

Child-centric Thematic Analysis toward Food Advertising Literacy among Indian Children: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This qualitative research aimed to investigate children's perspectives on television food advertisements to understand the reasons behind their preferences and the specific elements that appeal to them. With increasing media influence on children's dietary choices, the study emphasizes the need to consider their viewpoints in advertising strategies.

Materials and methods: The study was conducted in the Department of Pediatric Dentistry at a tertiary care hospital among children aged 9–12 years. Participants were exposed to a variety of television food advertisements and were then asked to share their opinions on what they liked about them. Their responses were recorded and analyzed using thematic analysis, which helped identify recurring patterns and psychological cues influencing their preferences.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed six key advertising themes that significantly influenced children's preferences: (i) Positive emotional relations, (ii) cognitive development, (iii) perception and conditioning, (iv) music and its effects, (v) parasocial interaction, and (vi) healthy and nutritious associations. These themes offer valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms driving children's responses to food advertisements.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the psychological and emotional factors that shape children's receptivity to television food advertisements. The study emphasizes the importance of recognizing children's needs and rights in the context of media exposure and food marketing.

Clinical significance: By uncovering the elements that appeal most to children, this research supports a child-centric approach to food advertising. It advocates for a media environment that promotes healthier choices and contributes to the overall well-being of children.

Keywords: Advertising strategies, Psychological model, Qualitative interviewing, Thematic analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Children are exposed to various food-related advertisements; these advertisements consist of various tactics and themes trying to persuade children to like their product and ultimately make a purchase. These marketing strategies are being prepared and evolved after rigorous psychological evaluation of children's mindset.

Qualitative interviews with children offer a unique opportunity to explore their authentic perspectives on advertisements, uncovering nuanced insights that quantitative methods may overlook. This study was initiated with the research question proposed in the year 2004 which primarily explored the impact of television advertising on children in relation to product usage.¹

The current research will enhance the understanding of the topic beyond the jurisdiction of previous quantitative as well as qualitative approaches conducted by Chaudhary² and George.³ The current research incorporates not only qualitative interviewing methods but also employs thematic analysis to better understand the tactics used by advertisers to enhance the sales of the packaged food products, which was largely missing in most of these previous researches. This dual-phase questioning approach shall allow for a nuanced exploration of the preferences. This structured approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the multifaceted reasons behind children's likes and dislikes. The method emphasizes detailed probing to uncover the rationale behind their preferences, including emotional responses, social influences, and cognitive evaluations. The use of cross-questioning to explore various

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dimensions of preference further enhances the depth of analysis, revealing the complex interplay of factors influencing children's attitudes toward advertisements.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection and Interview Process

To investigate children's understanding of persuasive tactics offered by advertisers, they were exposed to a series of advertisements that were prepared in accordance with previous research conducted in Netherlands, who prepared a compilation of advertisement

of 20–30 seconds each respectively.⁴ Advertisements included packaged food products which are advertised for the maximum number of times on the children-centric channels with maximum viewership these advertisements were categorized into chocolates, snack, sugar-sweetened beverages, instant noodles, juice, and biscuits to ensure the overall distribution of the variety of food products. The viewership of the advertisement and channel selection were taken into consideration from an ICMR project being carried out by the authors.

This cross-sectional mixed-methods study was conducted from December 2022 to February 2023 at a tertiary-level dental hospital among 9–12-year-old children visiting the pediatric dentistry outpatient department. The parents in the waiting area of children fulfilling the inclusion criteria of age were informed regarding the nature of the study, and children were enrolled only when the parents consented to participation. Children who were ready to cooperate were seated on a comfortable chair in a room next to a waiting area with visibility of their parents, were then asked an initial research question to understand their preferences regarding advertisements and to initiate thematic analysis on their responses by a trained female child psychologist who had an extensive experience of establishing relationship with children and administration of qualitative research among subjects.

Participants who were briefed regarding the basic nature of the study, verbatim responses were meticulously recorded, ensuring an accurate representation of their thoughts. Beyond merely documenting what they liked, the methodology involved in-depth cross-questioning to extract the rationale behind their preferences. To deepen the understanding of their preferences, a series of follow-up questions was used to probe the underlying reasons for their likes and dislikes. A few examples of these probing questions, which covered various dimensions, such as emotional responses (e.g., “What feeling did the advertisement evoke?”), social influences (e.g., “Do you like the advertisement because your friends use this product?”), and cognitive aspects (e.g., “Do you prefer the ad because it features healthy ingredients?”) are mentioned here. Five questions from each dimension were asked. Forty interviews were taken until theoretical data saturation was reached. Data saturation was deemed met by the researchers as no new information surfaced, and further coding and categorization were no longer feasible. A few children (three in number) who could not complete the interview were not considered in the recordings and were excluded from the study.

The in-depth approach by three coders yielded six key themes on advertising tactics, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping children’s preferences. The findings contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of the intricate interplay between children and TV food advertising, emphasizing the significance of probing beyond surface-level responses in qualitative research.

Thematic analysis, per Braun and Clarke, entails recognizing and examining patterns in data. Widely applied across disciplines, it offers flexibility. The six-step process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, guided our research in psychology, education, social sciences, and health sciences.⁵ The steps of thematic analysis are depicted in Figure 1.

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee (Ref. No: DYPV/EC/813/22; name of institution blinded for peer review). The study was conducted from December 2022 to February 2023. This research forms part of a larger project funded by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

RESULTS

Children’s reactions were documented using a recording device, which was transcribed later. When analyzing children’s responses in qualitative interviews, thematic analysis was used. Hence, the transcribed information underwent analysis through the process of thematic analysis, a qualitative research technique employed for interpreting data. This method involves identifying and interpreting recurring themes or patterns within the dataset.⁶ The process of thematic analysis began by reading and re-reading the transcribed responses of children, some of which are attached as follows:

- Response 1: “The juice gives power. I like fruits. In this ad, the fruits and juice box were jumping. I liked to see that. I like to be a powerful and strong girl. My mother says the same thing to me every day, that we are both strong. If juice is making me powerful, I would like to have it. I liked to see the cartoon jumping around because it is fun to watch juice boxes or real-life things in a cartoon-like way. When you have the same thing, you imagine that while drinking, and it is fun.”
- Response 2: “I liked it because they are giving out free toys on this. My friends and I have a collection of toys. We see who has the greatest number of toys in our group. So, I need to buy as many Cadbury lickables as possible to win among my friends. I have eaten this before, so I know that it is tasty to eat, and they say it in the ad too. I liked the music of the ad too. The music was like a poem. Sometimes I sing along with the advertisement. That is why I know this advertisement really well.”
- Response 3: “I like this ad because we get a lot of toys with this product. I love playing with a lot of toys with my friends. I also like this product because my friends like it. All of them bring it while coming to school. I also like the taste of this. It contains chocolate. I love the taste of chocolate. I also liked the cartoon characters moving around during the ad. It was fun to watch it.”

While some participants expressed excitement over receiving free toys with products, others were intrigued by the perceived power provided by the product. Some showed fascination with

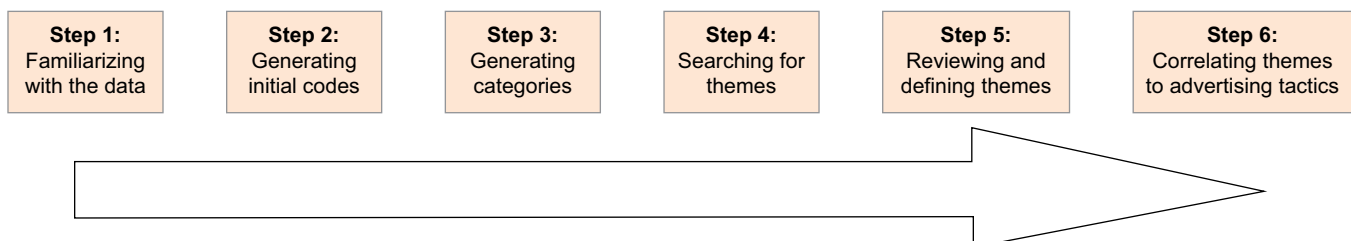
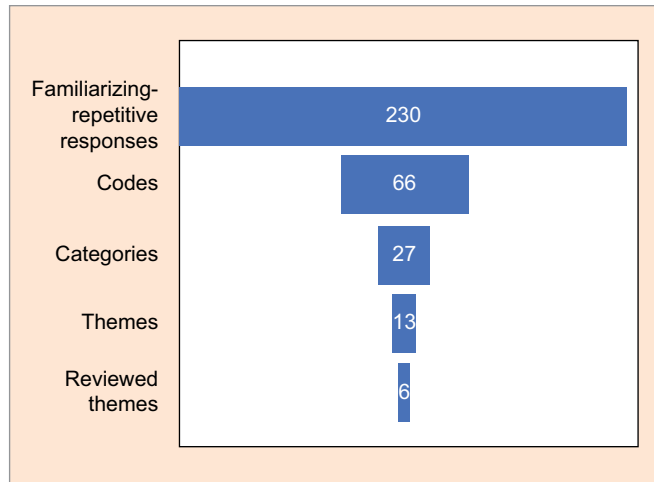


Fig. 1: Steps followed in thematic analysis

Table 1: Themes generated and tactics under themes

Sr. no.	Themes	Tactics that fall under these themes
1	Emotional and sensory appeals	Toys, animation, emotional appeal, fun, positive association with the product, and visual appeal, music
2	Social influence and parasocial appeals	Celebrity endorsement Peer popularity
3	Health and nutritional appeals	Health/nutrition/power claims
4	Advertising exposure	Ad repetition

**Fig. 2:** Stepwise distribution in thematic analysis

the movements depicted in the advertisements, among other responses, in the extensive dataset.

Four hundred and eighty repetitive responses indicate the codes that children liked about the advertisements they viewed; these were identified and highlighted from the transcribed interviews. This highlighted data was again re-read to gain a deep understanding of its content. After removing repetitive responses from each child, they were rewritten only once to be counted as a response (E.g., if 25 children responded that they liked the advertisement because that particular product gave a lot of toys to play with, that response coming from 25 children was not counted 25 times, but only once.) Through this process, responses were then found to be around 230 in number.

The codes were organized and grouped based on their similarities and differences. When compared to each other to determine possible relationships, based on their patterning, codes gave rise to generalizations, referred to as categories. 66 codes were clubbed to form initial categories.⁷ Twenty-seven such categories were formed.

Themes were then generated, ensuring they accurately captured the essence of the data found in the categories. Themes were generated to find further insights by conceptualizing and interpreting the underlying psychological meaning behind the categories.⁷ 13 such themes were found. These psychological themes were as follows:

Attachment and relationships, cognitive development for counting and comparing, emotional conditioning and intelligence, enjoyment and entertainment, gestalt psychology for perception, music and its effects, healthy and nutritious associations, social learning and influence, positive emotions and family settings, peer influence and social learning, parasocial interaction, perception of positive emotions, self-esteem and identity.

Subsequently, the identified themes were cross-verified against the structured dataset while investigating potential connections between the themes and the data. This process involved repeatedly assessing the alignment of the psychological theme development with the coded data and the entirety of the dataset. This helped to conclude themes and categorize them under four broader themes, which helped in understanding the psychological reasons behind why certain advertising tactics impact children more. A summary of the key findings is provided below in Figure 2, and the categorization of advertising themes is shown in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative study delving into children's perspectives on food advertisements through thematic analysis yields valuable insights into the psychological factors influencing their preferences. The identified themes, rooted in psychological models, offer a nuanced understanding of how and why children respond and are attracted to advertising tactics.

The thematic analysis of the responses from the study on children's preferences for TV food advertisements reveals four main key advertising themes that significantly influence their attitudes and choices. These themes are: emotional and sensory appeals; social influence and parasocial appeals; health and nutritional appeals; advertising exposure and limited literacy; and the role of cognitive development.

Emotional and Sensory Appeals

Children's attraction to jingles, animations, and visual effects echoes earlier findings that emotional engagement and sensory stimulation drive product desirability.⁸ Repetition and vivid cues condition children's perceptions, making products appear more appealing even without substantive nutritional value.

Social Influence and Parasocial Appeals

Consistent with literature on peer and celebrity influence, children in this study expressed strong attachment to characters, celebrities, and peer-driven competitions.⁹ Parasocial bonds created trust and familiarity, while peer comparisons reinforced behavioral intentions to purchase advertised products.

Health and Nutritional Appeals

Children readily accepted claims that products conferred strength, power, or health. This finding highlights the risk of misleading health claims and nutritional misinformation in advertising. This finding suggests that portraying a product as healthy and beneficial can attract both health-conscious parents and children. Children's cognitive limitations in evaluating such claims reflect their developmental stage, underlining the need for critical media literacy education.

Advertising Exposure

Perception and conditioning emerged as a crucial theme, reflecting how repeated exposure to certain advertising cues can influence children's preferences. Ads that use consistent visual and auditory elements create a sense of familiarity and comfort, which can condition children to favor the advertised product.¹⁰ This theme highlights the power of repetition and consistent branding in shaping children's perceptions. Advertisers can leverage this by ensuring that key brand elements are consistently presented across various media, reinforcing brand recognition and preference over time.

The Role of Cognitive Development

Cognitive development is being viewed as a factor shaping how children interpret advertising appeals. Younger children's preferences for animations and jingles reflect preoperational thought processes, while older children's comments about health benefits show the beginnings of concrete operational reasoning.¹⁰ Thus, the developmental stage moderates the impact of advertising tactics, amplifying susceptibility at younger ages.

Cognitive development shapes how children respond to persuasive food advertising, with psychological influences on dietary choices playing a pivotal role in long-term oral health outcomes. Asokan and Nuvvula¹¹ highlight that children's food preferences are strongly molded by psychological cues, making them particularly vulnerable to advertising that promotes cariogenic foods, thereby increasing their risk of dental caries.

Advertising Literacy

While "advertising literacy" emerged repeatedly during analysis, it was not retained as a standalone theme. This is because children's limited ability to recognize persuasive intent was evident across all four themes, whether in their literal acceptance of health claims, their attraction to jingles and animations, or their trust in characters and celebrities. Thus, advertising literacy is better understood as a cross-cutting construct that underpins children's responses to advertising, rather than as an independent thematic category.

Limitations

The entire research process is time-consuming, as the responses of each child were thematically analyzed under the intricate design of the current research study. Conducting thematic analysis among children is a challenging task.

Implications

The implications of our research extend to the realms of policy, interventions, and practices concerning children's exposure to advertising. By understanding the psychological factors influencing children's responses, policymakers can formulate regulations that prioritize children's well-being.

Interventions can be designed to promote media literacy among children, empowering them to critically evaluate advertisements. Practices in advertising can be modified to align with ethical standards that protect children's rights and foster a positive impact on their development.

The identified themes provide valuable insights for educators, parents, and advertisers, informing them about effective communication strategies and fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for children.

Overall, the methodology's unique combination of structured yet flexible approaches allows for a thorough and nuanced

exploration of children's preferences and the underlying reasons behind them.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that colorful visuals, cartoon characters, and catchy slogans are persuasive elements in advertising for children, significantly influencing their food preferences. These findings address the study aim by highlighting which features could be targeted in literacy interventions. The study also emphasizes the psychological and emotional factors that determine children's food choices. Further studies should be conducted in diverse settings to identify and address misleading and influential advertisements that affect children's choices, to support healthier behaviors, and improve the overall well-being of children.

Clinical Significance

This study highlights how specific advertising tactics influence children's food choices by influencing their emotions, cognition, and social behavior. Understanding these psychological responses can help pediatric dentists and healthcare workers advocate for media literacy and healthier food marketing. The findings support the development of targeted policy and educational initiatives to reduce the influence of unhealthy food advertising on children. Ultimately, this can contribute to better dietary habits and improved oral and overall health among children.

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