

The Ethics of Food and Beverage Advertising Targeted to Children in India: An Evaluation

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to evaluate food and beverage advertising targeted to children in India. We used content analysis to analyze television advertisements, websites and product packaging of leading brands of foods and beverages marketed in India. Based on our analysis, we suggest a set of guidelines for food marketing to children in India.

Childhood obesity has become a huge problem worldwide (Wilde, 2009). Obesity can contribute to a number of health risks such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and cancer (Palmer & Carpenter, 2006). In 2006, the Institute of Medicine released a report that linked obesity to food marketing (Moore & Rideout, 2007). Systematic reviews of research studies have indicated that food marketing communication changes preferences of children towards high fat, sugar or salt foods and results in increased consumption of less than healthy food items (Cairns et al, 2012). Manufacturers of foods and beverages spend billions of dollars and utilize a variety of techniques in marketing to children. The techniques employed include direct and indirect advertising, brand licensing, product placement, contests, promotions, in-school marketing, websites, social networking sites and advergaming (Linn and Novosat, 2008; Palmer & Carpenter, 2006).

The World Health Organization has recommended a co-regulatory approach involving statutory regulations on food marketing to children, self-regulation by industry, and monitoring of compliance by consumer groups (Hawkes, 2007). The WHO was particularly concerned about the growth of traditional and non-traditional food marketing techniques in middle and low-income countries. At present there are no statutory regulations in India governing marketing communications aimed at children. There is a set of self-regulation guidelines for advertising issued by the Advertising Standard Council of India (ASCI) which represents the media, advertising agencies and manufacturers. The ASCI guidelines on food and beverage advertising do not go far enough compared to regulations and guidelines in the EU and the US.

To understand the ground situation in India, we content analyzed television advertisements of 20 leading brands of foods and beverages marketed in India. We concentrated on advertisements on child focused TV channels. The study covered ads in seven product categories - snacks, cereals, biscuits, chocolates, fast foods, milk products and beverages. Our results indicate that about 95 percent of the ads did not mention the ingredients or nutritional value of the products and about 33 percent of the advertisements were promoting freebies with product purchase.

We analyzed the digital marketing initiatives of food and beverage brands and noticed all brands had a website. About 89 percent of the brands had official YouTube channels, and 83 percent were on Twitter and had a Facebook page. We found that the YouTube channel was only used for TV commercials, while the Facebook and Twitter pages had links for TV commercials, digital ads and engagement platforms. Only 61 percent of brands mentioned the ingredients or nutritional value on the website. Over one third of the websites had a dedicated section for children with games and other engagement activities.

The evaluation of product labels indicated that while all labels contained list of ingredients, nutrition information was indicated only on 77 percent of labels. Only 22 percent of product labels had a warning/caution/indication that they contained high sugar, salt and fat content. About 28 percent of labels had popular cartoon characters and

33 of labels had promotional messages regarding freebies.

We make several recommendations for marketing communication of food products directed to children in India. To start with, a full list of ingredients, nutritional information and calorific value of the product should be indicated on the product label. Foods high on sodium, sugar or fat should contain a warning message. Advertisements aimed at children should not be driven purely by freebies. There should be a ban on advertisements for foods high in trans-fat, sugar, and salt. Advertising should not be permitted at schools, nurseries, and on playgrounds. Digital marketing aimed at children should not have violent content. Privacy of the children should be protected and websites should seek parental approval before collecting any personal information from children. Parental approval should also be sought before children get to play or downloading paid applications and games.

Our study adds to the literature on marketing communication in emerging markets. The findings and recommendations are relevant for brand managers, advertising agencies, consumer groups, parents and policy makers. The study has some limitations, a small sample of brands in one country were analyzed through content analysis. Future research can gather opinions from stakeholders through interviews and surveys and can also examine links between food marketing communication, obesity and health risks in other developing countries.

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Keywords: *Marketing; children; food advertising; ethics; guidelines*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: The findings are useful for brand managers and advertising agencies who plan marketing communication aimed at children as well as for consumer groups and parents

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TRACK: Green Marketing/Sustainability