



Digital Food Marketing Strategies Targeting Children: Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Food and beverage industry is considered children and adolescents as a major market force. As a result, children and adolescents are now the target of specialized food marketing and advertising companies. Food marketers are interested in youth as consumers because of their spending power and purchasing influence and as future adult consumers. Multiple techniques and channels are used to reach youth even when they were children to influence food product purchase behavior. Majority of advertising campaigns promote unhealthy food items and often takes advantage of children's vulnerability to marketing making it even tougher for parents to inculcate healthy food habits among children. The nature or power of food advertising is relatively under-researched, particularly in non-US contexts as studies have tended to analyse the product itself, rather than the nature of the message promoting. Overall, despite the strong indications of impact of online marketing, there is need for more evidence in digital media reaching adolescents and children.

KEYWORD: *food marketing strategies, online food marketing*

The Food and beverage industry is considered children and adolescents as a major market force. As a result, children and adolescents are now the target of specialized food marketing and advertising companies. Food marketers are interested in youth as consumers because of their spending power and purchasing influence and as future adult consumers. Multiple techniques and channels are used to reach youth even when they were children to influence food product purchase behavior.

These food marketing channels include television advertising, in-school marketing, product placements, kids clubs, the internet, toys and products with brand logos, and youth-targeted promotions, such as cross promotions. While multiple factors influence eating behaviors and food choices of youth, one potent force is advertising (Story, etal, 2002). The unhealthy food many times means western fast food to many people but according to the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), unhealthy foods are those containing very little to zero proteins, vitamins or minerals yet are high in salt, sugar and fats and are high in calories. Many Indian food contains trans fat substance like bhatura, paratha and puris as 9.5%, 7.8% and 7.6%, individually which are higher when contrasted with 4.2% in standard French fries (Kaushik , 2011) .

Digital marketing:

Many concerns of television advertising are now translated to new media and digital marketing especially with regard to children. Investments on online advertising have also increased tremendously in recent years due to remarkable increase in online media use, particularly among children and young people. The forms of advertising and marketing on the Web differ significantly from television commercials. Utilizing the unique features of the Internet, companies can seamlessly integrate advertising and Web site content (Montgomery, 2001). Almost all of the major companies that advertise and market to children have created their own websites, designed as "branded environments" for children.

Digital marketing expose children and adolescents to advertisements online which influence them to prefer

those brands even if they could not remember exactly the advertisement watched. Children who play online advergaming (games that incorporate brands as content into the game experience) are more likely to prefer the associated brand and its food products when compared with unbranded foods (Halford and Boyland E, 2008). A study of growth of fast food industry with reference to shift in consumer's buying habits in Nagpur city indicates that non-availability of traditional foods forced with lack of awareness leads to westernization of food habits) and (Prakash Mondal, 2013). The advertising for food products spend in the country is expected to grow by 12.5 per cent in 2018 from 9.6 per cent last year report. The food marketing advertising in India is further expected to grow by 12.5% in 2019 ((Dentsu Aegis, 2018).

Digital tools provide marketers new and more effective ways of reaching children and young people. It is observed 19.5% drop in food marketing to young consumers in US between 2005 and 2009 at the same it is also noted a 50% increase in online and mobile marketing (Leibowitz and Rosch et al. 2014). Social marketing has changed rapidly in recent years and has become increasingly personalized and integrated into the social networking experience. Mobile advertising has been identified as a major growth area for social marketing, leading companies such as Face book invested heavily in mobile advertising. Face book recently introduced video advertising into users' news feed which will play automatically.

A review of online marketing to children in the US found that fast-food restaurants placed 19% of all their online display advertising on Face book in 2012. It further noted that brands such as Starbucks, McDonald's, Pepsi and Subway are more visible on websites such as Face book, Twitter and YouTube, with millions of followers and 'likes' (Harris et al. 2013).

Bucy, et al. (2011) study has looked specifically at the use of cartoon characters to market food products to children on websites and how this practice has developed in light of self-regulatory codes such as the Children's Advertising Regulation Unit (CARU) which is a U.S. self-regulatory organization to promote responsible advertising to children under the age of 12 in all media. There is a decrease in product characters created by the marketers, but noticed increase in the use of animated characters from other

television programmes or movies or online media to promote their food products.

According to Bottner and Ivens (2014) new marketing strategies for food products such as advergaming have created concerns among parents about online advertising to children and its impact on food habits. The parents are concern about embedded nature of online marketing as its persuasive nature is difficult for children to recognize. A number of companies tested the reasons why children attracted to websites and why It was revealed that girls and boys ages 9 to 11 liked the current website because it was age appropriate and had graphics. For teens, streaming video and interactive icons were found to be particularly effective tools for generating further engagement on website (FTC, 2012).

As children and young people have become increasingly competent and consistent users of the internet and other digital media, food and beverage companies have taken advantage of this trend. Child-targeted food marketing has firmly established itself amongst commercial websites including third party internet advertising (i.e., placement of banner advertising on other companies' websites, online videos, social media, and advergaming (Faber and LeeM, Nan,2004). A research study revealed that parents were aware of the existence of advergaming but had limited understanding of how these games were designed and were not aware that their children could freely access these games online .The study observed that advergaming are associated with food intake and obesity. Online media use as a part of overall sedentary behaviour and exposure to marketing for unhealthy food and beverage products (Bottner and Ivens, 2014)

Digital Food Marketing Vs Use of immersive techniques

Advertising and marketing aimed at children is rapidly becoming a pervasive presence on the Internet, with new techniques constantly being developed, yet advertising on the Web is virtually unrestricted. Advertising and content for children are often seamlessly interwoven in online "infomercials," interactive forms of product placement and branded environments on food company's websites (Montgomery and Pasnik , 2008). Despite the fact that television is still the dominant media for food advertising, all major food companies operate websites to engage children (Weber et al., 2006).

Although television remains an important avenue for food and beverage advertising, the propagation of new media within the past 5 years, such as branded websites, social media and mobile device applications has created additional factor for children and adolescents to be targeted (Williams and Collins, 2013).

Lingas et al (2009) found that only five out of 77 food and beverage products advertised on popular children's websites met the Institute of Medicine guidelines for foods to promote to youth. Digital forms of marketing provide new and more effective ways of reaching children and young people. A few digital marketing practices have also found a high prevalence of branded games and child-designated areas on food and beverage websites in the USA and Australia (Weber and Kelly *et al.*, 2008). For example, a study of 40 US food and beverage brand websites found that 58% contained child-designated areas and 63% featured advergames (Weber and Harnack, 2006). A study on websites popular with children in USA found that 60–84% of advertised products were HFSS foods or met the Institute of Medicine criteria for “foods to avoid” (Ustjanauskas, 2014).

“Stealth” marketing techniques in digital media take advantage of its innovative features. These include immersive techniques such as extensive HFSS-themed game applications or Apps, social media content created by users themselves, word-of-mouth social media communication, such as “liking”, sharing and commenting on marketing and paid partnerships popular with children. In social media, brands seek word-of-mouth effects as people trust friends more than brands or advertisers (Kim Johnson, 2015).

Digital marketers are now able to cater their food products with digital analytics that can capture consumer responses in much greater detail than previously. For example, in-device cameras and software record facial responses and conduct immediate, millisecond-by-millisecond analysis to identify “micro-emotions” and millisecond-level responses to marketing content (Venkatraman and Clithero, 2012). The power of digital marketing can be augmented further by matching advertising delivery to consumers' moment-by-moment moods or to weather- or mood-linked food consumption patterns (Holmberg and Chaplin, 2016). Obesity remains a major health concern and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has highlighted the role of new

media including advertising exposure, as playing a role in unhealthy food consumption (Council on Communications and Media 2011). It is on other hand also debated that these brands have increasingly shifted their marketing away from advertising on third-party websites and towards marketing on social networks where teenagers are thought to be easier to reach. There is however limited research on what role online advertising plays in teenagers' social lives, their wider media use or eating habits (Harris, Weinberg, et al., 2013).

The power of food marketing in the digital sphere is also indicated by viewers' engagement with it. Although studies indicate that parents of adolescents are largely unaware of digital food marketing and how adolescents engage with and enjoy digital marketing (Spiteri and Cornish, 2014). The AAP notes that online food marketing offers new ways of reaching children and adolescents such as child-friendly designs using cartoons (Vanwesenbeeck, et al. 2014). Importantly, food marketing directed at adults has escaped the same level of scrutiny awarded to child-directed marketing with a scarcity of literature assessing its impact on food intake behaviours or weight status (Nelson, 2008)

Research carried out by the Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute has argued that companies such as Cadbury, McDonald's and Coca-Cola have used methods of targeting children and adolescents online which would not be permitted through traditional media. These include branded games, mobile apps and Face book discount codes. The researchers argued that these companies used methods and styles that would appeal to children, despite the fact that children under 13 were not supposed to be using Face book (Dietz, 2013).

Digital Food Marketing Vs Food Consumption

Similar to television advertising and online marketing in general, it has been found that the products advertised through advergames are likely to be low in nutritional value (Rifon et al., 2014). A recent report from WHO (WHO, 2013) stated that HFSS products such as soft drinks, sugared cereals, confectionary and snacks and fast-food outlets were more likely to be marketed to children than healthier options. Campaigns concerning health experts include mobile apps linked to face book and offering daily deals, websites featuring games and children's activities linked to food products, and sites allowing customers

to enter food product codes to claim prizes appealing to young people.

Since more than two-thirds of web-sites in USA for children and adolescents use advertising as their primary revenue source, a concern has arisen about marketing products in cyberspace, including marketing of food and beverage. Such techniques are designed to appeal specifically to children, who may not even be aware that they are being exposed to sophisticated marketing strategies (weber et al., 2006). In view of globalization, many food and beverage companies have started their branches across the world. Companies regularly modify their so-called “global” products to quite literally suit the tastes of consumers in different markets. A visit to the McDonald’s country or region site (McDonalds 2006) will show menus that vary from country to country. McDonald’s India, for instance, promotes “McVeggies,” “McAloo Tikkis,” and “Maharaja Macs”; McDonald’s Uruguay sells “Dulce de Leche” pancakes. KFC in China has switched from white meat to dark for its chicken burgers and is replacing coleslaw and mashed potatoes—side dishes popular in the West with seasonal vegetables, shredded carrot salads, fungus and bamboo shoots, and rice porridge (Adler 2003). In short, food is marketed not as a commodity but as a cultural good (Jing 2000).

Children who spend lengthy amounts of time on websites are therefore likely to adopt positive associations with these sugary products as a result of the time they spend interacting with them online. The content on the most immersive sites may be even more engaging, as avatar customization has been found to heighten children’s feelings of presence and emotion (Baily, Wise and Bolls, 2009), increasing their focus and attention while online. Research indicates that young people are exposed to considerable levels of unhealthy food advertising through the internet (Alvy and Calvert, 2008 and Kelly et al., 2008). Hence food marketing has been identified as an important target for intervention in the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity (World Health Organization, 2006).

A recent systematic review and quantitative meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food advertising (via television or the Internet) across 18 studies, found a significant effect on children, whereby food advertising exposure was associated with greater food intake (Folkvord and Anschutz,

2015). Furthermore, a meta-analysis studying 45 published reports representing data from 3,292 participants found that food exposure significantly influenced eating behaviour and weight (Boswell, Kober, 2016). A set of studies have demonstrated that food-based advergaming increased children’s food intake (Rozendaal and Buijze ET, al, 2011). Coca-Cola and Cadbury Online campaigns in France and the USA reported returns on investment about four times greater than for television (Folkvord, Anschutz and Buijzen, 2013). Blades *et al.*, (2013) noticed that exposure of unhealthy food product marketing via new media leads to weight gain and obesity among youth as children are less able to recognize advertisements on websites compared with television.

Websites for sports and energy drinks target teens featuring celebrity athletes and rock or hip hop artists, sometimes sing or rap about a beverage brand. The company also produces its own sports video games, which can be downloaded for free to influence children to buy the products (Ustjanuskas, 2010). Adolescents are developmentally, neurologically and socially likely to be susceptible to HFSS food advertising (Pechmann, 2005). In addition, adolescents typically have pocket money and have been found to use “fast” and “junk” foods as an identity marker to set them apart from adults (Trew, 2005).

In a recent study analysed the marketing techniques used by the most popular food and beverage brand on Face book pages in Australia (including Subway and Coca-Cola). They found that many were unique to social media and they could directly increase consumer interaction and engagement and in some instances, even facilitate product purchase directly) with adolescents amongst those seemingly most receptive to this type of content. (Kelly et al. 2014) Studies have shown that the majority of foods promoted on websites are energy dense, nutrient-poor foods and children who play online advergaming are more likely to consume nutrient-poor snack foods and fewer fruits and vegetables, and increase energy intake regardless of the health profile of the product being advertised (Folkvord and Anschutz et.al, 2013). In addition, advergaming engages the player through entertainment and competitions, and has been shown to increase children’s preferences and for advertised food products (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007).

Media use, such as television, video games and the internet, has been much debated as a contributing

factor to the sedentary lifestyle of most children (CDC, 2008), as well as a persistent influence on their nutritionally poor diets (Nestle, 2003). Food marketers also encourage children to register and open an account, by providing benefits to members, such as access to special games, free downloadable items, etc. In addition, advergames on some food company websites engage children with branded characters and branded food items. One study in the US found a significantly higher proportion of children visitors on branded food company websites with advergames than those without Advergames (Harris 2012). Various studies have examined how food promotion could influence teenagers' consumption behavior (Cairns, Angus, & Hastings, 2009).

A research on adolescents' receptivity to different types of appeals used in social marketing advertisements advocating healthy eating and found news and fear appeals are more effective than love or popularity. In addition, an experimental study found that an advertisement using a threat appeal was more effective than one using a fun appeal in promoting healthy eating among pre-adolescent participants (Charry and Demoulin, 2012). Besides traditional advertising, teenagers reported that a variety of promotional tools also influenced their food consumption. Teenagers were attracted by offerings of food tasting at retail stores, sales discounts, on-pack premiums and sales promotions such as buy-one-get-one free offers. They also appreciated food products in packaging with special designs (Chan et al., 2015).

In Ireland, of 113 most popular retail and Face book food and soft drink brands, Face book had the greatest "reach" among users aged 13 or 14 years. Majority of the brands featured sugar-sweetened carbonated drinks, fast foods, savoury snacks, sweets, chocolate and ice-cream (Tat low and Tracey 2016). Furthermore, HFSS food advertising is likely to reach young Internet users not only directly through online brand promotions but also via peer networks in social media. In an exploratory study of user-generated content in the social media application of Instagram in Sweden it was revealed that 85% of young adolescent users shared images with food items and over two thirds were unhealthy, about half had clearly visible brand imagery – and many were clearly influenced by major food marketing campaigns (Holmbergm and Chaplin 2016).

Conclusion

Majority of advertising campaigns promote unhealthy food items and often takes advantage of children's vulnerability to marketing making it even tougher for parents to inculcate healthy food habits among children. The nature or power of food advertising is relatively under-researched, particularly in non-US contexts as studies have tended to analyse the product itself, rather than the nature of the message promoting. Overall, despite the strong indications of impact of online marketing, there is need for more evidence in digital media reaching adolescents and children.

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