



Misleading Advertisement and its Impact on Children

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Abstract

The International Organisation for Standardisation has highlighted the need to regulate advertising targeted at children though such regulation is lagging behind (ISO 2019). Research on advertising to children has focused on a variety of topics including persuasive tactics utilized by advertisers targeting children, impact of celebrities on children's buying behaviour and attitudes of parents toward regulating advertising targeted at children and views on stricter policy decisions by the government. The current study extends the literature and fills in the research gap by studying the influence of advertising on children, especially where celebrities endorse brands for children, and assessing the impact of contemporary media advertisements as perceived by parents and parent attitudes on need for stronger regulatory framework.

Key Words: Unethical, misleading, celebrity, endorser credibility, regulatory framework

1. Introduction

Children in India constitute nearly a fifth of the world child population and one-third of the country's population is under the age of 15 years (Census India 2011, Central Statistics Office Report, 2018). Needless to state that the Indian child consumer market is one of the largest in the world. Although there are twelve pro consumer laws to protect Indian consumers from misleading advertisements, but poor implementation of laws, lack of awareness amongst masses act as handicap in curbing the misleading advertisements to children.

Advertisements targeting children such as consuming health drinks can make taller, stronger or toppers in class or drinking soft drinks and juices can boost their energy level are rampant in the Indian market. Advertisers try to exploit young children by advertising products that may not be conducive to their health. Children are naïve and gullible and are vulnerable to advertiser's enticements. Many advertisers in India use celebrity endorsements to promote their products. (Biswas, 2006). Celebrity endorsements make advertising more effective, trusted and persuasive (Freiden 1984, Till and Shimp 1998); further using celebrities in advertising "cuts through clutter (Crutchfield, 2010). Advertisers rely on the children's pester power on their parents (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010). Children are exposed to ideas which may not be best for them, such as bungee jumping and wanting to imitate the celebrities in the ads. They start demanding products such as fast food, chocolates and ice creams everyday. This unhealthy diet loaded with trans fats leads to obesity increasing the risk of cancer by 40%, and diabetes by 50%, and gives rise to cardiovascular problems. The Consumers International revealed that the most aggressive advertisers are from the junk food sector. This paper entails to find out the impact of advertisements, persuasive tactics used by marketers on consumer buying behaviour of young children (4-15 years) as seen through the perspective of their parents.

2. Misleading Advertisements and Vulnerability of Children-Literature Review

Child advertising is an interaction between advertiser and child. It has been accused of being

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inherently unfair. It is based on the claim that younger children do not understand advertiser's selling intent. Children of the age group of 4-14 years are conventionally accepted target segment for marketers (Khullar, 2012). Children and adolescent remain an important market and huge digital spending trends needs urgency to investigate the potential privacy issues, advertising literacy, parent mediation, and regulation required to address new forms of digital advertising (Nelson, 2018). The American Psychological Association Task Force raised a general concern about the commercialism in children's lives related to marketing and advertising to children. Most children younger than 7-8 years of age do not recognize the persuasive intent of commercial appeals. The study reviewed research addressing two questions, firstly does advertising affect children's commercial recall and product preferences and secondly, does exposure to advertising result in consumption of products that are inimical to the health and wellbeing of children. The Task force also reported that there was dearth of research on commercialism in schools (APA, 2004).

A research paper compiling 138 published academic articles in Social Sciences Citation Index Journals related to advertising targeting young children upto 12 years old between 2006 to 2016 was studied. There was a consensus in all articles that food advertising is positively correlated with unhealthy food intake, implying that children who are frequently exposed to ads for unhealthy food consume unhealthy food. Despite the growing importance of embedded advertising, many of the new ad formats remain neglected by the researchers (Jans et al, 2019).

To investigate food related advertisements on television and their influence on the dietary habits and obesity among young children a study was conducted in India (Setu Gupta et al 2017). The key findings of the study were that majority of food advertising content on Indian television channels which young adolescents watch pertains to unhealthy food and beverages which are higher in energy and low in micronutrient content. Another study on the parent's perception of the influence of television advertisements on children aged 8-14 was undertaken through a survey done on 480 parents in India. The principal findings of the study were that junk food is the most heavily advertised product categories targeting children where a strong significant positive correlation between heavy television use and favourable attitudes towards junk foods was found. Parents also perceived that television advertisement targeting children lead to family conflict, materialism and skepticism (Khanna, 2012).

A comparative study to investigate television food advertisements aimed at adult and children in India on two children channels and two mainstream channels was undertaken. Key findings of the study were that out of 1602 food advertisements telecasted during the sample period, ads about chocolate and sweet products were maximum, followed by ads on health/ energy drinks and grain/fruit based products. Ads claiming nutritional benefits such as 'calcium and carbohydrates', 'high protein', 'low calories', 'makes taller and sharper' were the general claims appeared frequently on television. (Vijayapushpam, Maheshwar and Rao, 2014).

Another study explored the effects of advertisements on children with special reference to confectionery products. The paper mentions that more than half of television viewer's in India are children below fifteen years and advertising has a stronger impact on younger children than older ones and children's comprehension of television commercials increases with age.(Rana, 2015). The phenomenon of food advertising and the use of pester power by children to influence family consumption through requests and demands for certain products was examined. The paper investigated twelve studies which were included in the Food Standard's Agency (FSA) review, out of which eight from North America, two from UK, one from India and one from Saudi Arabia. Findings were grouped under three headings as 'observed purchase influence behaviour', 'reported purchase influence behaviour' and 'evidence from other cross-sectional studies. Results from a systematic review of international evidence found that food advertising causes 'pestering' by children and results in parents buying less healthy products that are associated with obesity. It also undermines arguments by industry that pester power is just a legitimate way for children to express their growing autonomy as consumers. (McDermott, et al 2006).

2.1 Persuasive Tactics and Use of Celebrities in Advertisements Targeting Children

Celebrity endorsements represent a multi-billion dollar industry globally and continue to be used as part of marketing campaigns. In UK even if product placement is banned in children channels, it has been observed that children at the age of ten and above watch adult channels. Thus, raising audience awareness and literacy about product placement becomes important. (Eagle and Dahl, 2015). Another study

investigated children's understanding of advertiser's six persuasive tactics including ad repetition, product demonstration, peer popularity appeal, humour, celebrity endorsements and premiums to elicit certain advertising effects. Policy makers according to the study should base their policies concerning children on scientific insights in children's development of advertising literacy. (Rosendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg 2011). Another study to understand how children identify sponsors and identify conditions suitable for sponsorships and to provide implications of interest to public institutions, such as government bodies and consumer activist groups that aim to protect consumers from inappropriate influences exerted by marketing and sponsorships. (Grohs, Reinhard, Wagner Udo and Regina Steiner, 2012).

2.2 Regulating Advertising to Children

Child advertising has been accused of being inherently unfair. It is based on the claim that younger children are not able to understand advertising's selling intent. Rowthorn studied whether all advertising to children is unfair by outlining two ways, ie exclusive account and inclusive account. Asymmetry of information leads to sub optimal outcome of exchange in case of child advertising. The paper concludes that if child advertising can be regulated and does not threat vulnerabilities of children, then it need not be completely banned and the charge that all advertising to children is 'unfair' needs to be reconsidered. (Rowthorn, 2019).

A study explored the legal legislative measures and self-regulation policies to regulate advertising to children in India and compared it with certain developed countries. India employs co-regulatory policy systems (self and legal regulatory systems) towards advertising to children. The self-regulatory monitoring body in India is the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) which was set up in October 1985-by media owners, advertisers, advertising agencies and allied professionals like consumer researchers, film makers, processors, etc and regulates the content of advertising in accordance to consumer interest. Unlike USA, Australia and other developed countries there is no separate code for advertising to children in India. The paper compared the policy regulatory system of India with other countries and found that in India, there is no specific restriction on timings and the duration of advertisements in media to children as compared to USA, UK, Australia and Canada. Need of community participation like developed countries where the standard boards look after the consumer complaints and increasing public participation in complaint process in India like developed countries is required (Ali, Batra and Ravichandran, 2012).

3. Research Methodology

The objectives of the study can be enlisted as follows:

1. To investigate the parental attitude towards advertising targeted to children.
2. To examine the attitude of parents towards persuasive tactics including celebrity endorsements, product placements and other embedded advertising and their influences on children.
3. To infer how these attitudes, influence a need for policy regulation of advertising to children.

The methodology of the proposed research entails a systematic study of the present literature available on misleading advertisements and its impact on children with the help of secondary resources, previous cases in consumer forums and primary research. It involved developing a questionnaire and using survey method to analyse the data to find out the impact of advertisements on children and their buying behavior. The survey was conducted by interviewing parents making use of questionnaire with a sizable number of 122 respondents in Delhi, NCR. The information thus collected was quantified and analyzed with statistical tools to fulfill the objectives of the study.

4. Conclusion

The study found the vulnerability of children, regardless of whether they are harmed, they are treated unfair as they cannot understand advertisers selling intent. Better laws, regulations and advertising literacy can play an important role in protecting children from unethical advertising. Many countries such as, Quebec, Sweden and Norway and Brazil have already banned child advertising. Use of social media, gaming devices and newer embedded mediums are now used to target children to buy advertised brands (Breves, et al, 2019).

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