



The Power of Persuasion: A Study on Children’s Food Habits and the Psychological Impact of TV Ads

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ABSTRACT

Television advertising has long been recognized as a dominant force shaping consumer preferences, particularly among children who remain highly vulnerable to persuasive techniques. This paper explores the psychological impact of television food advertisements on children’s eating behaviors, with a focus on how persuasive strategies foster unhealthy food habits and long-term brand loyalty. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, Cultivation Theory, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, the study illustrates how repeated exposure to mascots, jingles, celebrities, and reward-based marketing encourages emotional attachments that override rational decision-making. Case studies of multinational food corporations such as McDonald’s, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, and Kellogg’s demonstrate how advertising not only influences short-term consumption but also creates intergenerational consumer pipelines. The research highlights three critical concerns: the manipulation of children’s cognitive immaturity, the public health implications of high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) diets, and the ethical dilemmas for corporations balancing profitability with social responsibility. Using a doctrinal and thematic research design, the study analyzes advertising ethics, nutritional impacts, and case studies from India, the UK, and the US, alongside statutory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act (2019) and WHO recommendations. Methodologically, the study employs doctrinal and thematic analysis of legal frameworks, advertising strategies, and academic literature.

Findings suggest that television advertising contributes to childhood obesity, normalizes unhealthy diets, and undermines autonomy by embedding preferences during formative years. The paper concludes with recommendations for parents, schools, policymakers, and corporations, emphasizing the urgent need for ethical advertising reforms, HR-driven marketing accountability, and child-centered media literacy programs.

Introduction

1.1 Background:

Children's food habits are shaped by a complex interaction of parental influence, cultural traditions, and increasingly, commercial advertising, with television being one of the most pervasive and persuasive mediums of influence. Across the globe, children are exposed to thousands of food commercials each year, and a significant proportion of these advertisements promote products high in fat, sugar, and salt, directly undermining public health campaigns encouraging balanced nutrition. The persuasive appeal of these commercials is not simply informational but psychological, relying on carefully crafted emotional triggers that shape children's preferences before they have developed the critical judgment necessary to resist manipulation. Research has consistently shown that children recognize food logos such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola before they are even able to read, and these early recognitions quickly evolve into emotional attachments that are deeply embedded into memory and lifestyle choices (Lapierre, Vaala, & Linebarger, 2011). Unlike adults, children lack the cognitive maturity to separate entertainment from marketing messages, which means that television advertising functions simultaneously as cultural education and psychological intervention, embedding brand loyalty and consumption habits at a very early stage of development. This reality positions children as both a lucrative target market and a vulnerable group requiring protection.

Problem Statement

The central problem that emerges is that television food commercials deliberately manipulate children's psychological immaturity to create not only immediate desire but also enduring consumer loyalty.

Through strategies such as animated mascots, catchy jingles, celebrity endorsements, and reward bundling, advertisers bypass rational decision-making and instead cultivate emotional bonds that prove remarkably resistant to change in adulthood. These techniques create the foundation for habits that influence not just children's snack choices but their broader nutritional patterns, contributing significantly to unhealthy eating behaviors, childhood obesity, and lifestyle-related health conditions. The concern, therefore, is not confined to marketing ethics alone but extends into the realm of public health and societal well-being, where early exposure to persuasive advertising has lasting consequences.

Research Rationale

The rationale for this study lies in the need to understand the deep psychological mechanisms by which advertising influences children and to critically assess the ethical boundaries of corporate practices in this domain. By examining persuasion not only as a marketing strategy but also as a form of psychological conditioning, this research illuminates why brand loyalty proves so durable across generations and why children remain particularly vulnerable to commercial exploitation. Insights from this analysis are valuable for three reasons: first, they enrich academic debates by linking consumer behavior theories with developmental psychology; second, they provide practical lessons for corporations and HR managers about the reputational risks of manipulative branding; and third, they contribute to policy discussions by offering evidence for reforming advertising regulation in ways that balance corporate interests with children's rights and health.

Significance of the Study

Ultimately, the significance of the study rests on its interdisciplinary contribution. From an academic perspective, it integrates psychological theories with marketing analysis to explain how persuasion shapes food habits. From a practical perspective, it offers corporations and HR managers insights into the ways manipulative advertising can undermine trust and employee pride, highlighting the importance of aligning external marketing practices with internal ethical values. From a policy perspective, it underscores the urgent need for stronger legal frameworks, parental media literacy initiatives, and coordinated action between governments, schools, and corporations to mitigate the harms associated with unhealthy food promotion. Television advertising, therefore, is not merely a vehicle of persuasion but a force with profound consequences for children's psychological development, dietary patterns, and the broader ethical responsibilities of corporations in society.

Literature Review

Psychological Foundations of Persuasion: The impact of television advertising on children's food habits can be best understood through the lens of psychology, which explains why children are uniquely susceptible to persuasive messages. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) provides a foundation by suggesting that children learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. When they watch television commercials featuring peers enjoying fast food, smiling celebrities, or animated characters promoting snacks, children internalize these experiences as desirable behaviors. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1998) further strengthens this understanding by proposing that repeated exposure to media messages cultivates a worldview in which certain behaviors and brands are normalized. For children who lack the cognitive maturity to critically evaluate such content, the line between reality and advertisement becomes blurred. Developmental psychology, particularly Piaget's theory of cognitive development, indicates that children under the age of 12 are in stages where perception and imagery dominate their thought processes, making them especially receptive to visual and emotional cues rather than rational arguments. These psychological theories collectively suggest that children's responses to advertising are not based on informed choice but are the result of developmental vulnerabilities being exploited for commercial gain.

Persuasion Strategies in Television Advertising: Food companies employ a wide range of persuasive strategies designed to bypass rational evaluation and directly influence children's emotions and behaviors. Mascots such as Ronald McDonald or Tony the Tiger become trusted companions, creating parasocial relationships where children see them not as corporate symbols but as friendly characters. Jingles and catchy slogans embed themselves in memory, producing instant recognition and recall even in children too young to read. Celebrity endorsements, particularly from athletes and actors, enhance credibility and desirability, leading children to associate food consumption with success, fun, or physical strength. Studies have shown that children perceive foods endorsed by cartoon characters as tastier even when they are identical to unbranded versions (Roberto et al., 2010). Another powerful tactic is "pester power," where children influenced by advertisements pressure parents to purchase specific products, often leading to household dietary patterns being shaped by children's preferences (Cairns et al., 2013). Additionally, reward bundling—such as toys with fast-food meals—ties consumption to immediate gratification, reinforcing repetitive behavior. These strategies reveal that television advertising relies less on nutritional information and more on emotional manipulation, embedding brand loyalty in childhood that persists into adulthood.

Impact on Children's Food Habits and Nutrition: The persuasive power of television advertising has significant implications for children's dietary patterns. Studies indicate that children exposed to frequent food advertising consume more fast food, sugary beverages, and snack foods compared to those with less exposure (Andreyeva, Kelly, & Harris, 2011). This consumption pattern contributes directly to rising childhood obesity rates, as well as associated health issues such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension. In many cases, children begin to associate pleasure, fun, and family bonding with unhealthy food choices, leading to the normalization of diets dominated by high-fat, sugar, and salt products. The problem is exacerbated in low-income households, where children are more heavily exposed to advertising and parents may yield more quickly to pester power due to time pressures or limited resources. Evidence suggests that brand loyalty formed in childhood does not fade easily, as nostalgic associations with products like Coca-Cola or McDonald's meals persist into adulthood, often guiding dietary decisions across generations. Thus, television advertising does not merely influence one-off purchases but creates long-term consumption habits that shape health trajectories over entire lifespans.

Children's Cognitive Immaturity and Ethical Concerns: A major theme in the literature is the ethical issue of targeting children who lack the ability to critically understand advertising's persuasive intent. Livingstone and Helsper (2006) argue that children under 12 do not fully comprehend the commercial motives behind advertisements and therefore cannot exercise autonomy in resisting them. Nairn and Fine (2008) similarly highlight that advertising to children challenges ethical boundaries, as it takes advantage of cognitive immaturity to create preferences that feel like authentic choices but are actually manufactured. Ethical concerns are amplified by the fact that children exposed to such advertising often suffer long-term health consequences, making the corporate pursuit of profit appear exploitative. The balance between corporate interests and children's welfare becomes particularly fraught when corporations knowingly design campaigns that exploit developmental vulnerabilities for commercial gain. From an ethical standpoint, this raises questions of fairness, justice, and social responsibility that extend beyond marketing strategy into broader debates on child rights and public health.

HR Marketing and Corporate Responsibility: Another perspective gaining prominence in the literature is the role of human resource (HR) marketing and corporate responsibility in shaping advertising practices. Companies that heavily rely on manipulative child-focused advertising risk damaging their reputation as ethical employers. King, Grace, and Funk (2017) argue that employee

brand equity is weakened when staff perceive their organizations as unethical, leading to reduced pride and advocacy. Conversely, corporations that embed ethical responsibility into their advertising build trust capital both internally among employees and externally among consumers (Fombrun, 1996). This HR marketing perspective suggests that responsible advertising is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage in recruitment, retention, and stakeholder engagement. Recent studies emphasize that employees increasingly value working for companies that demonstrate social responsibility, particularly in areas impacting vulnerable populations such as children. Therefore, the psychological manipulation of children through television advertising is not merely a marketing issue but also an HR challenge that directly influences organizational culture and long-term sustainability.

Policy and Regulatory Responses: Literature also highlights the growing recognition of the need for regulatory intervention. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) has issued recommendations to restrict the marketing of high-fat, sugar, and salt foods to children, urging member states to adopt stricter policies. In India, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI, 2018) has introduced regulations limiting misleading claims in food advertising, while the Consumer Protection Act (2019) seeks to prevent deceptive marketing practices. In the UK, a watershed ban introduced in 2023 restricts junk food advertising before 9 p.m. to reduce children's exposure. Despite these efforts, enforcement remains inconsistent, and corporate self-regulation initiatives such as the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) in the US often fall short of meaningful reform. Literature suggests that effective regulation requires not only government action but also corporate accountability, parental education, and school-based media literacy programs to counteract the pervasive influence of advertising.

Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) provides a crucial foundation for understanding how children internalize messages from television food advertisements. According to this theory, individuals, especially children, learn behaviors by observing and imitating others, particularly when the observed actions are associated with rewards. In the context of food advertising, commercials often depict children or animated characters enjoying fast food with laughter, play, and social approval. These visual cues act as behavioral models that children are likely to replicate. For example, a child who repeatedly sees peers in advertisements having fun while eating burgers or drinking soda is more likely to associate those products with positive emotions. Over time, these associations form habitual

consumption patterns. Social Learning Theory thus explains how television ads function not simply as promotional tools but as powerful behavioral conditioning devices that shape food habits and preferences in early life.

George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1998) complements this understanding by explaining the long-term impact of repeated exposure to media messages. The theory suggests that consistent viewing of certain types of content cultivates a worldview in which the messages presented appear normal and desirable. For children, frequent exposure to commercials for high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) products normalizes their place in everyday diets. Over time, children come to see the consumption of sugary snacks or fast food not as occasional indulgences but as natural, routine behaviors. Cultivation Theory also highlights the subtlety of this influence: it is not a single commercial that shapes habits but rather the cumulative effect of thousands of messages across years of development. This perspective helps explain why childhood brand loyalty is so enduring, as early exposure becomes embedded in cultural and psychological norms that persist into adulthood.

Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) provides another important lens, emphasizing the role of awareness in resisting persuasion. The model argues that consumers develop “persuasion knowledge”—an understanding of the tactics used in advertising—which allows them to critically evaluate commercial messages. However, young children lack this level of cognitive sophistication, particularly before the age of 12. They often interpret advertisements literally, believing that mascots, celebrities, and jingles provide genuine information rather than persuasion. This developmental gap makes them uniquely vulnerable to manipulative marketing practices. In effect, advertisers exploit the absence of persuasion knowledge, embedding brand preferences before critical reasoning develops. As a result, children form emotional attachments that persist into later life, even after they acquire the cognitive ability to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising.

Brand Loyalty Theory (Oliver, 1999) explains how early exposure to products and repeated positive reinforcement transform childhood preferences into lifelong consumer habits. Loyalty is not simply a rational evaluation of product quality or price but a deep-seated emotional connection that resists change. In the case of food advertising, children who associate happiness, fun, and friendship with brands such as McDonald's or Coca-Cola often maintain these preferences into adulthood, even when healthier or cheaper alternatives exist. This loyalty is reinforced across generations, as adults introduce their childhood favorites to their own children, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational branding.

Brand Loyalty Theory thus underscores the commercial effectiveness of targeting children early, while also revealing the ethical challenges of creating attachments based on manipulation rather than informed choice.

Freeman's Stakeholder Theory (1984) extends the analysis to the ethical responsibilities of corporations. The theory emphasizes that businesses are accountable not only to shareholders but also to a wide range of stakeholders, including consumers, employees, parents, and society at large. When corporations exploit children's vulnerabilities through persuasive advertising, they risk breaching stakeholder trust, undermining their legitimacy, and facing reputational damage. From an HR marketing perspective, this misalignment between profit-driven strategies and ethical obligations can negatively affect employee pride, organizational culture, and long-term sustainability. Stakeholder Theory therefore frames the issue of child-targeted advertising not only as a marketing practice but also as a matter of corporate governance and social responsibility.

Research Objectives and Questions

The present study is guided by a set of interrelated objectives that aim to explore the psychological mechanisms through which television advertising influences children's food habits and to critically assess the ethical boundaries of such practices. The primary objective is to examine how persuasive strategies in food advertising affect children's dietary preferences and contribute to the formation of long-term brand loyalty. A second objective is to analyze the specific psychological techniques—such as the use of mascots, jingles, celebrity endorsements, and reward bundling—those advertisers deploy to bypass rational decision-making in young audiences. By focusing on these strategies, the study seeks to demonstrate how advertising capitalizes on children's cognitive immaturity to embed lasting brand associations.

Another important objective of the research is to evaluate the broader consequences of such advertising practices for public health, particularly in relation to the global rise of childhood obesity and diet-related diseases. This requires examining how frequent exposure to high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) product promotions normalizes unhealthy dietary choices and contributes to harmful food habits. At the same time, the study aims to investigate the ethical dimensions of child-targeted advertising, asking whether corporations, in prioritizing long-term profitability, cross boundaries of fairness and social responsibility. Within this framework, the study also intends to assess the role of regulatory systems and

HR marketing in shaping or constraining advertising practices, highlighting the importance of aligning business strategies with stakeholder accountability.

To address these objectives, the study is structured around the following guiding research questions: How do television food advertisements shape children's food habits and brand preferences? Which persuasive strategies are most effective in embedding emotional bonds with brands? To what extent do these practices raise ethical concerns regarding fairness, autonomy, and responsibility? How effective are existing regulatory and corporate responses in mitigating the negative impact of such advertising? Finally, what recommendations can be made to balance corporate profitability with the protection of children's psychological well-being and nutritional health?

Research Methodology

Research Design- This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and thematic research design, which is particularly suitable for investigating how television food advertisements shape children's food habits and psychological responses. The focus is not on primary data collection but on synthesizing existing literature, analyzing legal and policy frameworks, and reviewing case studies of major food corporations. This approach allows the research to explore the intersection of marketing psychology, child development, public health, and corporate responsibility. The doctrinal dimension involves examining statutory laws, international guidelines, and self-regulatory codes governing advertising to children, while the thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns in advertising strategies and their psychological effects. By combining these methods, the study captures the multidimensional nature of persuasion in food advertising.

Doctrinal and Legal Analysis - Doctrinal analysis forms an essential component of the research, as it evaluates the regulatory environment surrounding child-focused advertising. In the Indian context, the Consumer Protection Act (2019) prohibits misleading advertisements, while the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI, 2018) has established rules regarding nutrition and health claims in food promotion. Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) has issued updated recommendations to restrict the marketing of high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods to children, emphasizing global health concerns. In the United Kingdom, the 2023 watershed ban on junk food advertising before 9 p.m. illustrates a policy shift aimed at limiting children's exposure. Doctrinal

analysis of such frameworks highlights both progress and limitations, as enforcement often remains weak and corporate self-regulation insufficient to counteract aggressive marketing practices.

Thematic Content Analysis- The thematic component of the research identifies recurring strategies and themes across scholarly literature and media reports. Central themes include emotional branding, pester power, intergenerational loyalty, and the normalization of unhealthy food consumption. For example, mascots and jingles emerge consistently as tools for creating emotional attachments, while reward bundling links consumption to immediate gratification. Another recurring theme is the socioeconomic disparity in exposure to advertisements, where children from low-income families are often more heavily targeted, deepening nutritional inequalities. By analyzing these themes, the study demonstrates how advertising constructs a persuasive environment that extends beyond individual choice to shape cultural and social norms.

Case studies of multinational corporations provide concrete illustrations of how advertising strategies function in practice. McDonald's Happy Meals, Kellogg's cereal mascots, Nestlé's Maggi campaigns, and Coca-Cola's culturally embedded advertisements all exemplify deliberate efforts to secure consumer loyalty beginning in childhood. These case studies reveal how corporations employ psychological techniques to transform brands into emotional companions rather than commodities. They also demonstrate the resilience of brand loyalty built in childhood, which often persists despite health controversies, product recalls, or market competition. By grounding the analysis in real-world examples, the case study method reinforces the theoretical claims made in the research.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Contribution - Ethical considerations guide the study, particularly in acknowledging the vulnerability of children as research subjects. As the analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, it avoids exposing children directly to potentially harmful advertising. The research critiques manipulative marketing practices without endorsing them, and emphasizes the importance of future empirical studies being conducted under strict ethical review standards with parental consent. Methodologically, the study contributes by linking consumer psychology and advertising theory with HR marketing and legal frameworks. It also proposes a "loyalty pathway model" in which advertising exposure leads to brand recognition, emotional attachment, consumer loyalty, and intergenerational transfer. This model highlights how persuasion in television advertising operates as both a short-term sales driver and a long-term investment in consumer pipelines.

Analysis and Discussion

Persuasion as Psychological Conditioning- Television advertising directed at children is not merely a process of informing consumers about products but an exercise in psychological conditioning. The strategies employed by corporations are specifically tailored to exploit the cognitive immaturity of children, who lack the ability to critically evaluate persuasive intent. For example, Social Learning Theory suggests that children imitate behaviors they observe, particularly when those behaviors are associated with positive reinforcement. Advertisements often portray children laughing and playing while consuming fast food, creating an impression that such behaviors are linked with happiness and social acceptance. Similarly, mascots and characters such as Ronald McDonald are designed to function as companions rather than commercial symbols, reinforcing emotional familiarity. This form of persuasion does not rely on rational arguments about nutrition or value but on embedding products within the emotional fabric of childhood experiences. Over time, this conditioning creates a powerful attachment that evolves into brand loyalty, resistant to rational scrutiny even in adulthood.

Influence on Food Habits and Consumption Patterns- The most direct consequence of persuasive advertising is its impact on children's food habits. Studies consistently demonstrate that exposure to food advertising increases children's preference for high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) products, often leading to higher rates of consumption of sugary beverages, snacks, and fast food. For instance, research has shown that children exposed to fast-food advertisements are more likely to request those products from their parents and more likely to consume them, contributing to poor dietary patterns (Andreyeva, Kelly, & Harris, 2011). These food habits, once established in early life, are difficult to change. A child who grows up associating fun and reward with fast food is likely to carry these preferences into adulthood, where they may continue to choose unhealthy options despite knowing the risks. In this way, persuasion in advertising directly undermines public health goals, fueling rising rates of childhood obesity and related illnesses such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

Pester Power and Family Dynamics- A significant mechanism through which persuasion influences consumption is the phenomenon of "pester power." Children exposed to food advertising often exert pressure on parents to purchase advertised products, leading to shifts in household food consumption. Cairns et al. (2013) highlight that pester power is particularly effective in nuclear families where parents may yield to children's demands due to time pressures or the desire to avoid conflict. In India, where dual-income households are increasingly common, busy parents may be more inclined to acquiesce to

children's requests for fast food or sugary snacks. This dynamic extends the influence of advertising beyond the child to the entire family, creating patterns where unhealthy products become normalized as part of family routines. For example, a McDonald's outing may evolve into a weekend tradition, embedding brand loyalty not just in the child but across the household. Pester power thus transforms children from passive recipients of advertising into active influencers within family consumption decisions.

Intergenerational Brand Loyalty- One of the most striking outcomes of persuasive advertising is the creation of intergenerational loyalty pipelines. When children are exposed to brands at an early age, they not only retain those preferences into adulthood but also introduce them to their own children. This cycle ensures that corporations secure consumer bases across multiple generations, turning brand loyalty into a cultural legacy. Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nestlé are examples of companies that have successfully embedded themselves into childhood memories, creating nostalgic associations that persist even in the face of health controversies. Adults often recall jingles or mascots from their childhood with fondness, and this nostalgia influences their purchasing decisions as parents. In this way, persuasive advertising during childhood functions as a long-term investment for corporations, ensuring that customer pipelines remain steady across decades. From a public health perspective, however, this phenomenon perpetuates unhealthy dietary practices across generations, making it difficult to break cycles of poor nutrition.

Ethical Boundaries and the Exploitation of Vulnerability- The ethical dilemma surrounding persuasive advertising to children lies in the exploitation of cognitive immaturity. Children cannot give informed consent, nor can they fully comprehend the commercial motives behind advertisements. As a result, the preferences they develop are not autonomous choices but the product of manipulation. Livingstone and Helsper (2006) argue that advertising literacy does not typically develop until after age 12, meaning that younger children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. This raises serious ethical concerns: should corporations be allowed to shape lifelong consumption habits by targeting children during their formative years? The answer, from an ethical standpoint, leans toward no, as the practice undermines fairness and autonomy. Moreover, children from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately exposed to advertising, often because they watch more television, turning brand loyalty into a driver of nutritional inequality. Ethical concerns therefore intersect with social justice, as persuasive advertising exacerbates disparities in health outcomes across socioeconomic groups.

HR Marketing and Corporate Responsibility- Beyond consumer impact, persuasive advertising also raises challenges within corporations themselves. From an HR marketing perspective, companies that rely on manipulative child-targeted advertising risk undermining their reputation as ethical employers. Employees who perceive their organizations as exploitative may experience moral conflict, reducing their pride in the company and willingness to act as brand advocates (King, Grace, & Funk, 2017). Conversely, when companies embed responsibility into their advertising strategies, they can build trust capital both internally and externally. For example, corporations that promote healthier products or reduce reliance on manipulative mascots align themselves with ethical values that resonate with employees and consumers alike. In an era where employees increasingly seek meaning and responsibility in their work, aligning HR marketing with ethical advertising is not only a moral imperative but also a competitive advantage in recruitment and retention. Thus, the psychological impact of television advertising on children is not just a consumer issue but an organizational one, shaping corporate culture and long-term sustainability.

Public Health Implications- The long-term public health consequences of persuasive advertising are profound. The normalization of unhealthy food habits contributes to the global obesity epidemic, which the World Health Organization has identified as one of the most pressing health challenges of the 21st century. Childhood obesity is not merely a matter of weight but a precursor to chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular illness, and mental health issues related to body image and self-esteem. Persuasive advertising exacerbates this crisis by encouraging excessive consumption of unhealthy products, while simultaneously undermining efforts by governments and health organizations to promote balanced diets. The contradiction between public health goals and corporate marketing strategies highlights the urgent need for regulatory intervention and corporate accountability. Without meaningful reform, the psychological impact of advertising will continue to undermine public health initiatives, creating long-term burdens on healthcare systems and society at large.

Regulatory and Policy Challenges- While various regulations exist to limit children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising, enforcement remains inconsistent. The Consumer Protection Act (2019) in India and the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) provide some restrictions, but loopholes and self-regulation often dilute their effectiveness. In the United States, the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) has been criticized for its voluntary nature and limited impact. The UK's watershed ban on junk food ads before 9 p.m. represents a stronger intervention, but global

disparities in regulation mean that children in many countries remain largely unprotected. Furthermore, digital platforms complicate the issue, as children increasingly consume content online where regulations are weaker. This highlights the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral policies that integrate television and digital advertising, ensuring consistent protection for children across media platforms.

Findings

Early Brand Recognition and Attachment: The analysis confirms that children develop brand recognition at an early age, often before they can read or write, and that this recognition is quickly tied to emotional attachment. Logos, mascots, and jingles serve as cognitive shortcuts, allowing children to identify brands and associate them with happiness, fun, and social bonding. This attachment persists into adolescence and adulthood, laying the groundwork for long-term loyalty that resists rational evaluation of product quality or health consequences.

Advertising as a Driver of Food Habits: Television food advertisements play a direct role in shaping children's dietary preferences and consumption habits. Exposure to high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) product promotions is strongly correlated with increased demand and consumption of those products. Persuasive techniques such as reward bundling and celebrity endorsements encourage children to view unhealthy foods not just as occasional treats but as central to everyday life. As a result, food habits formed in childhood often align poorly with nutritional guidelines, contributing to obesity and diet-related illnesses.

Pester Power and Household Influence: The study also highlights the importance of pester power, through which children actively influence family purchasing decisions. Advertising equips children with persuasive tools that they deploy at home, often leading parents to purchase advertised products despite health concerns. This phenomenon ensures that the impact of advertising extends beyond the child to the household, reinforcing brand loyalty across family units. Over time, these patterns evolve into family traditions—such as weekend fast-food outings—that sustain intergenerational pipelines of consumer loyalty.

Intergenerational Loyalty and Cultural Normalization: One of the most significant findings is the creation of intergenerational loyalty. Brands that embed themselves into children's memories often persist across generations, as adults introduce their childhood favorites to their own children. This cycle

transforms commercial loyalty into a cultural norm, making it particularly difficult to challenge unhealthy dietary practices. The normalization of fast food, sugary drinks, and processed snacks reflects the success of advertising in transforming consumption choices into cultural rituals.

Ethical and Organizational Implications: Finally, the findings underscore the ethical and organizational consequences of persuasive advertising. Corporations that exploit children's cognitive immaturity for profit risk undermining fairness, autonomy, and stakeholder trust. From an HR marketing perspective, such practices may harm employee morale and organizational reputation, as staff perceive a misalignment between corporate values and ethical responsibility. Conversely, companies that adopt ethical advertising and promote healthier products have the opportunity to build trust capital both internally and externally, creating sustainable consumer and employee loyalty.

Recommendations

Parents play a crucial role in mediating the influence of persuasive advertising on their children. One effective strategy is to build media literacy at home by openly discussing the purpose of advertisements and explaining how mascots, jingles, and celebrity endorsements are designed to persuade rather than inform. Rather than imposing outright bans, parents can redirect children's enthusiasm toward healthier choices by making nutritious food fun and appealing, for example, through creative packaging, cooking together, or framing healthy eating as a family activity. Additionally, setting limits on screen time, in line with the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of less than two hours of daily media exposure, can reduce the frequency of brand impressions and the resulting demands for unhealthy foods. Schools are key environments for countering the persuasive impact of food advertising. Integrating media literacy into curricula can help children critically analyze advertising messages, recognize persuasion techniques, and make more informed choices. Nutrition education programs should go beyond facts about food groups to address the social and emotional dimensions of eating, equipping children with resilience against advertising pressures. Partnerships between schools and local food producers can also encourage healthy eating habits by normalizing fresh and nutritious foods within the school environment. By fostering awareness and offering healthier alternatives, schools can mitigate the harmful influence of commercial advertising. Corporations need to embed ethical responsibility into their advertising strategies, particularly when targeting vulnerable groups such as children. HR marketing plays a crucial role in this transformation, ensuring that external campaigns align with internal corporate values and employee expectations. Companies should shift their focus

toward promoting healthier products, reducing reliance on manipulative tactics such as toy bundling and cartoon mascots. Employee training on ethical branding can strengthen organizational culture, while internal feedback mechanisms can empower staff to flag campaigns that risk reputational damage. By embedding responsibility into the Employee Value Proposition (EVP), corporations can build trust capital that enhances long-term sustainability. Stronger regulations are essential to protect children from manipulative advertising. Governments should adopt stricter restrictions on the marketing of HFSS products during children's programming, drawing from the UK's 9 p.m. watershed ban as a model. In India and similar contexts, enforcement of existing laws such as the Consumer Protection Act (2019) and FSSAI guidelines must be strengthened to close loopholes and ensure compliance. Internationally, coordination with WHO recommendations can provide consistent global standards. At the same time, policies should encourage collaboration with civil society and consumer advocacy groups to monitor corporate practices, ensuring that marketing strategies prioritize children's welfare alongside profitability.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that television food advertising directed at children operates as a powerful tool of persuasion, shaping not only immediate consumption patterns but also long-term brand loyalty that persists into adulthood and across generations. Unlike adults, children lack the cognitive maturity to critically evaluate the persuasive intent behind advertising, which makes them particularly vulnerable to emotional appeals embedded in mascots, jingles, celebrities, and toy bundling. These strategies exploit developmental weaknesses to create emotional bonds with products, bonds that often resist rational evaluation even when children grow older and acquire greater media literacy. The evidence highlights that advertising exerts a direct influence on children's food habits, leading to increased consumption of high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) products and contributing to the rising prevalence of childhood obesity and diet-related health conditions. The impact is not limited to individual children but extends to families through the mechanism of pester power, as children persuade parents to purchase advertised foods, thereby normalizing unhealthy dietary practices within households. Over time, these habits solidify into cultural traditions, ensuring intergenerational pipelines of loyalty that benefit corporations while burdening public health systems. From an ethical perspective, persuasive advertising to children raises serious concerns. It undermines autonomy by creating preconditioned preferences before critical reasoning can develop, exploits vulnerability for commercial gain, and perpetuates nutritional inequality,

particularly among low-income families that are more heavily exposed to advertising. These practices contradict the principles of fairness and responsibility that corporations are expected to uphold under stakeholder theory. Moreover, they create organizational risks, as employees may view manipulative child-targeted advertising as inconsistent with ethical values, leading to reputational harm and weakened employee engagement. At the same time, the study underscores that profitability and responsibility need not be mutually exclusive. Corporations that embrace ethical marketing practices—by promoting healthier products, reformulating existing offerings, and aligning campaigns with transparent values—can build sustainable trust capital. HR marketing has a critical role in embedding ethics into advertising, ensuring that strategies resonate not only with consumers but also with employees who value responsibility and integrity. For policymakers, stricter regulations are essential to protect children from manipulative advertising, and for parents and educators, building media literacy provides an important line of defense against commercial persuasion.

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