sup> = 1.81      p = 0.771 (Not Significant)				

**Graph I: Influencing factors in food commercials for their request in children**



general and oral health, given the multifactorial nature of physical ailments and dental caries/erosion. However, advertising strongly influence children's food preference. Many consumer associations and health professionals are calling for greater regulation of food advertising to children. Definitely, it is the responsibility of the health care professional to consider this as an important health issue warranting good education for the parent and their children as well; to ensure the right message to reach and help them prioritize their choice. Every effort to improve child's nutritional regimen should be programmed and encouraged. Television should provide a platform for the parents to discuss nutrition and food values and encourage right decision making power in a child

### RECOMMENDATION

The health care team should be in the forefront in promoting good nutrition for general and oral health by creating awareness and advocating a healthy diet by following food guide pyramid for health promotion and disease prevention.

1. Global and national organizations (World health Organization, Food and Health Organization, Consumer Councils etc.) concerned with these issues should make strict regulations and monitor the broadcasting industries.

2. Legislative bodies, mass communication systems, schools, companies, communities should partner in promoting nutritional knowledge and aid in making healthy food choices.

3. Research and epidemiological studies in the interest of these issues are to be encouraged and results/reports to be made public.

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