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Food Advertisements Boon or Bane: A Prevalence Study of Misleading Food Advertisements in India

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Advertisements influence food consumption behaviour of children as they are the easiest target for food promotional activities. Hence objective was to study the prevalence of misleading food advertisements in India.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted over a period of 30 days to assess the food related advertisements against the guidelines laid down by Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA 2006). A total of 1200 advertisements, 900 (75%) in TV, 120 (10%) in magazines and 180 (15%) in newspaper were reviewed against guidelines for advertisement in FSSA 2006.

Results: Prevalence of misleading food advertisements was found to be 60%. The average number of food related advertisements was 15 ± 3.55 per hour on television. Majority (90%) of these were for food items which are linked foods High in Fat, sugar and Salt (HFSS). Common reasons for non-compliance were: promotion of a food item with gift (57%), use of celebrity picture on package (19%), false claims (14%), appealing with cartoons (10%).

Conclusion: Prevalence of misleading food advertisements was high. This is a cause for concern as the same is an indirect contributory factor in increase in prevalence of obesity in children in our country.

Introduction

Advertising is a form of communication to promote a product and attract consumers. It is an integral part of business today and has seen a boom in recent times. As per Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), an advertisement is defined as 'Any audio or visual publicity, representation or pronouncement made by means of any light, sound, smoke, gas, print, electronic media, internet, or website and includes through any notice, circular, label, wrapper, invoice or other document' [1]. Media and advertisements play a major role in

changing the dietary patterns of people in any country. Advertising in itself is not a problem but when these advertisements are misleading and make false claims then they become a problem [2].

Advertisements equally influence food consumption behaviour of adults and children. Children are the easiest target for such promotional activities [3]. Various packaged food companies have targeted their sale of products to children by promotion through inclusion of gifts with the food item for example a toy, goggles, scale, bottle, lunch box etc. These gifts are often linked to their favourite cartoon character on television. Children often get attracted towards these items and hence force their parents to buy them. Moreover various Bollywood celebrities and sports stars also promote food items meant for children. Consumption of food items promoted by such advertisements has a definite impact on the eating patterns of children. Over a few decades there has been a rising trend of obesity and diabetes in children. Surprisingly, but a reality of today is that Type 2 Diabetes instead of Type 1 has become the main type of diabetes in children [4]. This increasing prevalence has been attributed mainly to unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity in children especially in urban areas. These children have access to Television and are persuaded by various misleading advertisements. Marketing companies often target children of working parents. These parents often try to compensate for spending less quality time by buying unhealthy food items which children insist. For some food items the parents themselves are influenced by the advertisement and actually believe that these food items will be beneficial for their children. Since advertising plays an important role in changing the dietary patterns of children, a study was planned to review the claims and appeals made by various food companies in their advertisements to persuade children to consume their products. With this background a study was planned to find the prevalence of misleading advertisements and their claims with respect to food items.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted over a period of 30 days continuously to assess the food related advertisements

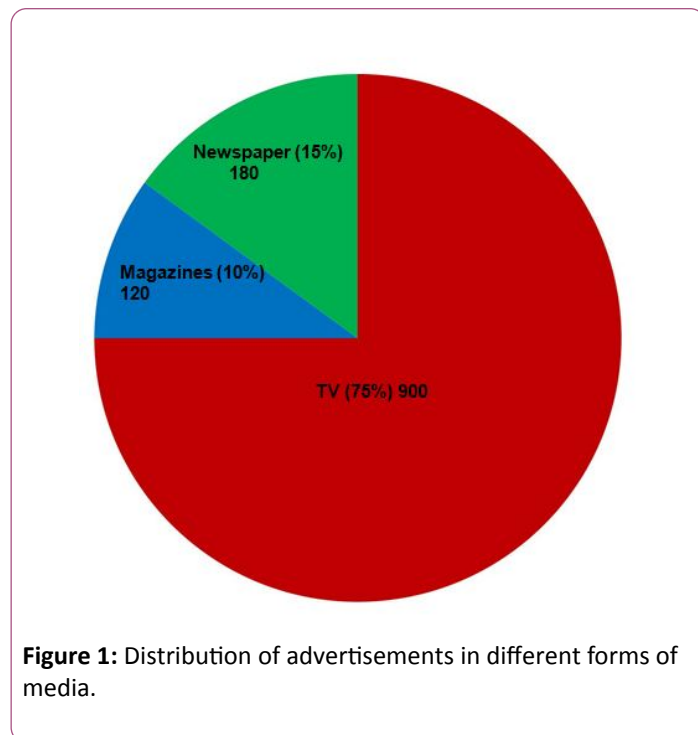
against the guidelines laid down by Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA 2006). Following media tools were used to collect data related to food advertisements-

- Kids entertainment channels selected randomly (n=6) on Cable TV for 2 Hours × 30days
- English and Hindi magazines selected randomly (n=20) for same 30 days
- English newspaper (n=1) × 30 days

A total of 1200 advertisements, 900 (75%) in TV, 120 (10%) in magazines and 180 (15%) in newspaper were reviewed against guidelines for advertisement in FSSA 2006.

Results

Prevalence of misleading food advertisements was found to be 60% i.e., 720 out of 1200. The average number of food related advertisements was 15 ± 3.55 per hour on television. Majority (90%) of these were for food items which are linked foods High in Fat, sugar and Salt (HFSS). Distribution of advertisements in different types of media is given in **Figure 1**.

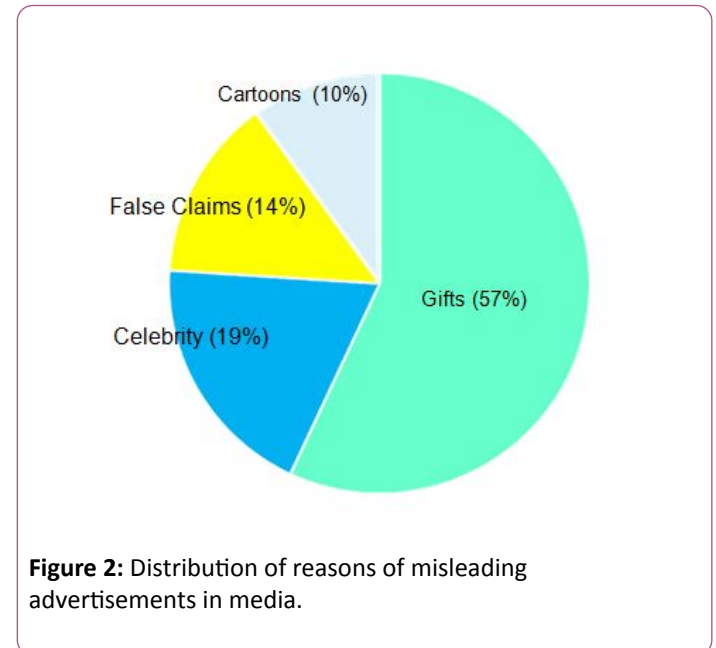


Proportion of food advertisements were 3 ± 1.86 of total advertisements in newspaper as compared to that in magazines 6 ± 2.77 . More than half (60%) of advertisements did not comply with FSSA 2006. Common reasons for non-compliance were: promotion of a food item with gift (57%), use of celebrity picture on package (19%), false claims (14%), appealing with cartoons (10%) (**Figure 2**).

Discussion

The prevalence of food related misleading advertisements in our study was high. We found that food as an item in these advertisements was not being shown as something to satisfy hunger rather its use was being highlighted for entertainment.

The marketing strategy behind such commercials is based on social learning theory which states that children learn by observing and imitating the behaviour of others. This has resulted in children from high socio-economic status preferring junk food over traditional nutritious food [5]. The childhood obesity epidemic can be primarily attributed to adverse environmental factors of which misleading advertisements is an important component. These promotional are inversely associated with intake of fruit and vegetables among adolescents [6].



Food advertisements are an important source of information and a powerful tool of communication to discourage consumption of unhealthy food items. Although televised food advertisements target all age groups, food items are the most heavily promoted product category targeting young children [7]. Harris et al. posited that successfully resisting food marketing requires comprehension of advertisements, how to effectively resist, cognitive maturity with fully developed self-regulatory abilities, the motivation to resist [8]. Children are the most vulnerable group which can fall prey to misleading advertisements as they do not have the cognitive capacity to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising required for the first condition. They simply view the advertisements as another source of information and do not consider it to be biased [9]. Studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between time spent with television and its impact on the buying behaviour of a child and its influence on family spending. Children learn new behaviour in one or two ways by direct experience through trial and error or by observing and imitating others in their social environment and observational learning is more efficient [10]. The scenario in our country is chaotic when compared with the developed world where there exists a detailed approval process for any claim in the advertisement or label. This develops confidence in the consumer regarding the consumption of product. Our media i.e., Television, Newspapers and Magazines are flooded with food advertisements and a significant number of these are either misleading or promote consumption of unhealthy food items to children.

An advertisement becomes misleading when it gives the customer an incorrect understanding of the product such as a cold drink claiming to bring happiness to the family or a health drink claiming to improve the academic results of the children. To touch the feelings of the parents various food advertisements were found to have an emotional content which are beyond the scientific scrutiny. Misleading advertisements are the one where claim is materially false and they persuade the consumer to buy the product. Media does not only have a negative impact on the lifestyle of children, it can also be used to have a positive impact on the dietary habits and behaviour change [11].

The nutrition and health claims content of all food advertisements are governed by Food Safety and Standards Regulations (FSSR) 2011. Food advertisements in our country are under the administrative control of FSSAI and Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). The section 24 of FSSA clearly states that no advertisement shall be made of any food which is misleading or deceiving and no person shall engage himself in any unfair trade practice for purpose of promoting sale, supply, use and consumption of articles of food or adopt any unfair or deceptive practice including the practice of making any statement, whether orally or in writing or by visible representation. No advertisement shall give the public any guarantee of the efficacy that is not based on an adequate or scientific justification thereof. ASCI, a voluntary Self-Regulation council, registered under Section 25 of the Indian Constitution Act (ACSI 2007) is a not-for-profit company. ASCI has adopted a Code for self-regulation in advertising which works in the interest of the consumers as well as the manufacturer's. There is a memorandum of understanding between the two organizations that monitoring of food advertisements is done by ASCI. The consumer protection bill 2015 aims to replace the archaic Consumer protection act 1986 and recommends stringent measures to tackle misleading advertisements and fix liability on endorsers and celebrities. This draft bill has provisions for imposing penalty of INR 10 lakh and imprisonment for up to 2 years or both for first offence and a fine of INR 50 lakh and imprisonment for up to five years for second offence. This will increase subsequently for offences proportionally.

Misleading food advertisements and non-conformance to FSSA 2006 can have a long term impact on the diet of children and hence a negative impact on the health of the children. There is also a rising need of educating the consumers about the advertisements, their standards, legislations and guidelines. The consumers should also be educated about the harmful effects of unhealthy diets and diseases that can be caused by them. Children should also be educated regarding misleading advertisements as they play an important role in purchasing of products in Indian set-up Results suggest that a media literacy

nutrition education curriculum can be easily conducted by a multisectoral approach through school teachers, public health professions, paediatricians and dieticians. Dieticians can modify the curriculum to teach parents how to critically analyze many other forms of media (supermarket magazines, brochures, newspapers, web sites) that sell nutrition misinformation to the public [12].

Conclusion

Prevalence of misleading food advertisements was high. This is a cause for concern as the same is an indirect contributory factor in increase in prevalence of obesity in children in our country.

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