

**TELEVISION FOOD ADVERTISING LEADS TO UNHEALTHY HABITS IN CHILDREN:
TAKING OUR STAND**

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ABSTRACT

Children are the main target of advertising especially foods promotion like breakfast cereals, confectionary, savoury-snacks, soft-drinks and fast food. Furthermore, food promotion tends to focus on “fun” and “taste” theme rather than on “health or nutrition”. In addition, television is the main channel uses by food marketers to reach children. As such, food promotion can influence children’s food-related knowledge, preference and behavior. Moreover children tend to pester their parents to purchase their desires. Food promotion affects daily lifestyle of nutrient-intake of children and these changes comprise of food habits, food purchasing and consumption patterns. Poor food choice will lead to eating disorders, which will develop nutrition problem such as malnutrition, obesity, hypertension, coronary heart disease and certain types of cancer. Apart from that, there was a positive association between numbers of hours of television viewing with consumption of advertised foods. Also, there was a positive association between amount of time children watch television and consumption of low nutrient foods. On top of that, there have been heated arguments about advertising to children especially its effect to children diet and health. Nevertheless, these never-ending clashes of the issues should keep consumers on the alert. We as consumers should accept and may expose our children to “good” advertising for their development but on the other side, we want ethical obligation on any future advertisement which include nutrition information of food products. Any issues that are rise up, which will affect our health should raise considerable concern from various parties especially the producers and government.

INTRODUCTION

Promotion is one P’s of marketing strategy. Promotion includes all means of communication of product to its target with the intention of influencing them. Children are the main target of advertising especially foods promotion like breakfast cereals, confectionary, savoury-snacks, soft-drinks and fast food. Furthermore, food promotion tends to focus on “fun” and “taste” theme rather than on “health or nutrition” (Food Standards Agency, 2003). In addition, television is the main method uses by food marketers to reach children (Food Standards Agency, 2003). As such, food promotion can influence children’s food-related knowledge, preference and behavior (Food Standards Agency, 2003). Food promotion affects daily lifestyle of nutrient-intake of children. According to Bong and Safurah (1996), the changes comprise of food habits, food purchasing and consumption patterns. Poor food choice will lead to eating disorders, which will develop nutrition problem such as malnutrition, obesity, hypertension, coronary heart disease and certain types of cancer (Bong & Safurah, 1996). WHO (2003) even reported that basic life course from fetus to old age have a strong correlation to chronic diseases where malnutrition and overnutrition play an important role to the development of chronic diseases.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Below are some definitions about certain terms used in this article. United Nations (1989) classified child as someone who is under 18 years old. Media Awareness Network (2007) classify child as tweens and teens, where, tweens are children between the age of 8 to 12 and teens are children above 12 years old. Young Media Australia (2003) defined young children as someone who is under 8 years old. Advertising is “any form of promotion of product, service, cause or idea for payment or any other form of remuneration” (Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, 2002, p. 17). Food knowledge is general perceptions of what foods are “good” and “bad” to eat, perceptions and understanding of what is a balanced diet, nutritional value of food....., and food preference as liking for specific foods, while food behavior as purchase-related behavior, consumption behavior, and diet and health status (Food Standards Agency, 2003, p. 11). “Pester power” was defined by Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2002, p. 8) as repetitive asking/requests for a specific item/service while Media Awareness Network (2007) described it as children ability to nag their parents into purchasing items they may not otherwise buy. In addition, there are two types of pester: (1) “persistence nagging” – a plea that is repeated over and over again; and (2) “importance nagging” – parents’ desire to provide the best for their children, and plays on any guilt they may have about not having enough time for their children (Media Awareness Network, 2007).

EFFECTS OF FOOD ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN

Based on previous research, food advertisement brings negative effect to children. One much debated factor is “pester power” from children that influence their parents to purchase their desires (ASA, 2005) since ads are shown in between or around program targeted at children. Furthermore, children recognize advertisement and feel that it is made “for them”. Thus, they tend to nag their parents to fulfill their needs. This will lead to conflict between parents and their children (Committee on Communications, 1995). There is also impact on children’s health where children’s tend to consume more non-nutritious foods than healthy foods such as confectionary, savoury-snacks, soft-drinks and fast food. Researches have shown that overweight or obese children are rapidly increasing (Young Media Australia, 2003) and there is an association between advertising and childhood obesity (Children Now, 2005). According to Media Awareness Network (2007), one in four Canadian children between 7 to 12 is obese. This is so because food ads on TV are persuading children to eat fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods. Besides that, young children are influenced to want product that attract their interest although they have no use for the product (Young Media Australia, 2003). Research shown that advertisement can isolate and shape children preferences for various toys, lifestyles, etc. (PPU, 2007). Marketers have find out that children keen on collecting toys like Barbies, Pokemon, Hello Kitty. etc. (Media Awareness Network, 2007).

TELEVISION VIEWING PATTERNS AND DIETARY INTAKES

Based on a survey in Australia, Table I shows that Australian children watched television on average 2 – 3 hours per day. In other word, in a week, children spent almost 24 hours to watch television. Furthermore, Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2002) also found from other studies that on average, children watched television for 2 – 4 hours per day and will not change channels or do something else when advertisement is on.

Coon, Goldberg, Rogers and Tucker (2001) stated that television is the major media source for food advertising mainly branded foods and fast food. From previous studies, they found that there was a positive association between numbers of hours of television viewing with consumption of advertised foods, especially low nutrient foods (Byrd-Bredbenner & Grasso, 1999; Neville, Thomas & Bauman, 2005). Coon, Goldberg, Rogers and Tucker (2001) also documented that children in household with lower incomes, less educated mothers or single parents watched televisions during their meals and even consumed more red meat, pizza, snack foods, and soda and fewer fruits and vegetables. Furthermore. Catford and Catterson (2003) revealed there is proof that television

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advertising, which focus on high-energy and high-fat food, was aimed at children. Evidences from 122 studies showed that television food advertising: (1) increased children's preference for high fat, salt or sugar foods over healthier alternatives; (2) increased children's request and pestering for advertised products; and (3) influenced children's consumption behavior (Children's Health Development Foundation, 2005).

TABLE I: TELEVISION VIEWING HOURS PER WEEK

Day	Viewing time	Viewing hour/day	Viewing hour/week
Monday - Friday	6.30 – 7.30 a.m.	1 hour	1 x 5 = 5 hours
	9.00 – 9.30 a.m.	0.5 hour	0.5 x 5 = 2.5 hours
	3.00 – 4.30 p.m.	1.5 hours	1.5 x 5 = 7.5 hours
Saturday - Sunday	7.00 – 11.30 a.m.	4.5 hours	4.5 x 2 = 9 hours
TOTAL			24 hours

Source: Neville, Thomas & Bauman (2005)

Some very critical evidences that associated television viewing with risk of chronic diseases are:

- Television viewing has been associated with childhood obesity in several epidemiologic studies (Matheson, Yun Wang, Klesges, Beech, Kraemer & Robinson, 2004; Cheng, 2005) as children tend to eat unhealthy foods during viewing.
- Television viewing contributed to a decline in fruit and vegetable consumption where lack of fruits and vegetables has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and various forms of cancer (Boynton-Jarrett, Thomas, Peterson, Wiecha, Sobol & Gortmaker, 2003).

As such, the amount of time on television viewing may influence children to take higher intake of fat foods and lower consumption of vegetables and fruits. In conclusion, all these rationalizations lead to permanent eating pattern during adulthood that might lead to risk of chronic diseases. This has been confirmed by findings that suggested a positive correlation between obesity in adolescence and morbidity will exist in later life (Coon, Goldberg, Rogers & Tucker, 2001).

COMPILATION OF STUDIES ON CHILDREN AND FOOD ADVERTISING

Table II shows an overview of all the studies on children and advertising that have been done (Food Standards Agency, 2003). Based on Livingstone (2004, p. 17) survey, there are five possible conclusions that can be made from the above studies: (1) Don't know – previous research evidence is too flawed for robust conclusions to be drawn; (2) Pro-effects – previous research confirmed that food promotion has an effect on children's food preferences, knowledge and behavior; (3) No effects - previous research showed that food promotion has little or no effect on children's food preferences, knowledge and behavior; (4) Modest effects - previous research explained that food promotion has an effect on children's food preferences, knowledge and behavior despite the fact that it's only a modest effect by comparison with more influential factors like parental diet; (5) No effects in reality – experimental researches disclosed consequence of food promotion but cannot be generalized directly from the findings to children's everyday lives.

TABLE II: STUDIES ON CHILDREN AND ADVERTISING

No.	Theme of study	No. of study	Findings
1.	Promotional channel used to target children	13	Television as dominant promotional channel Food products advertising has increased
2.	What food items being promoted?	41	Food promotion being dominated by a "big 5" food items: breakfast cereals, confectionary, savoury-snacks, soft-drinks and fast food Food items were considered unhealthy and the advertised diet differ from the recommendation by public health Promotions for staples and fresh foods have been replaced by promotion of the "big 5" items
3.	Usage of principal strategies to target children	34	Format of adverts – characterization, animation and tone Theme of adverts – storyline, humorous, serious Theme appeal – taste, fantasy/adventure, fun/humour, novelty
4.	Time-slot advertised	24	Children's program
5.	How do children respond to food promotion?	18	children recall food adverts & its their favorite channel children discussed food promotion with peers & families asking their parents to buy food advertised free gifts & packaging attribute attract children
6.	Food promotion influences children's nutritional knowledge	8	exposure to food promotion for "low nutrition" foods was associated with poorer nutritional knowledge food promotion may have little influence on children's general perceptions of what constitutes a healthy diet
7.	Food promotion influences children's food preference	14	exposure to food promotion had an impact with significant changes in children's food preference children more likely to prefer high fat, salt or sugar foods
8.	Food promotion influences children's food purchasing behavior	7	increasing purchase for foods high in fat, sugar or salt either in supermarket or vending machine
9.	Food promotion influence children's diet and health	6	there is a significant but small relationships between television viewing and diet, television viewing and obesity, television viewing and cholesterol

DISPUTE ON ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN: TAKING OUR STAND

Food promotion influences children's life. There have been heated arguments about advertising to children. Some very debated matters on advertising: (1) children's are able to distinguish advertising from other program's subject matter; (2) children can interpret the aim of advertising. Based on previous studies, Jarlbro (2001, p. 11) suggested that:

"children as young as two could differentiate between advertising and programmed content. However, [it is believed] that it is not until late childhood – from 8 to 12 years – that children completely understand the aim of advertising."

Is television advertising so influential or is it parents' decision that influences children? As said by Jarlbro (2000, p. 75) from previous studies analysis:

"... we find that none of the studies included in the survey actually measures the effects of television advertising, long – or short- term. Instead they focus on parent's – chiefly mother's – attitudes toward television advertising that targets their children."

According to Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2002), children can nag their parents but the final decision to buy is made by the parents as children do not have the “purchase power” - money. Public also argued that (1) advertisements should be “legal, decent, honest and truthful”; (2) marketers should be prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and society; and (3) marketers should respect the principles of fair competition in business. (Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, 2002, p. 22). Recent case of GlaxoSmithKline showed that the international company is not “decent, honest and truthful”. GlaxoSmithKline was fined NZ\$217,000 (RM546,000) for the offence of broadcasted bewildered advertisement between 2002 to 2006, where , the advertisement showed Ribena contained more vitamin C than an orange, but, in actual, Ribena contained much less vitamin C (AP, 2007). Due to all these disputes, justification for current stress on television viewing and its potential contribution to chronic disease risk factors are:

- Changes in dietary pattern where children tend to consumed higher energy and fat foods
- Exposure of television viewing to advertisements for food products which are fattening
- TV viewing produces a sedentary lifestyle
- Watching more television means low physical activity
- Increased children’s request and pestering for advertised products

Whatever the consequences, for every argument, there is always a privilege. According to Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (2002), some benefits from advertising are (1) revenue from television advertising is used to buy quality children’s program; (2) children increase their educational development due to exposure to advertisement; (3) children has equal right to access information about product; (4) advertising control to children might have a negative effect on children’s overall development – e.g. ability to understand the aim of advertising is destroyed. Based on the argument above, it is important to note that industries and consumers gain advantage from good advertising (Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, 2002). Nevertheless, these never-ending clashes of the issues should keep consumers on the alert. We as consumers or people outside the producers or the industry that made the product should take our stand of the arguments. On one side, we accept and may expose our children to “good” advertising for their development and educate them about the main goal of advertising but on the other side, we want ethical obligation on any future advertisement which include nutrition information of food products. Any issues that are rise up, which will affect our health or the well being of other living things in this world, should raise considerable concern from various parties especially the producers and government. We as consumers should always do 4 steps to ensure our children get a well-balanced diet and stay healthy: (1) eat a variety of food from each level of the Food Guide Pyramid as per Figure I in Appendix I; (2) eat healthy meals that contain protein and various vitamins; (3) read food labels to make wise selections about nutrition information; and (4) do regular exercise for a healthy lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

Advertising to children is all about creating pester power, as advertisers recognize what a powerful force it can be (Media Awareness Network, 2007). Although Food Standards Agency (2003) found that advertising does affect children’s food choices and behavior, but everyone must remember that “life has to go on”, so how one deal with these issues is one decision but bear in mind that children could not be detach from advertisement involving product of their interest. They have the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, or through any other media of the child’s choice (United Nations, 1989, Article 13). In addition, restriction of fast food advertisements would not solve obesity problem according to Minister of Health, Dr Chua, although it initiate consciousness among the consumer (Cruetz, 2007). No matter what, children should be educated and developed so that they can use their full potential to make decision on their own later in their life.

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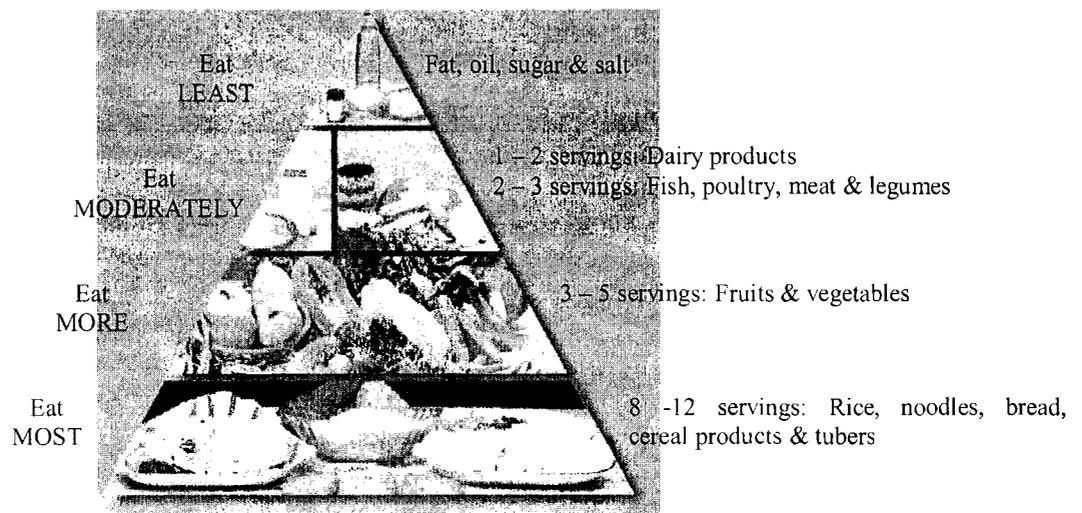
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APPENDIX I

FIGURE I: MALAYSIAN FOOD GUIDE PYRAMID



Source: Nutrition Society of Malaysia (2000)