



The Junk Food Generation



A multi-country survey of the influence of television advertisements on children



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Acknowledgement

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Preface

There has been in both developed and developing countries a substantial increase in advertising of foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Much of this targets young children. Correspondingly, there is a disturbingly rapid increase in the incidence of childhood obesity.

As worries about this new pandemic sharpen, so does the search for ways of changing consumer behaviour. Television, or more precisely television food advertising, has been singled out as the most easily modifiable influential factor on diet.

Consumer organisations recognise that advertising can be a useful source of information to consumers. However, advertising is not an impartial source of information since its essential aim is to persuade rather than inform.

Advertising is an immensely potent tool, which can sway the judgement of even the most clued-up consumer. It has the power to reinvent the familiar and make the unfamiliar trustworthy. It preys on the human need to belong and lures people into buying into a lifestyle, an identity. Children are especially vulnerable to advertising because they are less able than adults to fully understand its persuasive techniques and to therefore judge it critically.

Advertising regulations and guidelines at both the national and international levels seek to prohibit the exploitation of children's credulity, lack of experience or sense of loyalty and to protect them from high pressure selling. Many countries have introduced restrictions on the marketing of tobacco and alcohol with respect to children. Yet, food advertising, despite its relationship to child health and nutrition, has received little attention at the regulatory level. However, before formulating intervention strategies, it is important to understand the forces driving consumer behaviour and the link between advertising, knowledge and behaviour.

This report outlines the major findings from studies conducted on the influence of televised food ads on children, drawing primarily upon the results from a survey conducted by Consumers International Asia Pacific Office in six Asian countries - India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Korea.

The survey on parents and children was carried out by the following consumers organisations and partners:

India – Voluntary Organisation in the Interest of Consumers Education (VOICE) and Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP)

Indonesia – Yayasan Lembaga Konsumen Indonesia (YKLI)

Malaysia – Education and Research Association for Consumers (ERA Consumer)

Pakistan – The Network for Consumer Protection in Pakistan (TheNetwork)

Philippines – Management and Organisational Development for Empowerment, Inc. (MODE)

South Korea – Citizens' Alliance for Consumer Protection in Korea (CACPK)

The surveys in South Korea and India were carried out in 2000 and 2001 respectively, while the others were undertaken in 2002.

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Dr. S. Sothi Rachagan
Regional Director
Consumers International
Asia Pacific Office

Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings of research conducted by Consumers International Asia Pacific Office and CI member organisations and partners on food advertising directed at children in six countries in the Asia-Pacific region (India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and South Korea).

The report draws on evidence from other studies largely performed in Western countries. The recommendations are based on those previously put forward by Consumers International (CI) in other countries. The report highlights the shared concerns of consumer organisations in the participating countries on the impact of such advertising, its insufficient regulation and the need for greater consumer education.

The main findings of our study are listed below.

The power of television

- Through television, advertisers can reach a whole spectrum of consumers. Children are exposed to an overwhelming amount of advertising as there is little regulation controlling the programme to advertisement ratio. 30 per cent of Malaysian children watch over eight hours of television a day during holidays, and are exposed to over two and half hours of advertisements a day.
- The majority of children believe television advertisements to be informative and most children respond to them favourably. 73 per cent of Pakistani children claim to love advertisements, as do 68 per cent of Filipino children. Malaysian children are not so fond of advertisements, probably because they watch the most television and get frustrated by the constant interruption caused by commercial breaks.



Source: http://www.caresnackages.com/images/junk_lg.jpg



Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/media/images/39392000/jpg/_39392081_fat_boy300.jpg

Food advertisement

- In India, 40-50 per cent of advertisements during children's programming were for food. For Pakistan, the Philippines and Malaysia the percentage of food advertisements varied between 50 and 75 per cent.
- In the Philippines, programme to advertisement ratios during children's programming go up to 50 per cent.

Pester power

- More than 50 per cent of parents in all countries surveyed say that their children are an important factor in influencing their purchasing decisions. Indian, Malaysian and Pakistani parents cited "child's demand" as the primary reason for buying a product.

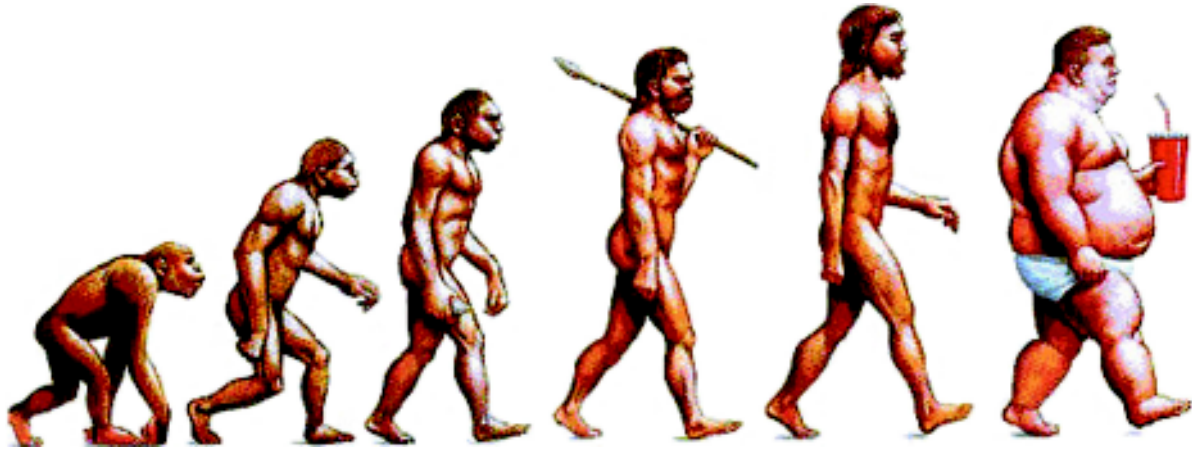
Nutrition knowledge

- 73 per cent of Pakistani children perceive soft drinks to be healthy for frequent consumption. In the Philippines 80 per cent of children and 71 per cent of parents, drink soft drinks at least once a week, as do 71 per cent of South Koreans.
- 40 per cent of parents and 63 per cent of children in the Philippines believe fast food to be fit for frequent consumption.

Current legislation

- All six countries have legislative frameworks governing advertising in general and most have guidelines for advertising to children in particular.
- South Korea and the Philippines are the only two countries to have specific regulations pertaining to the sponsorship of children's programmes, and laws pertaining to the advertisement of fast food and confectionery.
- The majority of parents from all six countries are in favour of a reduction of the number of advertisements during children's broadcasting.

I. Globesity: the new pandemic



Source: *The Economist* (Dec 2003), vol 369

According to the Worldwatch Institute (a Washington D.C. based research organisation), for the first time, the number of obese adults in the world now matches the number of adults who are underweight. While the world's malnourished population has declined since 1980 to 1.1 billion, the number of overweight has increased to 1.1 billion.¹

Child obesity has reached epidemic proportions in some countries and is on the rise in others. Approximately 17.6 million children aged five years and below are estimated to be overweight worldwide. The trend has spread from the overindulgent developed nations to the less developed ones. For example in Thailand, the prevalence of obesity in 5-to-12 year old children rose from 12.2 per cent to 15.6 per cent in just two years.² In Malaysia, recent data demonstrate an increasing prevalence in obesity with increases in age - 6.6 per cent among six year olds, rising to 13.8 per cent of 10 year olds.³ Ethnic differences were also observed, especially among boys, where 16.8 per cent of Malays were obese compared to approximately 11 per cent of Chinese and Indians. Recent data from Japanese school children aged 6-14 years old shows the prevalence of obesity ranging between five per cent and 11 per cent⁴, and in the Philippines rates of 12 per cent have been recorded.⁵

Temporal trends can also be noted. In Malaysia, obesity has increased from one per cent in 1990 to six per cent in 1997 among 13-17 year olds.⁶ In Japan, the prevalence of obesity among nine year old boys increased from 2.9 per cent in 1970 to 9.7 per cent in 1997, while rates for girls increased from 3.4 per cent to eight per cent over the same time period. Obesity brings in its train a host of health problems, both physical and psychological. The long-term prognosis is poor health with a high adult risk of early heart disease, certain cancers, diabetes and premature death. These can no longer be referred to

as "Western diseases". It has been projected on a global basis that by 2020, 60 per cent of the burden of chronic diseases will occur in less-industrialised countries. A recent World Health Organisation (WHO) report has highlighted that cardiovascular diseases are even now more numerous in India and China than in all the economically developed countries in the world added together. The incidence of diabetes is also on the increase and is expected to rise by 20 per cent world-wide in the next two decades. The global increase in diabetes will partly be due to increasing trends towards obesity, unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles. South East Asia is witnessing the fastest spread of the epidemic, and in India and China the incidence is projected to rise by 50 per cent by 2025.⁷ The top 10 countries in numbers of people with diabetes are India, China, USA, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Brazil, Italy and Bangladesh. In developed countries most people with diabetes are above the age of retirement, while in developing countries those most frequently affected are aged between 35 and 64.⁸

The increase in diet-related diseases has gone hand in hand with a trend known as the "nutrition transition". Until the mid-1950s, poverty-related malnutrition was the major problem in Asia. The primary concern was to ensure adequate energy intakes and prevention or control of dietary deficiency diseases. Today, nutrition problems in Asia cover the entire spectrum from deficiency disease to excess. Since the 1960s, there has been a major shift in the structure of the global diet marked by the uncoupling of the classic relationship between incomes and fat intakes. Global availability of cheap vegetable oils and fats has resulted in greatly increased fat consumption among low-income nations. Wealthy industrialised nations in North America and the European Union spend hefty sums of money to encourage their citizens to replace dietary fats with a simpler diet based on grains,

vegetables, and fruit. Paradoxically, developing nations use their growing incomes to replace their traditional diets, rich in fibres and grains, with diets that include a greater proportion of fats and caloric sweeteners. As the nutrition transition proceeds, diets typically become more diverse, with the traditional root vegetables and coarse grains replaced by rice and wheat, which are in turn supplemented or replaced by meat and milk products, fresh vegetables and fruit. But more varied diets generally contain an increased proportion of dietary fats and sweeteners.⁹

As the food and drink markets in Western Europe and North America reach saturation levels, multinational suppliers are increasingly looking elsewhere to achieve or improve profitability. The Developing World has become the new target. Foreign investment is funding the increased production of fatty and sugary foods as well as providing the marketing support for these products. Frequent exposure to marketing messages, along with changes in social circumstances, such as children’s increasingly independent spending power, thus contribute to the creation of a nutritionally “obesogenic” environment.

For every US\$1 the WHO spends on trying to improve the nutrition of the world’s population, US\$500 is spent by the food industry on promoting processed foods. The world food-industry-advertising budget was estimated at US\$40 billion in 2001.¹⁰ The chart below indicates the big spenders of television advertising in the UK for 2003.

Table 1: Who Spends Most on TV Adverts

1. Nestle (cereals, chocolate) £43m
2. Kellogg (cereals) £30m
3. Coca-Cola (drinks) £26m
4. Masterfoods (chocolate) £25m
5. Unilever Bestfoods (snacks, ready meals) £23m
6. Unilever Ice-cream and Frozen Foods £23m
7. Wrigley (chewing gum, mouth fresheners) £16m
8. Walkers (crisps) £16m
9. Proctor and Gamble (coffee, snacks) £11m
10. Ferrero (chocolate) £11m

Source: Nielsen Media Research quoted in The Times (UK), Feb 7, 2004.

The results of our survey revealed that among the six countries, the consumption of soft drinks was lowest in India where only 26 per cent of children and 18 per cent of parents consumed soft drinks weekly. This leaves room for a huge increase in sales, which may explain the overwhelming increase in advertisement for soft drinks in India over the past few years. The Ad Watch Club of Mumbai Grahak Panchayat monitored the number of soft drink advertisements on various television channels in India for a period of four years. In 1997 there were 5,172 minutes spent on soft drink advertising a year, while in 2000 this had gone up to 30,000 minutes.

The advertising industry continues to claim that advertising is an “innocuous” part of daily life and that watching advertisements cannot make you fat. But the affirmation is simplistic. Experimentally, it remains very difficult to measure the direct impact of advertising as it is impossible to eliminate all other possible variables. However, the escalating investment into food advertising aimed at children demonstrates just how much effect they have and are hoping to have on consumer behaviour.

Endnotes:

¹ Worldwatch Institute (2000), Chronic hunger and obesity epidemic eroding global progress, Worldwatch Institute press release February 4 2000. <http://www.worldwatch.org/press/news/2000/02/04> (accessed on May 5, 2004).

² WHO (2003), Obesity and Environment Fact sheet 02 http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/gs_obesity.pdf (accessed on May 5, 2004).

³ Ismail, M and Tan, C. (1998) Prevalence of obesity in Malaysia, Country report at the regional advisory board meeting on obesity, August 1998, Manila, Philippines.

⁴ Ito, K and Murata, M (1999), Diagnostic criteria of childhood obesity, Japanese Journal of Pediatrics Vol 52 (supplement), pages 1182-96.

⁵ International Diabetes Institute (2000) The Asia-Pacific perspective: Redefining obesity and its treatment. http://www.idi.org.au/downloads/obesity_report.pdf (accessed on May 6, 2004).

⁶ *Ibid.*

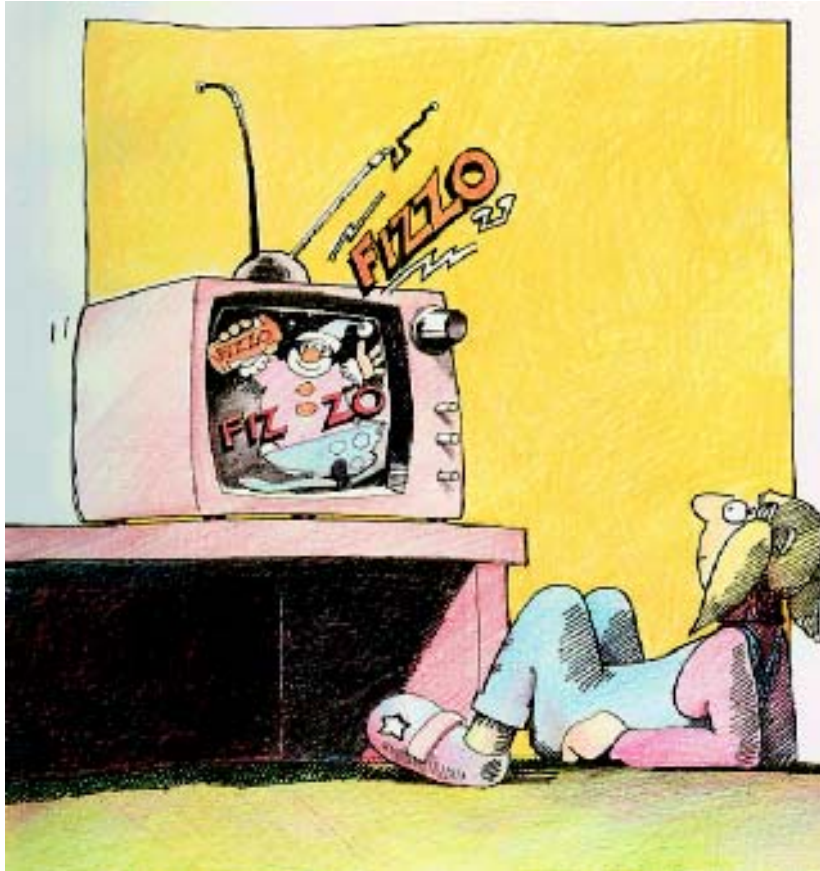
⁷ *International Diabetes Federation (2003) Diabetes Atlas.*

⁸ WHO/International Diabetes Foundation (2004), Diabetes action now: An initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Diabetes Federation. <http://www.who.int/diabetes/actionnow/en/DANbooklet.pdf> (accessed on May 7, 2004).

⁹ Drewnowski, A. and Popkin, B. (1997), The nutrition transition: New trends in the global diet. *Nutrition Reviews* 55(2).

¹⁰ Millstone, E. and Lang, T. (2003), *The atlas of food: who eats what, where and why.* London. Earthscan.

II. The power of television



Source: Australian Consumers' Association, "I KNOW WHAT ADS ARE", 1986.

Television has been labelled as a powerful variable in the early onset of obesity. Through television, advertisers can reach and manipulate the minds of a whole spectrum of consumers. We underestimate the powerful influence of the millions of televised images registered by children everyday. We no longer fear the dangers of idolatry; we have forgotten the power of images to confine our thoughts to the merely finite dimension of what can be seen. Advertising firms thrive on our susceptibility to be swayed through images and soon came to prey upon the heightened vulnerability of children who are even more sensitive to such visual cues.

Our research showed that most children and parents watch between two and four hours of television on weekdays. Children and parents in India and Pakistan appear to watch the least (with only three per cent watching in excess of six hours a day), while households in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia watch a lot more. During weekends, television viewing rates go up for both parents and children in all countries. According to the survey, 20 per cent of Indonesian children and 15 per cent of Filipino children watch six to eight hours of television a day during this time.

Television viewing reaches an overwhelming high during school vacations. The results from our survey showed that Malaysian children watch the most television over this time, 30 per cent of them watching over eight hours a day compared to only two per cent of Pakistani children watching in excess

Table 2: Percentage of children and parents watching over eight hours of television a day during vacations

Country	Percentage watching >8 hours	
	Children	Parents
India	10	3
Indonesia	16	12
Malaysia	30	11
Pakistan	2	—
Philippines	18	10
S. Korea	10	3

of eight hours. This would expose them to an enormous amount of food advertising over any one day.

There are two primary mechanisms by which television viewing contributes to obesity. It reduces energy expenditure from displacement of physical activity but it also increases dietary energy intake, either during viewing or as a result of advertising. One study showed significant changes over a period of seven months in the Body Mass Index (BMI)¹¹, tricep skinfold thickness, waist circumference and waist-to-hip ratio of children whose access to television was limited.¹² A famous study in the USA on the correlation between television viewing and obesity showed that during adolescence, the prevalence of obesity increased by two per cent for every extra hour of television viewed.¹³ Another convincing study measured the specific contribution of food advertising. The use of detailed television viewing diaries enabled a calculation of the extent to which each subject was exposed specifically to food advertising rather than simply the amount of time the subject spent watching television in general. The study found that the greater a child's food advertising exposure, the more frequent his or her snacking and the lower his or her nutrient efficiency.¹⁴

Because of the amount of television they watch, children are thus exposed to an overwhelming amount of advertising. The European Union Television with Frontiers Directive set maximum limits on advertising time, which cannot exceed 15 per cent of daily transmission time with a limit of 12 minutes in any hour.¹⁵ In Asia, there is still too little regulation controlling the programme to advertising ratio especially during children's programmes. And while channels may abide "general rules", often the number of advertisements per programme is largely dependent on the popularity of the show.¹⁶

Table 3: Advertising time per hour of children's programme

Country	Minutes of advertising per hour
India	15
Indonesia	15
Malaysia	20
Pakistan	6-9
Philippines	20
South Korea	6
EU recommendation	12

The highest advertising to programme ratios are found in Malaysia and the Philippines, where for every 30 minute programme, 10 minutes are spent on advertisements, which works out to a little more than 30 per cent of the programme time. The 30 per cent of Malaysian children watching over eight hours of television a day during vacations would therefore be exposed to over two and a half hours of advertising. In the Philippines, during early evening cartoons or programmes that capture children in their target demographics, the ratio between advertisements and programmes can go up to 50 per cent. South Korea on the contrary possesses the strictest regulation on the advertising to programme ratio. Time restrictions on children's television programmes are the same as for general television programmes, which is 10 per cent of the total programme time and 10 per cent less than the European Union recommendation.

Food advertising

The commercialisation of children's television is one of several concerns raised by child health professionals regarding the impact of television on children's well-being. Our survey revealed that while in South Korea food advertisements made up only 25 per cent of all advertising during children's programmes, in India 40-50 per cent of children's advertisements were about food. In Pakistan and the Philippines it varied between 50 and 75 per cent, and in Malaysia food advertisements made up 70 per cent of all advertising during children's television programmes. Foods dominate children's advertising, and a recent report indicates that the diet advertised to children contrasts strongly with the nationally recommended diet.¹⁷ The overwhelming majority of food advertising aimed at children is for foods and beverages high in sugars, fat and/or salt.

Food advertising has long been proposed as a candidate for the association between body fat (adiposity) and television viewing. In the Philippines, McDonald's, Jollibee and Nestle are the biggest sponsors of food advertisements. The most frequently advertised products were all low in nutritive value - from cheese spreads (Cheez Whiz) and Kraft Eden Cheese, to various fast food chains and confectionery such as Chocko-Chocko and Yum-Yum wafer sticks. Other products included instant noodles and cereals high in added sugar such as Koko Krunch. In India, Coca Cola, Pepsi Co, Britannia and Parle join Nestle as the major sponsors of food advertisements, promoting soft drinks, biscuits and other confectionery. Our survey also probed parents and children about which advertisements they found the most memorable. This form of advertisement recall revealed the extent of food advertising for energy-dense micronutrient-poor junk food. Across all six countries, soft drink, fast food and chocolate commercials ranked high,

closely followed by advertisements for instant noodles and ghee (clarified butter), oil and butter advertisements in the case of Pakistan.

This highlights the growing gap between the diet promoted through advertising and that which, is recommended by dieticians. This discrepancy needs to be addressed through legislative measures, especially considering the evidence that dietary habits are formed at a young age. Appetite and hunger is the product of a battle between internal as well as external cues. It is important to remember that the majority of people choose *foods*, not energy or other nutrients, in their dietary selections. Learning mechanisms play a vital role in the acquisition of food likes and dislikes in childhood. For example, overweight parents often raise their children in environments where fatty foods are easily accessible. In this manner, repeated exposure to high-fat foods is likely to encourage a “taste” for them.¹⁸ This goes against the wildly held belief that willpower overrides physiological mechanisms of hunger and satiety, a belief that finds itself deep-rooted in the Cartesian mind/body dualism of Western culture. In this manner, with the development of will and consciousness, and the ability to make choices, the developing child possesses a complex of cognitive factors with which to control food intake. However this is not as straightforward as it seems. Critical judgement is not fully developed in young children and the powerful influence of advertising is making it harder for parents to act as the main guide to their eating habits.

In the light of this, the WHO has come to the conclusion that although the evidence that the heavy marketing of junk food to young children causes obesity is near equivocal, the heavy investment into such marketing attests indirectly to its power. Consequently, food advertising has been labelled as a “probable” cause of child obesity and has thus become a potential target for intervention.¹⁹

Endnotes:

- ¹¹ The BMI is a measurement of the relative percentages of fat and muscle mass in the human body, in which weight in kilograms is divided by height in meters and the result used as an index of obesity.
- ¹² Robinson, T.N. (1999), Reducing children’s television viewing to prevent obesity: a randomised controlled trial, *JAMA* 282, pages 1561-7.
- ¹³ Dietz W, Gortmaker S. (1985), Do we fatten our children at the TV set? Obesity and television viewing in children and adolescents, *Pediatrics* 75, pages 807-812.
- ¹⁴ Bolton, R. (1983), Modeling the impact of television food advertising on children’s diets in Leigh, J and Martin Jr C (eds), *Current issues and research in advertising*, Ann Arbor, MI: Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan, pages 173-199.
- ¹⁵ Antal, S. (1999), *Easy Targets: A survey of food and toy advertising to children in four Central European Countries*, Consumers International.
- ¹⁶ Consumer organisations which facilitated the project.
- ¹⁷ Hasting, G et al (2003), *Review of the research on the effects of food promotion to children*, Final Report. Food Standards Agency London.
- ¹⁸ Johnson, S.L., McPhee, L. and Birch, L.L. (1991), Conditioned preferences: young children prefer flavours associated with high dietary fat. *Physiology and Behaviour*, Vol 50: pages 1245-51.
- ¹⁹ WHO/FAO (2003), *Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Disease*, Technical Report Series 916, WHO: Geneva http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/who_fao_expert_report.pdf (accessed May 6, 2004).

III. Children and food advertising



Source: <http://www.junkfoodnews.com/brotherbear.jpg>



John
Michael
Yanson

Source:
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep00/images/advertising.jpg>

The explosion of children’s advertising occurred during the 1980s. This was fuelled by efforts to increase not only the then current trends but also future consumption. Young children are increasingly the target of advertising and marketing because of the amount they spend themselves, the influence they have on their parents’ spending (the “pester power”) and because of the money they are projected to spend as future consumers if brand loyalty is nurtured from childhood. “Cradle to grave” tactics seems to be the strategy of choice for today’s multi-million dollar corporations who have set their sights on the wallets and minds of kids.²⁰

Creating brand conscious babies

The importance of children as consumers cannot be underestimated. They have their own money to spend but they also have considerable ability to

Creating Brand Conscious Babies

- At six months of age, the same age they are imitating simple sounds like “ma-ma,” babies are forming mental images of corporate logos and mascots.
- According to recent marketing industry studies, a person’s “brand loyalty” may begin as early as age two.
- At three years of age, before they can read, one out of five American children is already making specific requests for brand-name products.
- Experts say a lifetime customer in the US may be worth US\$100,000 to a retailer

Source: www.newdream.org/campaign/kids/facts.html

influence family purchases. In addition, advertisers recognise children as the teenage and adult shoppers of the future and hence will try and instil brand loyalty from an early age, even for products with little immediate interest for children. This is what led the Chief Executive Officer of Prism Communications to state that “they aren’t children so much as what I would like to call ‘evolving consumers’ ”.²¹

Exploiting the vulnerable

Children, especially younger children, are more vulnerable and have the least cognitive defences against television advertising. Overweight or obese children may be even more sensitive to the emotional appeals in adverts associating confectionery with fun, health, happiness, and above all, personal enhancement.²² Advertising exploits individual insecurities, creates false needs and offers counterfeit solutions.²³ Brand identification allows people to buy into an artificial sense of identity. This is true at all ages but young children and teenagers may be particularly sensitive to these cues.

Consumer socialisation refers to the process of acquiring consumption-related knowledge, attitudes and skills. A large body of literature, primarily conducted in the USA in the 1970s, has documented this. The research concentrates on several key areas – children’s ability to discriminate between programming and advertising, their understanding of advertising intent, their recognition of bias and deception in advertising and their use of cognitive defences against advertising.²⁴ It has also been found that the ability to discriminate between advertisements and other programmes, as well as awareness of the intent of advertisement varied among children according to different variables including age, gender and parental influence.²⁵

Trying to measure how promotion influences general consumption is difficult. The choice of research methods is critical. Limitations in children's cognitive and social development must be accounted for. As children below a certain age often struggle to think in abstract terms, methods based on written or verbal investigation techniques are of limited value.²⁶ Children enjoy and remember advertisements but this does not necessarily mean that they have an impact on their behaviour.

Overall food promotion may have little influence on children's general perceptions of what constitutes a healthy diet, but it can in various contexts, have an effect on more specific types of nutritional knowledge.²⁷ Studies showed a much more definitive influence on food preferences, showing that children were more likely to choose an advertised brand than a non-advertised brand of the same product, hence giving strong evidence for the power of advertising. One survey found that at three years of age, before they can even read, one out of five American children is already making specific requests for brand-name products.²⁸ Research data is still lacking in Asia however.

Research has shown that children do understand the difference between advertising and editorial or programme content from the age of three. From around the age of five children begin to also understand the commercial intent of advertising - i.e. that it is trying to sell you something. By the age of seven or eight most children have an understanding of the persuasive nature of advertising. Full understanding increases with age, but before they are acting independently as purchasers, they comprehend that advertising is there to sell to them. A review commissioned by the United Kingdom Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concluded that children begin to distinguish advertising from programming in early childhood (around five to eight years old), though the distinction is based primarily on fundamental characteristics such as that commercials are shorter than programmes. Between the ages nine to 12, the majority of children are aware that commercials are about selling things, but not until early adolescence do they develop a complete understanding of the intent of advertising, such as profit motives.¹³ Thus many children lack the cognitive skills and maturity to deal with advertising and are vulnerable to its persuasive appeals.²⁹

Our survey showed that by and large children's views about advertisements were similar across all six countries. The majority of children believe television advertisements to be informative, and a third of children would desire their parents to be more like those shown in the advertisements. Children learn behaviours by imitating role models - parents, teachers, peers, siblings, but also television characters. This highlights the need for advertisers to be socially responsible in whatever messages they



Source: <http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/healtheducation/children.html>

wittingly or unwittingly convey through their advertisements. A limiting factor in our research however is that the age of the child respondents was not standardised across the six countries. Without a doubt this would have skewed the research data, as children of different ages are not equally as susceptible to advertising.

Malaysian children seem to appreciate advertisements the least out of the six countries.³⁰ 30 per cent claimed they were altogether useless compared to only eight per cent of South Korean children. This may be because Malaysian children watch the most television and may therefore get frustrated with the constant interruption of advertisements. Pakistanis, who watch the least television, appear to be great fans of advertising though. 78 per cent think advertisements are necessary and 73 per cent said they loved watching them. While 66 per cent did acknowledge that advertising increase the price of a product, 65 per cent of them still valued the informative content of advertisements on the product's features and quality. Pakistani children also seemed to be the most highly influenced by the advertising content - 44 per cent felt an inferiority complex after watching advertisements (compared to only 2 per cent of Indians, 7 per cent of Indonesians and 17 per cent of Malaysians) and 36 per cent wished their parents to be more like the models on television.

The ability to understand advertising is one of the most important prerequisites for the development of a critical understanding or questioning attitude towards advertising. It has thus been argued that advertising to children younger than 12 is therefore inherently unfair. In recent years, television advertisers have increased their efforts to target young child audiences (under the age of eight). All advertising to children too young to recognise the persuasive intent of such messages is by its nature exploitative. While it is impossible to protect this age group from all commercial exposure, it is pragmatic to restrict efforts by advertisers when they focus

Table 4: Percentage of children who indicated certain views on advertisements

Views about Advertisements	India	Indonesia	Malaysia	Pakistan	Philippines	South Korea
Advertisements update about new products	86	91	68	77	84	91
Advertisements are necessary	57	35	42	78	59	64
Love watching TV advertisements	62	61	33	73	68	62
Advertisements create artificial need	49	31	36	47	40	51
Advertisements inform about product quality/features	44	75	38	65	75	45
Advertisements increase the cost of the product	59	51	51	66	48	68

(The percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple responses.)

primarily, if not exclusively, on this uniquely vulnerable segment of the child population.

Children today are exposed to a wider range of influences, cultures and media than any other generation. Banning advertising during children's programming would not insulate children from commercial messages - they would still see products they like advertised in a positive light in shop windows. Should this also be restricted? A high level of parental control of television viewing may result in lower understanding of television advertising. The UK advertising industry actively promotes this awareness through the Food Advertising Unit's Parent Power publications and media-literacy initiatives such as Media Smart. Understanding the role of advertising and marketing is an essential part of growing up and becoming a citizen in a free market democracy. Children have to develop the ability to make critical comparisons and informed decisions.

Endnotes:

²⁰ Beder, S. (1998), Marketing to children. www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/sbeder/children.html (accessed Jan 21, 2004)

²¹ Zoglin, R. (1990), 'Is TV ruining our children?', Time 15 October 1990, Vol. 136

²² Lewis M.K and Hill A.J. (1998), Food advertising on British children's television: a content analysis and experimental study with 9-year olds. International Journal of Obesity Vol 22, pages 206-214.

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Source: <http://www.svcn.com/archives/cupertinocourier/02.27.02/gifs/cover-top-0209.jpg>

²⁴ Hastings et al (2003), Review of research on the effects of food promotion to children, Final Report, Food Standards Agency London.

²⁵ Bijmolt, T., Claasen, W. and Brus, B. (1998), Children's understanding of TV advertising: effects of age, gender, and parental influence. Journal of Consumer Policy Vol 21, pages 171-194.

²⁶ Hastings et al (2003), Review of research on the effects of food promotion to children, Final Report, Food Standards Agency London.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ McNeal, J and Yeh C-H (2003), "Born to Shop," American Demographics, June.

²⁹ Young, B. et al (1996), The Role of Television Advertising in Children's Food Choice, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, UK

IV. Marketing to kids: calculated child's play

Children's advertisements make use of formats and tools specifically designed to appeal to children. Animation, pace and fantasy are common in food advertisements, as are premium offers (free gifts) and statements about product quality.

Competition between brands is intense. Businesses are spending billions of dollars in marketing and merchandising to children via licensing, packaging and advertising and children's consumer research is at an all time high.³⁰ Developing countries are the fresh target of such advertising strategies and governments have yet to set up sufficient protective legislation to safeguard children from manipulation.

Marketing techniques

Multinational and domestic food companies, which promote energy-dense and low-nutrient foods and drink use highly effective marketing techniques to encourage regular consumption, repeat purchases and brand loyalty – especially amongst children. Familiar examples of such marketing include the use of collectable toys, games and contests, advertising and packaging featuring cartoon characters, food shaped and coloured to be especially appealing to children, and the use of television advertising and catchy jingles. One of Burger King's most effective strategies is to offer free toys with its children's meals. In 1999 Burger King endorsed a *Telletubbies* Burger King promotion which featured 50,000,000 *Telletubbies* dolls. The promotion doubled sales of Burger King's Kids Club Meals in the US.³¹ Soft drink and fast food companies also focus their attention (and advertising budgets) on the teenage market, through linkups with the most attractive and popular movie stars, pop singers and sports celebrities. Pepsi has just teamed up with Beyonce Knowles, Pink and Britney Spears³² and McDonald's latest "I'm lovin' it" campaign had Justin Timberlake singing along to the chorus. Executives close to McDonald's estimate the Timberlake deal to be worth nearly US\$6 million. Mr. Light, McDonald's global chief marketing officer explained that "Justin Timberlake is absolutely connected to today's consumer attitudes and trends. His cultural relevance is right in tune with McDonald's new direction".³³ Recently, McDonald's signed on pro- basketball star Yao Ming to a multiyear endorsement deal. The deal was aimed at expanding McDonald's global reach (especially the China market) and to counter negative publicity.³⁴ So powerful is the marketing impact of link-ups with children's television characters and movies that some advertisements for McDonald's do not mention the food at all. They show only the toy available in the latest collecting offer.³⁵

But in order to seep into foreign cultures, multinational marketing also has to be fine-tuned to meet the needs of local consumers. Hence, *localisation* has become the buzzword in the food and beverage business. It refers to the adaptation to the local palate, the creation of fusion food to facilitate the infiltration of Western food products. Many hope it's the key to increasing turnovers, especially in emerging markets like Asia. The sheer diversity of the region, in terms of culture, language and living standards, has forced global companies to adapt different marketing strategies to appeal to different consumers. The number of McDonald's restaurants in Asia rose from 1,458 to 6,748 between 1991 and 2001. This was accompanied by well-researched locally sensitive marketing strategies to appeal to the vast array of cultural restraints and local palates. McDonald's has been surprisingly successful at this despite being heavily criticised for homogenising tastes across the world. Usually in Asia about a third of the menu is made up of dishes you won't find anywhere else like the *Prosperity Burger* in Malaysia during Chinese New Year, or *Pizza McPuffs* in India. McDonald's started localising its menu in the early 1980s before "fusion" became a culinary catchphrase. It introduced the *Teriyaki Burger* in 1989 in Japan and *Fried Chicken* in 1988 in Malaysia. Even the standard cheeseburgers and *BigMacs* are tweaked to appeal to local taste buds - spiced up a bit in Malaysia, sweetened in the Philippines. Pizza Hut has *kung pao* chicken toppings in Taiwan and *kimchi* pizza in Korea, while Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) serves soups and dumplings in China.³⁶ The food advertisements follow the same trend. At the level of cultural signification, McDonald's introduces local emotive signs in the naming of some of its food items. For example, a chicken burger was marketed as *Kampong* burger in Singapore, a direct reference to the villages where most Singaporeans lived prior to being resettled into high-rise public housing estates.

Advertising and pester power

Children play an important role in the consumer market by influencing their parents' purchases. Gone are the days where "mom-power" outweighed marketing power. Our survey asked parents what factors influenced their buying decisions when it came to food. The results can be seen in the following table:

Although the vast majority of parents answered that they based their food purchases on their personal judgement, more than 50 per cent of parents in all the countries apart from South Korea said their children were an important influence. The

Table 5: Influence on parents' buying decisions

Factor influencing buying decision	India	Indonesia	Malaysia	Pakistan	Philippines	South Korea
Self	75	75	53	76	93	79
Spouse / adult family member	37	42	41	72	49	44
Children	51	58	52	65	66	25
Advertisement	—	33	—	29	33	44
Friends & neighbours	7	5	23	4	24	33
Expert's Advice	6	3	8	10	7	12

(The percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple responses.)

advertising firms know that if they convince the children, all they need do is sit back and watch the children convince the parents.

The parents were also asked to list the three main reasons for buying a food product. Out of the six countries, only South Korea rated health needs, family's demand and price as the most influential factors on purchase. Indian, Malaysian and Pakistani parents gave "child's demand" as the primary reason for buying a particular product.

Parents may be primarily responsible for feeding their children but the aggressive marketing of food products to children is making their efforts to feed their children a healthy diet very difficult. Parental authority is undermined by the wide discrepancies between what parents tell their children is healthy to eat and what marketers tell children is desirable to eat. From the survey it appears that although South Koreans seemed to be the most informed in terms of healthy diets, they could still not fully control their children's diets. Indeed, while only 17 per cent of parents consume ready meals weekly, 32 per cent of the children do so. Similarly, 41 per cent of parents drink soft drinks weekly, while 71 per cent of the children do so. The same pattern is true for healthy foods. Again, even though 87 per cent of South Korean parents consume fruit juice weekly, only 57 per cent of children do.

Our survey also aimed to gain an insight into how parental denial affects children and how parents in the different countries deal with "the nag factor". This revealed some interesting cultural differences. While 75 per cent of Filipino children would feel disappointed if their parents denied their request, in Pakistan most children would feel angry, and 27 per cent of Malaysian children would feel ashamed in the company of their friends. Parents were also asked about how they thought children must feel when their requests were denied, and 21 per cent of Malaysian parents believed their children must hate them under such circumstances. Correspondingly 46 per cent of Malaysian parents and 36 per cent of

children said they would get the product anyway. This reveals either a lack of parental control on the part of Malaysian parents or a tendency to spoil their children.

'Fruitamins' and complex-carbohydrates: how companies skew the science

Consumers often report confusion over basic nutritional principles and over the properties of specific foods. There are many possible explanations for this confusion, but advertising is one contributory cause. Precisely because foods and drinks in recent years have increasingly been promoted on health platforms, advertising has become an important influence on the popular understanding of nutrition. In many ways, this educational role of advertising has been positive, contributing to the wider public awareness of the nutritional problems with our current diet. But there are negative consequences as well. The claims and counterclaims of rival manufacturers about the health virtues of their own products and the health risks of competitors, all apparently supported by evidence, create a sense of dispute within nutrition. The battle between butter and margarine manufacturers over the different fats in their products and their effects on heart disease is a good example.³⁷ In such advertisements, nutritional science appears to be supporting incompatible claims. This is one major source of consumer confusion.

Mars uses its website to display fatty, sugary *Mars* bars amidst pictures of blueberries, strawberries, grapes and apples to promote its message that "certain chocolates and cocoa may provide cardiovascular health benefits" as a valuable source of antioxidants.³⁸ The British Soft Drinks Association states that soft drinks provide the vital fluids our bodies need with some also providing contributions to the various vitamins and minerals we need every day.³⁹ But why make some of them so sugary then? Just one bottle of *Lucozade* or *Ribena* exceeds a child's daily recommended sugar intake⁴⁰ and how many

adults would put five sugars in their tea? One study showed that for each additional can or glass of sugar-sweetened drink that children consumed everyday, their obesity risk jumped by 60 per cent.⁴¹ And yet, an International Life Science Institute publication on the health effects of sugar consumption states that “intake of sugars is inversely associated with the prevalence of obesity” and comments on the need to research the positive role of glucose in “facilitating mental processes”.⁴²

The root of the problem lies in the selective use of scientific evidence and the exaggeration of new research, creating an inaccurate impression of nutritional science. While all advertising relating to nutrition and health should have a scientific basis, most advertisements directed at ordinary consumers have to be expressed in non-technical language. However, many advertisements for foods and drinks use this to their advantage, sometimes even inventing terms such as “fruitamins” to suggest greater virtues than reason or evidence would allow. It is easy to persuade the health conscious consumer through loose phrasings like “packed with vitamins” or “contains the protein/calcium necessary for building healthy bodies”. Logos may also be used to add credibility to health claims. *Kellogg’s* for example have designed a new set of symbols indicating that their cereals are good for bones, concentration, physical energy, a healthy heart or low in fat. “*Frosties*” for example carry the logos for physical energy, concentration and healthy bones, although they are 40 per cent sugar and the healthy bones claim is based on you eating the cereal with milk.

Our survey highlighted that when it came to breakfast cereal, which is highly marketed to children and is one of Malaysia’s biggest food product imports, 79 per cent of children identified cereals as part of a healthy diet. Only 17 per cent of Malaysian parents on the other hand, accustomed to their traditional breakfasts made up of rice and noodles, shared the same belief. In South Korea, 54 per cent of children thought of cereals as healthy and 41 per cent consume breakfast cereals weekly. Only 33 per cent of the parents deemed it to be healthy, however, and correspondingly only 17 per cent consumed it weekly. Despite the fact that many children associate breakfast cereal with a healthy diet, most cereals on the market are actually heavily loaded in sugar.

In the following picture of six *Nestlé* cereals available in Malaysia, four are high in added sugar and yet *Nestlé’s* slogan in Malaysia is “Good food. Good life. Nourishing Malaysia”.

Food products should not bear unsubstantiated, misleading or meaningless claims, including claims concerning the nutritional value of foods. *Nestlé’s* Malaysian website advertises *Milo*, an instant chocolate drink, poor in nutritious value as “a health



Source: www.nestle.com.my

food drink ... fortified with vitamins and minerals”. The manufacturers boast that “in fact *MILO*® with Actigen-E now contains a unique combination of vitamins and minerals to help energise and bring out the champion in you. In Actigen-E, there are enriched levels of B Vitamins and higher levels of Vitamin C, which increases the absorption of iron for better energy management. There’s also more calcium and magnesium to help optimise the release of energy”.

Consumers often find it hard to see through the marketing tactics on packaging. A good example of this is *Marigold’s* juice *Peel fresh* marketed in Malaysia and Singapore with the following slogan “Any fresher, you’ll have had to peel it yourself”. However, the actual fruit content isn’t indicated on the packaging and it has sugar as its second most important ingredient after fruit concentrate. *Nestlé* takes it further, promoting its high sugar synthetic fruit juices as “premium quality juice drinks made from *real* fruit concentrate”. As opposed to - fake fruit concentrate?

Most consumers poorly understand the concept of “empty calories”. Fast foods including cola drinks are known to be of high glycemic index, i.e. foods having excess sugar with no nutritive value. Empty calorie foods tend to increase the blood sugar level instantly and abnormally, but the body is unable to retain this excess sugar and so blood sugar levels drop to below normal. Such a rise and fall in the blood sugar levels create ‘cravings’ for more sugar.

Our study showed that worryingly 73 per cent of Pakistani children perceive soft drinks to be healthy and 40 per cent of Filipino parents and 63 per cent of children believe fast food to be fit for regular consumption. In the Philippines, 80 per cent of the children interviewed and 71 per cent of the parents said they drank soft drinks at least once a week. In South Korea, 71 per cent of parents and children also consume soft drinks on a weekly basis. When given the choice between several alternative beverages, 71 per cent of Filipino adults said that when thirsty they would substitute water with a soft drink.

Our survey revealed important differences between the six countries in terms of what food products they deemed to be fit for frequent consumption and what junk foods they consumed on a weekly basis. In Indonesia and Pakistan, 85 per cent of children and 56 per cent of adults, regard cakes and biscuits as

healthy for frequent consumption. The Philippines however appears to be more inclined towards fast food. Pakistani families indicated a preference for ready-made meals and interestingly the survey also showed that they were most likely to recall food advertisements for instant noodles. Just like with the chicken and the egg, it is difficult to conclude as to which came first – whether the preference for ready-made meals came before the instant noodle advertisements or the other way round. Nonetheless, it still highlights the link between advertising and consumer preference and behaviour, even if the cause and effect are unclear.

However, knowing what is healthy and what is not is by no means a direct indication of actual consumption patterns. A recent survey found that 10-12 year old children in Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Manila did have a basic understanding of the role of macro-nutrients (e.g. energy sources) and micro-nutrients (such as iron and calcium), as well as some of the primary sources of these. The bad news is that they found that such knowledge does not seem to prevent childhood overweight and obesity. One in four of the children surveyed were overweight or obese, and amongst the boys, this figure rose to almost one in three.⁴³

Our survey clearly highlights the same disparity between knowledge and behaviour. From the survey results, South Korean families seem to be the most well informed in terms of what constitutes a healthy diet. The majority of both children and adults responded “No” to whether cakes and biscuits, confectionery, ice cream, ready meals, fast food and soft drinks were fit for frequent consumption. Weekly consumption profiles however, demonstrate that parents are unable to adequately regulate their children’s food intake in accordance with these principles.

Endnotes:

- ³⁰ Dalmeny, K. (2003), Food marketing: the role of advertising in child health, *Consumer Policy Review*, Vol 13 (1).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Levins, H. (2004), Pepsi’s three-minute Britney Spears ‘Gladiator’ ad., AdAGE.com Online Edition <http://www.adage.com/news.cms?newsId=39726> (accessed May 7, 2004).
- ³³ MacArthur, K. (2003), Pop star leads McDonald’s global ad campaign launch, AdAGE.com Online Edition <http://www.adage.com/news.cms?newsId=38611> (accessed May 7, 2004).
- ³⁴ McDonalds eyes image and China market with Yao Ming Hire, AdAge.com Online Edition February 12, 2004 <http://www.adage.com> (accessed May 7, 2004).
- ³⁵ Dalmeny, K. (2003), Food marketing: the role of advertising in child health, *Consumer Policy Review*, Vol 13 (1).
- ³⁶ Yoon, S. (2001), ‘Look who’s going native’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb 1 2001.
- ³⁷ Margarine, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margarine#The_Trans_fat_issue (accessed May 10, 2004).
- ³⁸ Mars website, www.cocoapro.com (accessed May 7, 2004).
- ³⁹ British Softdrink Association website; <http://www.britishsoftdrinks.com/htm/index1.htm> (accessed May 7, 2004).
- ⁴⁰ The Food Commission (2004), Sweets in a bottle, *The Food Magazine*, Issue 64, January/March 2004, page 21.
- ⁴¹ Ludwig, D.S., Peterson, K., Gortmaker, S (2001), Relationship between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: A prospective observational analysis, *The Lancet* 357, pages 505-8.
- ⁴² The International Life Science Institute (ISLI) was founded in 1978 by food companies Heinz, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, General Foods, Kraft and Proctor & Gamble.
- ⁴³ The Asian Food Information Centre, FFA, Issue 16 November 2002 - Focus on Tweenie Health, website: <http://www.afic.org/> (Accessed on May 12, 2004).

Regulating food ads



Source:
http://www.oneworld.net/penguin/pollution/junk_food.gif

Everybody would agree that children require a certain degree of protection in society. However, the extent to which they should or can be shielded from its commercial aspects is contentious. Children today are exposed to advertising across various media, as well as promotional offers, branded packaging, in-store displays and other sales techniques. Some feel that children need to be protected from the most visible by-product of this commercial world – television advertising.

Self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the process whereby commercial food marketers participate in and are responsible for their own regulation. A prime example is the International Code of Advertising Practice, issued by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The guidelines state that:

- Because of the particular vulnerability of children, if there is any likelihood of advertisements being confused with editorial or programme material, they should be clearly labelled “advertisement” or identified in an equally effective manner;
- Advertisements should not undermine social values when suggesting that possession or use of

a product alone will give the child a physical, social or psychological advantage over other children of the same age, or that non-possession of this product would have the opposite of this effect;

- Advertisements should not undermine the authority, responsibility, judgement or tastes of parents, taking into account the current social values;
- Advertisements should not include any direct appeal to children to persuade others to buy the advertised product for them; and
- Price indication should not be such as to lead children to an unreal perception of the true value of the product, for instance by using the word “only”. No advertisement should imply that the advertised product is immediately within reach of every family budget.

Many of these guidelines have been adopted in national guidelines across Asia but children in these countries are still hounded by advertisements. However, actual food advertising laws in the Asian region are very lax as compared to such laws in European countries. In Norway, Austria and the Flemish part of Belgium, no advertising is allowed around children’s programmes. Australia does not allow advertisements during programmes for pre-school children.

All the countries in the survey have legislative frameworks governing advertising in general, and most have guidelines for advertising to children in particular. The Philippines and South Korea even have laws pertaining to the advertisement of fast food and confectionery. Reprimand and warnings by way of punishment for advertising violations exist in all the countries, but the extent of the sanctions varies among the countries. Only the Philippines have a provision for the suspension and subsequent cancellation of advertising licenses.

Table 6: Penalties for advertisement violations

Country	Reprimand	Public apology	Withdrawal of ad	Fine	Imprisonment	Suspension and retraction of licence
India	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Indonesia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Malaysia	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Pakistan	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Philippines	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
South Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Table 7: Parents' recommendations concerning advertisements during children's programming

Recommendations	India	Indonesia	Malaysia	Pakistan	Philippines	S. Korea
Reduce the frequency of ads on TV	72	63	54	92	54	41
Make health protection messages in food-ads mandatory	66	66	53	98	78	28

Recommendations

1) Restrict advertising for young children under the age of 12

This portion of the population is exceptionally vulnerable to being manipulated by advertisements. For this reason, Sweden bans advertising for children under 12 years, arguing that if children are not fully aware of the purpose of advertising and do not have the ability to question it critically, advertising should not be addressed to them. Similar policies have also been implemented in Australia, Canada and the UK.

2) Reduce the number of junk food ads during children's programming

Food habits are formed at a young age and are difficult to change. For this reason, repetitive exposure to adverts encouraging overeating, large portions, and the consumption of foods high in sugar, salt and saturated fat need to be cut down. The vast majority of parents in all six countries of our survey recommended that the sheer quantity of advertising be reduced apart from in South Korea, where the number is already low. In Pakistan 71 per cent of parents were of the opinion that there should be no advertisements five minutes before, after and during children's television programmes.

South Korean legislation limits its advertisement ratio to 10 per cent of programme time and imposes a maximum limit of 30 seconds per advertisement. The EU proposes a maximum limit of 12 minutes of advertising per hour of programming. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland recommends that advertising as a whole and not just individual advertisements should be monitored and further, that the amount of advertising to children, by types or category of food advertised, should be regulated.

3) Identification and separation of advertising

Given the ambiguity surrounding the ability of children to comprehend the nature and purpose of advertising, there is a critical need for advertising to be clearly distinguishable from other programme content. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, in its draft Children's Advertising Code, has required broadcasters to alert children when a commercial break is beginning and ending.⁴⁴

4) Improve the effectiveness of regulating bodies

In all six countries, piecemeal legislation exists alongside self-regulating codes. These are found to be neither adequate nor effective. All the countries surveyed have government regulatory mechanisms. Besides this, there are also independent regulatory mechanisms in Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea. On top of these, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines also have self-regulating mechanisms. Yet all six countries proclaimed these regulating bodies as not very effective. As present, India, Pakistan, Malaysia and the Philippines have a pre-vetting mechanism teamed up with a complaint mechanism. Indonesia advertising control is solely based on a complaint feedback mechanism. In all six countries punitive measures are taken against advertising regulation violations with varying degrees of severity, but only the Philippines has a provision for the suspension and subsequent retraction of advertising licenses. Rigorous enforcement of advertising regulations is necessary to ensure compliance and improve the effectiveness of regulatory bodies.

5) Monitor health messages in ads

Consumer awareness about diet and nutrition has largely improved over the past decade. However, advertisers know how to manipulate consumers and to use the ambiguity of scientific terms to distort the nutritional value of food and drink products. Health messages in advertisements and on packaging need to be monitored to eliminate misleading promotion.

For instance, products with high levels of added sugar should not be allowed to display the fact that they are 100 per cent fat free. Advertisements pertaining to health foods should not be allowed to show their nutritional claims being backed by individuals like doctors. The Food Sanitation Act in South Korea offers a useful model for such regulation, in covering labelling and exaggerated advertisements with regard to manufacturing method and quality of food additives, apparatus, containers and packaging. Labels or advertisements that might lead consumers to mistake a food product for medicine are banned.

6) Health messages should be made mandatory for advertisements promoting junk food

In Indonesia, the Law of Telecasting and the Regulation of Food Labelling and Advertising regulate television food advertisements. A special section deals with food advertising aimed at children. It states that advertisements of processed food, containing materials, which can disturb the growth and/or health of children, shall contain warnings about the negative impacts of the food. Cigarette packets now carry health messages warning about the dangers of smoking such as “smoking kills”, or the benefits of breast milk over formula milk, which is labelled as “no good for babies less than six months old”. It is time for junk food packaging and adverts to bear nutrition advice such as “should be consumed in moderation” or “should not be consumed in place of a balanced meal”.

There should also be warnings for parents stating that fast food is addictive and can harm their children’s health, causing problems like high-cholesterol and obesity. The manufacturer should also inform parents that it is inadvisable to let children below five years of age to drink soft drinks. Carbonated drinks and other food items with high sugar content should display health warnings for diabetics and children, that the product may be unhealthy for them, lead to tooth decay, obesity and health problems in adult life. The majority of parents in all countries surveyed (except for South Korea) believed that health protection messages should be made mandatory.

The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland is set to impose strong health warnings on unhealthy food advertisements. A toothbrush symbol on the screen to remind children of the implications for dental health should be shown in future advertisements for cakes, sweets, biscuits and chocolate, aimed at children. All fast food advertisements will have to be accompanied by announcements or a visual image stating that such food “should be eaten in moderation and as part of a balanced diet.”⁴⁵

7) Balanced diets should be actively promoted via advertising

Children’s advertising should support messages related to public health and human well-being as endorsed by government policies. In all six countries surveyed, there are common core food-based messages in the national nutrition guidelines.⁴⁶ Yet the diet actively promoted on television goes in direct opposition to these.

National dietary guidelines include recommendations to choose a diet composed of a wide variety of foods; eat enough food to meet bodily needs and maintain or improve body weight;

select foods that are safe to eat; and enjoy your food. Most of the guidelines are general and are food, rather than nutrition-based, with the exception of Singapore’s, which are quantitative and nutrient-specific. Some include advice on frequency of consumption or recommend specific amounts of different foods. Most guidelines stress increased intakes of fruits, vegetables, cereal, and dairy food to promote fibre, vitamin, and mineral intakes. The guidelines for more affluent Asian countries, such as Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Japan (and also for more affluent members of the population in Indonesia and India), emphasise moderation in fat, saturated fat, and/or simple sugars. These guidelines should be promoted wherever possible, from packaging to television advertisements. Malaysian radio has already taken steps towards this, periodically broadcasting nutrition advice.

8) Sponsorship

Popular cartoon and television characters are often licensed to appear on a vast range of children’s foods - usually aimed at toddlers or primary school children. So powerful is the marketing impact of link-ups with children’s television characters and movies that some advertisements for McDonald’s do not mention the food at all - they show only the toy in the current collecting offer. In reaction to this, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland has opined that celebrities and sports stars will not be allowed to promote food and drink products aimed at children from now on unless the advertisement is part of a “public health or education campaign”. Characters or personalities from children’s programmes will also be restricted from endorsing or advertising products or services.⁴⁷ The sponsorship of children’s programmes is permitted in the six countries surveyed. South Korea and the Philippines are the only two countries to have specific regulations pertaining to such sponsorship.

Endnotes:

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⁴⁶ Dwyer, J. et al (2002), Dietary guidelines in three regions of the world in Handbook of nutrition and food, CRC Press LLC.

⁴⁷ Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, The Children’s Advertising Code phase 3, 7, Diet and nutrition website http://62.231.40.117/adult/diet_nutrition.html (accessed May 7, 2004).

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