



## General Article

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# Adverse Impact of Marketing Communications on Health of Children- Specific Reference to its Impact on Child Obesity

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Obesity is one subject with which all are suddenly concerned and alarmed. In India, however, we do not pay much attention to the issue of Obesity. Primary reason for this is our attitude towards health issues-which is looked upon as more of a necessary evil and is not given due importance/priority in our mind, right from childhood. Health issues are noticed and tackled only when one falls sick/ill. Till then, such matters are grossly neglected. However, following observations by a report from OECD (Organisation of Economic and Cooperation Development) needs to be taken very seriously. "India is now in the grip of an obesity epidemic and the trend needs to be immediately arrested by taxing junk food, restricting food ads and making food labeling clearer"<sup>1</sup>. The study that looked at the burden of overweight citizens in six countries- Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Russia and South Africa has found that India's overweight rates increased by 20% in last decade or so. Currently, almost one in five men and over one in six women are overweight. In some urban areas, the rates are as high as 40%"<sup>2</sup>. The report further says, "Obesity is the root for several non-communicable diseases (NCDs)." It is predicted that by 2030, nearly 70% of all global deaths will be from non-communicable disease like cancer, diabetes, and respiratory and heart disease<sup>1</sup>. Of these 70% of deaths, 80% will be in the less wealthy nation like India. It is also worth making a note of the fact that most developed countries have already woken up to this dreaded development of spread of obesity (Annexure 1) and are trying to arrest the same by targeting children as it is firmly believed that this problem has to be

tackled from childhood level - all eating habits are developed during this stage.

In view of this, an attempt has been made here to review the problem of impact of Marketing communications by all processed food manufacturers, on health of children. I would also like to mention here that marketing communication includes not only advertisements but also all kinds of promotional activities associated with marketing of a product. This list includes event management, participation in fairs, exhibitions, direct marketing, various promotional schemes (like introductory offers etc.) bill boards, packaging of products, product displays at various vantage locations and so on. The combined effect of such efforts is so high that children, from early childhood get habituated to eating of junk food. More importantly, the children do not even realize that what they are eating is a kind of poison. So much is the power of Marketing Communication, these days. We should also consider the fact that obesity is also a function of well off children vis a vis not so well off children. One can see from the chart (Annexure 2) that percentage of students who are affected by obesity are more predominant in private schools as compared to Govt. schools. It is safe to assume that eating habits are different for the students going to private schools and students going to Govt. schools. Before I plunge into the main topic - impact of marketing communications on the health of children- I would like to introduce a concept regarding human understanding of things around him. After explaining this concept, I will then show its relevance to the main topic. Thereafter, I propose to dwell in more details on the adverse

impact of marketing communications on health of children.

### **Human understanding of things around him**

We humans have limited perceptive and cognitive capacity. We take in and make sense of only limited aspects of the world around us (something similar to the fact that we read news paper every 24 hours, regularly. Now, world is so large and consists of so many societies and each society has so many sub societies. During past 24 hours, in such a vast world so many events happen which are worth to be informed to people. But, news paper has its own limitations of gathering, evaluating, weighing, short listing and ultimately to make a final print of very few from the short listed events to be reported. As a reader, one is however, aware of only those events which are finally reported and he is totally unaware of rest of all the events of all the societies in the world occurred during the same period). We have thus, of necessity, developed heuristics - "rules of thumb" - that allow us to make sense of the world and move in it without having to constantly perform an exhaustive analysis of what is actually going on in the world. These rules of thumb serve us well, but they are imperfect, and they lead to systematic biases in our thinking. Among these biases, or, really, a way of theorizing across our aggregated biases, is dispositionism. Our conscious awareness is limited to a few highly salient features of the external world and a few salient features of our inner lives (such as our conscious thoughts and preferences, the experiences of will - collectively called our dispositions). Unless there is some highly salient situational influence clearly overbearing dispositional choice, we mistakenly attribute our own and other people's behavior to those limited features of our external and internal worlds (of which we are consciously aware). In the process, we exclude appreciating the ways in which we are moved by powerful situational influences in the world around us, and unseen features of the world within us.

Also fundamental to the situational character are powerful internal motivations that shape our receipt and processing of information, and drive us towards opinions and behaviors in ways that we do not appreciate. For example, we are motivated to view ourselves in a self-affirming fashion. We are further motivated to view in an affirmative fashion the groups and social systems of which we are a part. We tend to receive and process information in a manner that supports these motivations. They are a central feature of our

inner lives and they continually shape our interactions with the external world - but we are usually blind to them. Even as we engage in motivated reasoning regarding ourselves, our groups, and our social system, we believe ourselves to be reasoning objectively, fairly, and rationally. It is in this sense that these motivations are situational; though hidden, they constitute an influential aspect of our situational character. The fact that we tend not to appreciate the influence of these motivations on our thoughts and behaviors contributes substantially to our dispositionism. Under these cognitive and motivational processes are deeply laden "visceral factors," (our internal feelings, not our intellect) which influence us profoundly, but which we tend not to see. Such visceral factors include our eating systems, and also, at a deeper remove, our experience of will.

Consider the eating system, which has relevance to the topic of this paper. We tend to believe that our experience of hunger is directly related to our body's imminent need for food. We eat because we are hungry, and believe we feel hungry because we need to eat. But we are mistaken. Scientists have established that our experience of hunger is largely unrelated to our body's imminent or even short-term need for food. Instead, the symptoms that we associate with the experience of hunger (for example a palpable - strongly felt-drop in blood sugar) are actually caused by the body's eating system preparing itself for the anticipated intake of food, and the massive amount of blood sugar that comes with it. Thus, hunger is caused by the body's anticipation of eating (and not by actual need for eating)! Scientists have also demonstrated that due to the fact that the problem of food scarcity has bedeviled human society throughout most of our history on Earth, we long-ago evolved eating systems that are oriented towards consuming as much food as possible, especially highly caloric food, whenever food is available, regardless of the body's present energy needs. The body stores excess energy as fat for use during lean times. This may have served us well in times of food scarcity, but in the modern world, where for many, food is made more or less constantly available, it can be powerfully misleading, even deadly. Visceral factors (strong inner feelings) such as hunger and eating fundamentally shape our situational character, yet their influence is obscure to our intuitive experience of ourselves. This approach thus predicts that corporations will strive to exercise unseen situational influence over consumers. Certainly such influence extends through the stimulation of

consumption, as we shall soon see that it has in the junk-food market. But critical realism further predicts that one of the crucial ways that corporations will exercise situational influence is by cultivating and promoting and dispositionism, to regulators, and to consumers themselves. While corporations appreciate the fact that people are situational characters, they have a great stake in widespread dispositionism, because it is this outlook that places responsibility, for any bad outcomes associated with consumer behavior, squarely on consumers themselves, rather than on the situational influences that may be driving that behavior. We call this process "deep capture". Broken Scale was dedicated to elaborating these concepts and testing these predictions in the specific context of the obesity epidemic. It became necessary to examine, in some detail the ways in which the food industry has powerfully shaped consumer behavior in this area, and how the industry has evaded responsibility for having done so by pursuing deep capture<sup>3</sup>.

### **Childhood Obesity and Junk-Food Advertising**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 16 percent of U.S. children ages 6 to 19 - around 9 million children - suffer from obesity. This is triple the rate of three decades ago, and the trend shows no signs of slowing. The obesity epidemic is bringing with it widespread human suffering - in the form of diabetes, diseases of the heart, liver, and kidneys, depression, and premature death, as well as an enormous social cost in terms of public healthcare expenditures dedicated to dealing with these conditions. In India too, the situation is alarming. One study on obesity among school going children of urban areas suggest a substantial rise in number of children becoming obese (Annexure 2).

There are, of course, many contributing factors to the childhood obesity epidemic. To understand what part corporate behavior plays in it, we must understand that market forces compel successful firms in the junk-food industry to exploit any situational advantage they can, to influence children to consume their products. One very powerful method of situational influence that firms have at their disposal is marketing communications. The most widespread advertising method is the use of broadcast promotions on television for junk-food products. Billboard and print advertising in newspapers and magazines are other familiar and widespread methods. More recently, market pressures have led to the creation of innovative forms of advertising, including in schools, on the Internet, through cell phones, and through product placement and promotion directly

in the content of entertainment programming. Social scientists have been somewhat slow to study these innovative methods of advertising than corporations have been.

There is, however, a formidable body of social science analyzing conventional methods of advertising to children, particularly in television advertising. Watching television has become "the dominant pastime of youth" throughout the industrialized world. In USA alone, today's corporate world spend no less than \$12 billion per year in promoting junk food to children. Most of it is spent on television advertising. Studies estimate that children in the United States see between twenty thousand to forty thousand television commercials each year. The vast majority of these advertisements are for fast food, soft drinks, sugared cereal, and candy. The consensus among researchers and the revealed opinion of profit-oriented market players is that television advertising contributes substantially to the heavy consumption of junk food on the part of children. It is important to appreciate that television advertising contributes to childhood obesity in multiple ways. Perhaps most importantly, junk-food advertising alters children's diets by inducing preferences for junk-food consumption. Additionally, junk-food advertising contributes substantially to sedentary habits (tendency to sit a lot) in children, which contribute to weight gain. Advertising pays for the programming that draws children to the couch and away from more physically strenuous activity, so that they will be sitting more-or-less still when the programming is interrupted with advertising. Thus, television programs aimed at children are essentially advertisements for advertisements. That is the sense, undoubtedly, in which Studies also show that children, like adults, often eat while watching television, food that would likely not be consumed were they engaged in some other activity. Children's programming is very well understood by the food industry.

Just how does exposure to junk-food advertising lead to the consumption of junk food by children? The process is somewhat unclear. What is less clear, however, is that the process does not resemble the stylized picture of a rational player gathering and responding to information about the availability and price of a good for which the player has a pre-existing preference. The findings in this area are much more consistent with a situational character-type conception of agency and consumer behavior. As a recent co commission report of the American Psychological Association summarized: Commercials are highly effective at employing

production conventions, or formal features, to attract children's attention, such as unique sound effects and auditory changes, rapidly moving images, and audiovisual gimmicks and special effects. Advertising to children avoids any appeal to the rational. Instead, it emphasizes that ads are entertainment and 'enjoyable for their own sake,' as opposed to providing any real consumer information. The most common persuasive strategy employed in advertising to children is to associate the product with fun and happiness, rather than to provide any factual product-related information. For example, a commercial featuring Ronald McDonald dancing, singing, and smiling in McDonald's restaurants without any mention of the actual food products available reflects a fun/happiness theme. This strategy is also found used very frequently. Thus, it is my submission that the junk-food industry's claim that it is sedentary lifestyles, rather than food consumption habits, that is responsible for childhood obesity would not, even if it were true, absolve the industry of responsibility for the epidemic. With cereal ads, which often include spokes-characters (like Tom and Jerry and so on) to help children identify the product. In contrast, most commercials fail to mention even the major grain used in each cereal.

Some researchers have argued that junk-food advertising makes use of deeply ingrained information-transmitting cues through which human young have, from time immemorial, learned what foods are beneficial to eat, and which are to be avoided. The themes emphasized in television advertisements for foods appear to be providing information that once served as a signal of nutritional value. Such cues, which have been shown to be influential in the development of eating habits in other mammals, involve themes such as food being fought over, or the consumption of a food item being accompanied by exaggerated visible signs of enjoyment, as well as of health and vitality. When children respond to such cues and consume the advertised foods, they encounter foods that are filled with salt, sugar, and fat, precisely the kinds of highly caloric foods our evolutionarily eating systems are oriented towards consuming in large amounts when they are available. Unfortunately, such foods, which were available only intermittently in natural conditions under which our eating systems evolved, are today made ubiquitously available to children by the food industry, not just in grocery stores, but in schools, shopping centers, gasoline stations, and any other place corporations can reach. Much of the research in this area has focused on tracking children's own conscious understanding of the advertisements they see. Such

studies have established that young children have little understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising. Children begin to understand advertising intent around the age of seven or eight. Preteens, this research suggests, possess the cognitive ability to process advertisements but do not necessarily do so. These findings provide important evidence of the unseen influence of junk-food advertising on children. But the importance of such findings to the overall analytic objective in this article should not be overstated. Even though adults may recognize the persuasive intent of advertisements that does not mean that the advertisements do not influence adults in ways they do not appreciate. Indeed, advertising's powerful grip on adults is bolstered by the irony that most adults believe advertising probably manipulates other consumers, but not themselves. While it is cause for concern that children do not recognize the persuasive intent of junk-food advertising, one must guard from the unseen power of advertising to manipulate consumer behavior.

### Remedy

This is a serious matter and one needs to look around, to find out remedies for our country. Consider few steps taken in USA, in the past. The FTC (Federal Trade Commission) in USA proposed banning all television advertising to children in the late-1970s. Despite the fact that the FTC does not appear to have the appetite for it, Senators proposed legislation in June 2004 that would broadly empower the FTC to restrict advertising of food and beverages to children, and which would ban junk-food advertising to children in schools altogether. Other nations suffering their own childhood obesity crises have also begun to respond, in part, by restricting junk-food advertising. Sweden, for example, has implemented a near total ban on any advertising directed at children under the age of twelve. Similarly, Canadian law purports to prohibit all advertising directed at children under thirteen. Other countries have less complete, but still significant, bans: Belgium bans all advertising during children's television programming, and Australia bans advertisements during television programming directed at preschoolers. Few remedies suggested are listed below:

All advertisements in children programme or channels designed for children as target audience, must be censored before by Ministry of Health, Govt of India (before they are allowed to be released in all media like print media-news paper/magazines, electronic media, radio, internet, bill boards and any promotional material such as packaging, printed leaflets and so on). Criterion should focus on there must be product information,

there must not be excessive communication reg. "Happiness" shown on the person (implying that use of such products lead to happiness/healthy body and mind). There should be restriction on number of ads to be released during children prime time, during major events like World Cup/IPL 4 / and so on (this is so as, most companies are planning to spend more than 50% of their annual budget in the year 2011 during 90 days of cricket carnival World cup and IPL 4).

More revolutionary and therefore, more difficult to implement, is forcing all processed food marketers to prepare Health care awareness marketing communications and make them release those advertisements/promotional material side by side and back to back. In other words, such companies have to spend 50% of their advertising budget on children for their health awareness. Many Corporates like Pepsi Co. and Coca cola Co. have come out with their version of health related products /drinks. They are coming out with such products as they feel that health awareness is increasing among youth and also they have "guilt" of providing products with excessive sugar/high fat /high calorie and so on. Such practices (of providing health related products) should be encouraged by

the Govt. by providing incentives to make health products (eg reduction in excise duty, relief on imports duty on imported component of the product and so on). All processed food companies must be forced to keep away from advertising near school campuses. This will have a balancing impact on children as at home where they are constantly bombarded with unhealthy marketing communications. Govt. of India and all State Govts. should run their own Advertising campaign clearly mentioning ill effects of Junk Food. The campaign should run round the year and budget for this can be met from charging extra cess (tax, like education cess) on sale of all processed foods<sup>4</sup>.

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### Annexure 1 (Source : 13 Nov. 2010 , Times of India)

#### Everyday Signs that Obesity Rates Are Increasing

Many experts agree that obesity is one of the most pressing health problems facing the country. Over the last twenty years, obesity rates have *doubled* in adults and children and *tripled* in teens. Two-thirds of Americans are now overweight or obese. Yet some food industry groups question whether obesity rates are increasing and instead, claim that the rising rates are due to a change in the definition for obesity (Body Mass Index). For anyone else who is skeptical, here are some other signs that obesity rates are going up.

- Because of safety concerns, the Federal Aviation Administration has instructed airlines to add ten pounds to approved passenger weights.
- When administering vaccines and drawing blood, doctors now need longer needles to penetrate thicker layers of fat on Americans' bodies.
- Almost 25% of women in their 50's are too large to have their body fat measured with a traditional skin fold caliper, an instrument developed in the 1950's.
- Liposuction is the most commonly performed cosmetic surgical procedure in the U.S., increasing 118% between 1997 and 2001.
- Over the last decade, diabetes rates rose 60% in the U.S. (Over half of diabetes cases are due to overweight, poor diet and physical inactivity).
- Today's size 10 was sold as a women's size 14 in the 1940's.
- The Gap, Limited Too and Target are selling plus-sized clothes for youth.

Plus-size boutique Lane Bryant is expected to increase its number of stores from 650 to 1,000 over five years. Catherine's Plus Sizes is projected to increase from 470 to 700 stores. The plus-size clothing market generates \$23 billion in sales a year, accounting for a quarter of women's clothing sales.

- One of the reasons that the Boston Red Sox decided to rebuild the legendary Fenway Park was that the seats were too narrow for today's baseball fans. The seats in the new ballpark are four inches wider.
- More benches and bigger seats have been installed in Seattle's Puget Sound ferries to accommodate wider riders.

### Annexure 2 (Source : 13 Nov. 2010 , Times of India)

#### Child obesity in India (as % of total school going children)

	Private schools	Government schools
Delhi	32.6	9.6
Mumbai	30.4	7.9
Agra	25.5	5.6
Allahabad	19.3	9.2
Dehradun	17.5	3.3
Jaipur	16.5	5.5
Overall	24.1	7.0