

Food Messages on Television and their Influence on Children's Food Preferences

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Children receive food-related messages from television. Children are exposed to numerous low-nutrients, high-calorie foods on television. Children may get influenced by television messages on food and indicate preferences for unhealthy foods. This study attempts to understand the influence that food messages on television have on the food preferences of children. The study has adopted a survey method. A sample of 200 children were analysed for this study. The study revealed that food messages on television influenced children's food preferences, purchase and consumption.

[Key Words: children, food messages, television, food preferences, food consumption]

Media plays an important role in the lives of children. Even though children have the opportunity of accessing various types of media, the influence of television is considered most important. Children still continue to spend more time with television than with all forms of media combined, and this pattern is especially true for younger children (Rideout et al. 2010). Television has the capacity to capture the attention of the children easily. Television viewing is typically a child's first media experience (Zimmerman et al. 2007). Since television is easily available in the homes, the messages that television convey to children cannot be ignored. Children receive a significant amount of food related messages from television. This study tries to analyse the influence that food messages on television have on the food preferences of children.

Food messages

Television provides a lot of information to children. One of the main information given to children is on food. This is because major food industries use television to advertise their products. Television provides a large source of food-related messages to children (Story and French 2004). Television advertisements directly target children who are their potential consumers. Food and toys are the two largest categories of products that target children (Williams et al. 1993). A study on television networks indicated that, one-fifth of the commercials were for food, and food advertisements were especially prevalent

during cartoons and on children's networks (Bell et al. 2009). Since children view cartoons, advertisers choose these specific programmes to advertise their food products. In yet another study of 27.5 hours of children's television revealed that 49% of the advertisements were for food (Seitz et al. 2008). Food companies readily become children's channels main advertisement sponsors to target them. The marketing of food items through television advertisements has raised a lot of concern.

Foods that appear on television

Numerous food products are advertised during television programmes. Studies examining the type of food product advertised, found that snacks were the chief food item that was shown on television. In children's programming, 83% of all advertisements are for fast food or snacks. It was found that snacking was shown in commercials more often than breakfast, lunch, and dinner combined (Harrison and Marske 2005). Snacks appearing on television include candy bars, chips, cookies, biscuits, popcorn, pizza, sandwich, and burgers. These products are high in calorie and low in nutrition.

Breakfast cereals are another type of food category that targets children. Sugared cereals are the primary cereals advertised in the food advertisement (Kotz and Story 1994). When cereal advertisements were examined it was found that 88% conveyed the message that highly sugared cereals were part of a balanced breakfast (Kunkel et al. 2009). Most of the cereals were rich in sugar. It is found that 66% of cereals advertised to children fail to meet national nutritional standards, particularly with regard to added sugar (Schwartz et al. 2008).

Children are flooded with soft drinks advertisements during television programmes. Soft drinks consumption leads to obesity, diabetes, dental decay and other health-related problems. Children who drank more soft drinks and beverages had low in-take of many nutrients such as calcium, foliate and iron that are essential to maintain good health (Frary et al. 2004).

Food advertisements are associated with changing consumption patterns around the world. Children are said to be exposed to more advertising for unhealthy than healthy foods. A review of advertisements from twenty three countries in Europe and Asia found that the most commonly advertised foods were sweetened cereals, fast foods, confectionary, savory snacks, and soft drinks (Consumers International 2004). A study conducted on television advertisements revealed that half of 828 advertisements analysed were for food products, out of which 60% were for breakfast, cereals and confectionery/snacks (Lewis and Hill 1998). When studying the ten most frequently advertised food items, six were unhealthy items such as fast food, high sugar/low fibre breakfast cereals, chocolate/confectionery and snack foods (Boyland et al. 2011). A study on Japanese children suggested that media influence was interfering with normal eating and leading to a higher consumption of unhealthy processed foods (Ishigaki 1991). These changes in

eating habits are attributed to the food messages available on television that directly targets children.

Low nutritional value

Food items advertised on television are mainly processed and packaged foods. These foods are designed to be portable, quick and satisfying. They are intended to be storable, more durable, and less perishable. They are usually designed to save consumers' time in the kitchen. They often contain substantial amount of sweeteners, preservatives and ingredients such as spices, chocolate, and artificial flavours. Some of the ingredients in these foods may be unhealthy to children.

Food products advertised on television are said to lack nutritious value. Most of them are unhealthy food items. Television messages are dominated by advertisements for high calorie foods with low nutritional quality. Though the food advertisements claim these foods to be nutritionally adequate, in reality they lack in the nutritional standards that would have an adverse effect on the health of the children. More than half of such advertisements are for food especially sugared cereals and high-caloric snacks (Larson and Story 2008). Almost 80% of foods on television advertisements were judged to be low in nutritional value (Cotugna 1988).

Health experts are specifically concerned and recommend that people avoid high-calorie, low nutrient junk food. These food items are often categorised as junk foods because they typically have little or no nutritional value. They do not contribute towards general health and nutrition. Since most of the times they are high in calorie they lead to various health related problems. Almost all food advertisements viewed by children are product high in fat, sugar or sodium (Powell et al. 2007). Heavy advertising of food products to children, particularly those with high sugar content, promotes poor nutritional habits and poses serious health risks. These messages in the food advertisements tend to promote unhealthy eating habits among children. This had raised concerns among parents as well as nutritionists.

Techniques used to appeal

In order to draw the attention of the children, food industries use various strategies and gimmicks. Techniques are used to create a desire in the children to purchase food products that are advertised. Food companies are ready to manipulate essential information about the food product. The food industries use several appeals to sell their products to children. It has been found that specific appeals attract children to buy food items. The most commonly used appeal to attract children is associating the product with fun and happiness rather than conveying any factual product-based information (Folta et al. 2006). Advertisements are cleverly constructed to get viewers to associate the food product with happiness and fun, rather than taste or nutritional benefit. Children easily fall for this marketing gimmick and think that consuming the food item might lead them to the same fun and happiness shown in the advertisements. Also, food commercials can show exaggerated pleasure responses to eating a

food product (Page and Brewster 2009). This creates an intense desire in the child to buy the food product and consume them to experience the same pleasure and happiness that the advertisements promises to give. Food companies use covert marketing techniques that include humorous advertising that entertains without providing rational product benefits, have brand messages embedded within entertainment content, and have brand logo placement at entertainment and sporting events (Petty and Andrews 2008). Children are unable to understand the marketing strategies used by advertisers to make them buy these food products.

Children's cognition

Children are exposed to television advertising messages much sooner than they develop the ability to recognize such content as media persuasion. Television advertising influences adults. Its potential influence on children is even more powerful. A large body of consumer behaviour research documents young children's inherent vulnerability to advertising. Young children below the age of 5 do not consistently discriminate between television programme and commercial content (Kunkel 1988). They view advertising as simply another source of information about the world around them (John 1999). They think that the television programme and the commercial are one and the same.

Children do not analyse the intent of the food advertisement. They tend to believe that whatever the advertisements tell is true. Children lack the cognitive skill to examine the nutritional value of the product that leads to their consumption of unhealthy food items promoted by the television. Until the age of 14, children do not understand the misleading tactics and appeals used by advertisers when viewing commercials (John 1999). Young children, between ages 6 and 8 years are developmentally unable to understand the intent of advertisements and, in fact frequently accept, advertising claims as being largely true (Gunter et al. 2005).

Children may not differentiate advertising and television programming as adults do and young children do not fully understand commercial messages and their intent to sell. It is clearly seen that children do not critical view an advertisements and tend to accept television messages on food. Until the age of eight years, children do not possess the cognitive ability to understand that advertising presents a biased point of view (Martin 1997). Messages in television food advertising might be confusing to them by including, for instance, denigration of core foods and exaggerated health claims (Roberts and Pettigrew 2007). Children are unaware of the persuasive nature and economic interests of advertisements. Children could easily be influenced by the advertisements which could compel them to buy and consume unhealthy food products.

Preferences towards unhealthy foods

Television plays an important role in affecting children's preferences of food products. Children are vulnerable to pressure from television messages. They are unprepared to make appropriate food choices and do not understand

the association between food consumption and maintenance of good health. Viewing of television food advertisements is associated with attitudinal and behavioural changes among children. The food products on television present wrong claims that they are substitutes for regular meals. Children get influenced by the food advertisements shown on television and purchase them. Children have been found to request more advertised junk foods and drinks and also attempt to influence their parents' purchases (Chamberlain et al. 2006). Preschool children who watch food advertisements get influenced and prefer foods shown in the advertisements (Borzekowski and Robinson 2001).

Children, who spend more time with television, expressed strong desire for the food products shown on television. In a study of 3-to 8-year-olds, the number of weekly viewing hours correlated significantly with both children's caloric intake and children's requests to parents for foods shown on television (Taras et al. 1989). Television messages were effective in forming positive attitudes to the product being advertised (Hastings et al. 2006). This indicates that the television messages have an influence on the purchase and consumption of television advertised food items. Today's children are more likely to consume high fat foods due to television messages. Television deluges children with commercials for food products that provide less nutritional value.

Snacking behaviour among children is said to have increased over the years. This is attributed to the fact that the number of snack food advertisements on television have also increased. A study of more than 21,000 children and adolescents has found that the prevalence of snacking has increased considerably over the years. By the mid 1990's, children were consuming 25% of their daily calories a day by snacking, compared with 18% in 1977, and teens consume 610 calories a day by snacking (Jahns et al. 2001). Of late there is much more snacks advertisements that appear on television. Snacking was shown in commercials more often than breakfast, lunch, and dinner combined (Harrison and Marske 2005). This would increase the snacking behaviour among children that in turn increases their caloric intake. Most of the snacks and soft drinks advertised are unhealthy. Many children are lured into the habit of eating unhealthy food that causes serious health concerns.

Overweight children

Higher caloric intake and poor diet among children contributes to childhood obesity. The availability of inexpensive energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and beverages is a significant contributor to obesity (Frieden et al. 2010). The prevalence of overweight children is found worldwide. Media is an important contributor to this health issue. Television advertising contributes to children's preferences for unhealthy categories of food that may have a profound negative impact on the health of children. Food advertising contributes towards childhood obesity by distorting children's food preferences, requests, consumption patterns and nutrition knowledge (Cairns et al. 2009). Television messages on food increase obesity rates among children. Obesity could result in various health problems at a later stage in a child's life. The high

fat, high sugar junk foods advertised on television is an important element that causes obesity among children (Horgen 2005).

Healthy foods

On the other hand food products that have to be promoted among children for good health are hardly shown on television. Healthy foods that should be a part of regular diet are almost never advertised to children (Stitt and Kunkel 2008). A study of fifty two hours of advertising during children's programming found that two thirds of the advertisements were for sugared cereals, sweets, fats or oils, but none were for fruits or vegetables (Kotz and Story 1994). It was seen that very few healthy items recommended for a child's daily diet were aired on children's programmes (Kunkel et al. 2009). Several studies have found that television viewing was inversely associated with intake of fruit and vegetables. A study of 500 middle school students studied over a 19-month period found that for each additional hour of television viewed per day, consumption of fruits and vegetables actually decreases among teenagers, which may be attributable to television advertising of snack foods (Boynton-Jarrett et al. 2003). Junk foods advertising on television is said not only to make children choose these unhealthy food items but also keep them away from eating fruits and vegetables. Since fruits and vegetables are never advertised, children generally prefer calorie dense foods instead of unadvertised fruits and vegetables. Television fails to advocate right eating habits that help in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. At the same time, if television promoted healthy eating it definitely had an effect on children's eating habits. For example, modelling of healthy eating by television characters promoted healthy eating among children (Tapper et al. 2003). Children's exposure to pro- nutrition messages makes children like healthy and nutritious foods (Dixon et al. 2007). Children's exposure on television to pro-nutritional messages that contribute to children's well being is essential. Television messages should advocate healthy eating among children.

Method

A survey method was adopted for this study. A questionnaire was distributed to the children. Data collected from 200 school children (100 boys, 100 girls) in Chennai was analysed for this study. The children were from the 3rd, 4th, and the 5th standard. The study followed a systematic sampling technique. Out of 200 questionnaires, 4 were found to be incomplete and were removed from the data. The data of the 196 respondents was coded and analysed to arrive at the results. Three aspects namely food preferences, purchase behaviour, and consumption were taken into consideration to study the influence that food messages on television have on the food preferences of children.

Analysis

Table 1: Food Preferences

S. No.	Food Preferences	Percentage
1	Chocolate /Candy	89.2%
2	Biscuit/Cake	82.3%
3	Chips	78.4%
4	Acidic soft drinks (e.g.col)	75.1%
5	Pasta /Noodles	70.3%
6	Breakfast Cereals	66.1%
7	Non acidic soft drinks (fruit juices)	61.9%

The above table shows the food preferred by children. It was found that 89.2% prefer Chocolate /Candy, 82.3% prefer Biscuit/Cake, 78.4% prefer Chips, 75.1% prefer Acidic soft drinks (e.g.col), 70.3% Pasta /Noodles, 66.1% prefer Breakfast Cereals, 61.9% Non acidic soft drinks (fruit juices).

Table 2: Purchase Behaviour

S. No.	Purchase Behaviour	Agree Frequency/ Percentage	Disagree Frequency/ Percentage
1	I buy the food products shown on television	165 (84.1%)	31 (15.9%)
2	I pester my parents to buy the food products that are advertised on television	172 (87.7%)	24 (12.3%)
3	I usually demand the food products that I see on television	160 (81.6%)	36 (18.4%)
4	I feel food advertisements on television encourage me to buy the food products	158 (80.6%)	38 (19.4%)

The above table shows that among the 196 (100%) children, 165 (84.1%) agree and 31 (15.9%) disagree to the statement 'I buy the food products shown on television'. Similarly 172 (87.7%) agree and 24 (12.3%) disagree to the statement 'I pester my parents to buy the food products that are advertised on television'. Among the children 160 (81.6%) agree and 36 (18.4%) disagree to the statement 'I usually demand the food products that I see on television'. For the statement 'I feel food advertisements on television encourage me to buy the food products', 158 (80.6%) children agree and 38 (19.4%) children disagree.

Table 3: Consumption

S. No.	Consumption	Agree Frequency/ Percentage	Disagree Frequency/ Percentage
1	I prefer to eat food products shown on television than home-made food items	171(87.2%)	25 (12.8%)
2	I desire to eat the food products shown on television	164 (83.6%)	32 (16.4%)
3	I think food products shown on television are tastier than home-made foods.	165 (84.1%)	31 (15.9%)
4	Repeated food advertisements on television increase my desire to eat them	159 (81.1%)	37 (18.9%)

The above table shows that among the 196 (100%) children, 171(87.2%) agree and 25 (12.8%) disagree to the statement 'I prefer to eat food products shown on television than home-made food items'. Similarly 164 (83.6%) agree and 32 (16.4%) disagree to the statement 'I desire to eat the food products shown on television'. Among the children 165 (84.1%) agree and 31 (15.9%) disagree to the statement 'I think food products shown on television are tastier than home-made foods'. For the statement 'Repeated food advertisements on television increase my desire to eat them', 159 (81.1%) children agree and 37 (18.9%) children disagree.

Discussion

The study revealed that food messages on television had an influence on children. Most of foods preferred by children are high in sugar and calorie. This could be because children are repeatedly exposed to television messages of foods that are high in sugar and calorie. The food messages convinced most of the children to purchase the food products shown on television. They demanded and also pestered their parents to buy them the food products. Majority of the children strongly felt that food advertisements on television encouraged them to buy the food products. When analysing the consumption of food products shown on television the results indicated that many children preferred to eat the food products shown on television than home-made food items. They also thought that the food products promoted by television were indeed tastier than home-made food items. Their desire to eat the food products further increased when they saw the food advertisements repeatedly shown on television.

Conclusion

The food messages on television have a strong influence on children's food preferences. These food messages are successful in controlling and directing the minds of the vulnerable children. They effectively convince the

children to purchase and consume the food products shown on television. Children often do not realise the intent of the advertisements on food and they make wrong choices of food products. Concern arises since most of the food products shown on television belong to the low nutrient, unhealthy category. The consumption of these foods is considered a risk factor since it leads to childhood obesity. The fact is that food messages on television create misconceptions about the nutritional values of food. This increases the preference for calorie-dense junk foods that leads to poor eating habits and ill-health among children. The food messages from television have shown to shape food-related knowledge. Regulation of food advertising to children will potentially limit its influences on children's food preferences. Children should be encouraged to make healthy food choices. They should be educated about the intent of television food messages and taught to guard themselves against its influence.

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