



## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT AND MANAGEMENT

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## TV VIEWING PRACTICES OF INDIAN CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

Children are exposed to a lot of television these days. It has been seen that they view TV for long hours and view a large number of ads on TV. Huge exposure to TV and ad content is seen to result into many psychological problems in children. More so, many food ads are aired during times when children watch TV or in children's programmes. In this situation, the parents need to be vigilant about what their children watch. Therefore, it is pertinent to note the patterns of TV viewing in Indian children. The present study aims to explore TV habits of Indian children and to explore awareness in parents about the type of food ads aired on programmes that children watch.

## KEYWORDS

TV viewing, children, parents, India.

## INTRODUCTION

Children across the globe are seen to spend a lot of time watching TV. In India as well, children are seen to be glued to TV sets and are thus exposed to a large number of commercials (George, 2003). Children, now a days, live in a multi-channel, multi-media environment such that there are, a) multiple TV sets in the house, or b) there are several electronic media (for example internet) to which children are exposed. Exposure to media further increases for children as most parents work outside the home these days (and this proportion is rising in India as well) who have lesser time to engage their children. In such a situation, TV acts as an electronic baby sitter for them and other caregivers who then find it easier to manage them when parents are away. Parents also like that their children get tech-savvy and so they let them watch TV without much hesitation. However, excessive TV viewing is seen to be associated with psychological problems in children like aggression, fear, and materialism (Nathanson, 1999; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003 and 2005). Children, as they watch TV, are also exposed to a large number of food ads and researchers find that most of the advertised foods are unhealthy (Consumers International, 2004 and 2008; Stitt and Kunkel, 2008). Excessive exposure to ads for these foods on TV is also found to be associated with overweight and obesity in children (Matheson *et al.*, 2004; Barkin *et al.*, 2006). Watching television itself promotes obesity at two levels. Firstly, television viewing promotes snacking (Matheson *et al.*, 2004), and secondly, food commercials aired in between also trigger the desire to take rich food (Barkin *et al.*, 2006). Children are also seen to consume a substantial proportion of their energy while watching television. They have a propensity to eat more of advertised foods which are mostly energy dense than the non-advertised healthy foods. The energy intake is also seen to increase with increase in TV viewing on weekends than on weekdays (Matheson *et al.* 2004).

High levels of TV viewing in children have led to a situation whereby obesity problems have reached alarming levels in the US, UK, and Australia. The European countries are also taking note of exposure of children to ads as they have detrimental effects on children's dietary habits. Television commercials and prime-time programmes have been identified as important influencers on the types of food that children ask their parents to buy for them and also for the food that they buy for themselves. Sweetened breakfast cereals, candy, desserts, low-nutrient beverages, and salty snack foods are the most commonly advertised products to children and are also the items most frequently requested of parents. Food-marketing practices have come under fire for targeting children and are part of the broader social controversy over marketing to children. Much of the controversy focuses on the appropriateness of particular marketing strategies in view of children's vulnerability.

In India also, problems related to exposure to ads and poor dietary habits are being witnessed. This is attributed to certain reasons, one of the main ones being increase in the number of dual-career families. Dual income families, firstly, increase the spending power of families and, secondly, make the parents more time poor. In such situations, parents do not have much option but to succumb to pressures exerted by children (as they nag their parents to buy their favourite products and brands). More so, as parents are not able to devote much time for their child's activities, buying them products is another way of compensating for lack of time devoted to children and keeping them happy. However, parents are primarily responsible for physical and psychological well being of their children. They can only take some actions if they are aware of the media habits of their children and take interest in identifying the nature of foods advertised when their children watch TV. As not much work has already been done in India, the present paper endeavours to uncover media habits of Indian children and compare across younger and older children. It also aims to shed light on the type of foods that parents find mostly advertised.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Researchers have explored TV viewing habits of children in various countries. Gortmaker *et al.* (1996) found that an average amount of TV viewing in 1990 was 4.8 hours per day for American children. Nearly one third of the youth watched more than five hours of TV every day. Hardy *et al.* (2006) also found that as children watch TV for more than two hours on an average on weekdays and that it increases on weekends. Scragg, Quigley and Taylor (2006) also reported that children are viewing similarly in New Zealand and that mean hours of TV viewing are increasing. The number of TV sets in a house is also increasing such that children have been found to have their own TV set in their bedroom. There is more than one TV in the house or the children have their own TV set in their bedroom. They were exposed to considerable amounts of TV advertising for food and three out of every four food ads were for unhealthy foods.

Researchers have also found that nearly half of the ads broadcast at times when children watch TV or on children's channels or programs are for foods (Arnas, 2006; Kelly *et al.* 2007; Stitt and Kunkel, 2008). Other studies have also confirmed that large numbers of food ads are aired on TV to target children (Hardy *et al.* 2006). A lot of food ads are advertised during the times when children watch TV. Arnas (2006) study showed that ninety percent children ate or drank while watching TV. Ninety percent of them reported to have a snack, and many of them consumed unhealthy foods such as soft drinks, chocolates, candy and cake. Nearly forty percent of the children also asked their parents to buy advertised foods (mainly sweetened products) and some of them even cried and pestered their parents in the supermarket. Younger children's food behaviour was found to be most affected as it considerably led to unhealthy food consumption in them. The nature of foods consumed is also seen to vary if TV is on during meal times. Coon *et al.* (2001) found that in families where TV was on during two or

more meals, children consumed more energy dense and nutrient poor foods (red meat, processed meats, pizza/salty snacks and soda groups). They ate less of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables and derived less energy from carbohydrates and more from total fat and saturated fat and consumed more caffeine. In a study, Jordan et al. (2006) noted that nearly half of the families surveyed had a TV set in the room designated for eating. A majority of children indicated that they ate snacks and meals in front of TV and a third of families said that they had the television on during mealtime. In a qualitative study of children in Brazil by Fiates et al. (2008), children reported to watch TV at meal times and also eating while watching TV. They voiced that watching TV interfered in the amount of food they ate.

In light of the foregoing review, the present study endeavours to uncover TV viewing practices of Indian children on weekdays and on weekends, timings of watching TV, frequency of food ads found aired during the times when children watch TV and the nature of foods advertised therein.

## METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from three cities of Punjab—Amritsar, Jalandhar and Ludhiana and its capital city of Chandigarh during the period November, 2010 to June, 2011. The three cities were chosen to represent the three regions of Punjab—Amritsar (Majha), Jalandhar (Doaba) and Ludhiana (Malwa). The capital city was chosen as it is more cosmopolitan. The mothers were the basic sampling unit for the present study as they are seen to be the primary caregivers for children. Schools were selected (randomly) out of all schools in the city that enrolled students with various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Parents of children in eight schools (two from each city), were approached through the schools. The children were asked to take the questionnaire home and get it filled by their mother. In case two children were studying in the same school, the mother was requested to fill the questionnaire keeping in mind the child who had brought it. Of the 600 questionnaires that were distributed to children, 509 (84.83%) complete questionnaires were returned. This resulted in a total sample of 509 mothers of children in the age category 5-15 years (51.27% boys).

In the sample, mothers from all educational levels were represented, although most of them were relatively well educated: 40.1% were graduates and 40.7% were post graduates. Monthly family incomes ranged from less than Rupee 30,000 per month (8.9% of the sample) to more than Rupee 40,000 (26.5% of the sample) per month. More than half of the sample of mothers was working (57.4%) and most of them worked for six days in a week, 6-8 hours every day on an average. The children came from diverse set of families: 44% came from extended families (Husband, wife, children and grandparents), 38 % came from nuclear families and 18% hailed from joint families.

Data were collected through a structured, pre-tested, and non-disguised questionnaire. To develop a list of information items for framing the questionnaire, previous literature on attitude of parents towards advertising in general, children's advertising and food advertising to children was reviewed. Experts in the area were also consulted. Online discussions were also held with other researchers and academicians and current marketing and social environment was considered. The suggestions led to minor but valuable and meaningful modifications. The preliminary draft of the questionnaire was pre-tested through personal interviews with 80 mothers. This helped in improving the questionnaire. With a few deletions and additions, the final questionnaire was developed. Frequencies and percentages, mean scores and t-test have been used to analyze the data using SPSS 17.0 version.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

At the outset, the mothers were asked to specify the number of TV sets they have in the house. Their responses are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF TV SETS IN THE HOUSE

TV sets	Frequency	Percent
1.00	195	38.3
2.00	182	35.8
3.00	89	17.5
4.00	29	5.7
5.00	14	2.8
Total	509	100.0

The table reveals that nearly seventy three percent of respondents have one or two TV sets in their houses. Only a few respondents (2.8%) stated that they had five TV sets in their house.

The mothers were further asked to specify the number of hours their child watched TV during weekdays and on weekends. Their responses are tabulated in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF HOURS OF TV WATCHING DURING WEEKDAYS

	Overall sample		Young children		Older children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
0.50	20	3.9	12	4.9	8	3
1.00	147	28.9	58	23.8	89	33.6
1.50	25	4.9	12	4.9	13	4.9
2.00	195	38.3	96	39.3	99	37.4
2.50	6	1.2	3	1.2	3	1.1
3.00	59	11.6	30	12.3	29	10.9
4.00	34	6.7	23	9.4	11	4.2
5.00	11	2.2	4	1.6	7	2.6
6.00	6	1.2	3	1.2	3	1.1
7.00	6	1.2	3	1.2	3	1.1
Total	509	100.0	244	100	265	100

The table shows that children watch TV for one or two hours on weekdays as reported by mothers for 38.3 percent and 28.9 percent children respectively. On cross-classification of responses on the basis of age, younger as well as older children (nearly 60%) watch TV for one or more hours only on weekdays. Interestingly, younger children (13.4%) are also reported to watch TV for 4-7 hours a weekday. This proportion of younger children watching TV for 4-7 hours during weekdays is higher than the proportion of older children (9.0%). Thus, younger children, in small proportion, also watch a lot of TV during weekdays.

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF HOURS OF TV WATCHING DURING WEEKENDS

	Overall sample		Young children		Older children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
0.50	3	.6	1	0.4	2	0.8
1.00	39	7.7	19	7.8	20	7.5
1.50	20	3.9	6	2.5	14	5.376
2.00	145	28.5	76	31.1	69	28.5
2.50	6	1.2	1	0.4	5	1.9
3.00	139	27.3	63	25.8	76	28.7
4.00	93	18.3	52	21.3	41	15.5
5.00	31	6.1	9	3.7	22	8.3
6.00	30	5.9	15	6.1	15	5.7
7.00	3	.6	2	0.8	1	0.4
Total	509	100.0	244	100	265	100

From Table 3, it can be seen that TV viewership increases on weekends. For the overall sample, children are reported to watch TV for two, three or four hours, their respective percentages being 28.5 percent, 27.3 percent and 18.3 percent. Similar pattern is observed for younger and older children. Younger children (78.2%) and older children (71.7%) watch TV for two, three or four hours on weekends.

A comparison of Tables 4.2 and 4.3 highlights that more children watch TV for one hour or an hour and a half on weekdays, whereas, on weekends, more children watch TV for three or four hours.

In order to understand whether TV viewing is a family activity for children or whether they watch alone, the mothers were asked to specify the person with whom the child watches TV. Their responses are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4: WITH WHOM DOES THE CHILD WATCH TV?

	Overall sample		Younger children		Older children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Alone	113	22.2	57	23.4	56	21.1
With brother/ sister	239	47.0	109	44.7	130	49.1
All family members together	211	41.5	91	37.3	120	45.3
Parents	174	34.2	84	34.4	90	34
Others	25	4.9	12	4.9	13	4.9
Total	509	100.0	244	100	265	100

The table shows that children watch TV with their brother/sister, together with all family member, parent as well as alone. Their respective percentages are 47.0 percent, 41.5 percent, 34.2 percent and 22.2 percent. Similar patterns are observed for younger as well as older children. This shows that TV viewing continues to be a family activity in Indian families.

After questioning the mothers about how many hours and with whom their child watches TV, another pertinent question was the time when the child watched TV. Responses of mothers in this regard are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5: WHEN DOES THE CHILD WATCH TV?

	Overall sample		Young children		Older children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Morning before school	20	3.9	9	3.7	11	4.2
Afternoon	162	31.8	76	31.1	86	32.5
Evening	351	69.0	165	67.6	186	70.2
Night	144	28.3	66	27.0	78	29.4

Table 5 highlights that a majority of children (69.0%) watch TV in the evening. Most of the younger children (67.6%) and older children (70.2%) also watch TV in the evening. Children are also reported to watch TV in the afternoon or at night; their respective percentages being 31.8 percent and 28.3 percent.

The study sought to note the type of products that are advertised when children watch TV. Therefore, mothers were asked to specify the frequency with which they found foods advertised especially when children watched TV from very frequently, frequently, sometimes, occasionally, and rarely. Mean score was calculated for this purpose. Their responses reveal that parents find foods ads to be aired frequently (mean scores=3.78).

In line with this, they were further asked to specify the foods they find frequently advertised out of listed foods— Snacks (such as chips), candies, sweets, chewing gums and chocolates, soft drinks, fruit juices, health supplements (such as Bournvita, Horlicks), ready to eat foods (such as Maggi, other noodles), fast food restaurants (such as McDonalds), and others. Their responses are presented in Table 4.6.

TABLE 6: FOODS FOUND ADVERTISED

Foods	Overall Sample		Younger children		Older children	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Snacks	334	65.6	150	61.5	184	69.4
Candies, sweets, gums and chocolates	273	53.6	128	52.5	145	54.7
Soft drinks	278	54.6	133	54.5	145	54.7
Fruit juices	179	35.2	98	40.2	81	30.6
Health supplements	385	75.6	181	74.2	204	77
Ready to eat foods	367	72.1	164	67.2	203	76.6
Fast food restaurants	185	36.3	77	31.6	108	40.8



Others	37	7.9	0	0.0	1	0.4
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The table points to the fact that the mothers (from the overall sample) find health supplements, ready to eat foods (such as Maggi), snacks, soft drinks and candies, sweets, gums and chocolates to be frequently advertised; their percentages are—75.6 percent, 72.1 percent, 65.6 percent, 54.6 percent and 53.6 percent, respectively. Similar patterns are observed for mother of younger as well as older children. However mother of older children, in a greater proportion, as compared to younger children report to witness food ads on TV for health supplements (77% versus 74.2%), ready to eat foods. (76.6% versus 67.2%), snacks (69.4% versus 61.5%) and fast food restaurant (40.8% versus 31.6%). The mothers of younger children however report to find fruit juices more frequently advertised as compared to older children (40.2% versus 30.6%).

All the listed foods are unhealthy, either high in sugar, salt or fat/energy. The mothers report to find these foods frequently advertised. These point to ethical issues about nature of foods targeted at children. If unhealthy foods are frequently advertised, the chances that children would also consume them would also be higher, leading to the problem of obesity.

Mothers were asked to report eating practices of children they eat lunch, dinner or snacks (from very often to rarely) i.e. whether in front of TV their responses are presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7: EATING PRACTICES IN FRONT OF TELEVISION

S. No.		Overall weighted average score	Std. Dev.	Younger children (w.a.s)	Older children (w.a.s)	(t-value)
1	Eat lunch in front of television	2.09	0.78	2.09	2.09	-0.11
2	Eat dinner in front of television	2.13	0.76	2.09	2.16	-1.01
3	Eat snacks in front of television	2.02	0.72	2.00	2.03	-4.07
4	Eat dinner with parents in front of television	2.11	0.74	2.05	2.16	-1.06

For the overall sample, the table shows that, most children eat lunch or dinner or snacks either alone or with parents only sometimes (the weighted average scores are close to 2). Similarly the younger and the older children have been reported by their mothers to eat in front of television only 'sometimes'.

In order to test the null hypothesis—"younger and older children do not differ significantly in their eating practices", t test was applied. The t-values, as seen from the table, were not found to be significant at 5% or 1% level. This also confirms that statistically also there exist no significant differences in eating practices of children in front of TV.

The mothers were asked to specify if children make purchase requests after seeing an ad for a food item on TV. All the mothers, irrespective of age of children, reported that children requested advertised foods after seeing them on TV.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present paper bring to the fore that most of the families surveyed own one or two TV sets. Children watch TV generally for one or two hours on weekdays and the viewership increases on weekends. This level of TV viewing is well within the recommended limits prescribed by American Academy of Paediatrics (Jordan *et al.*, 2006). Most of the children watch TV in the evening and it continues to be a family activity (as already established by Verma and Larson, 2002). Parents find that foods are frequently advertised when children watch TV. Mothers find that most of the advertised foods are unhealthy. More so, mothers of older children find all the products to be more heavily advertised as compared to mothers of younger children. Although mothers report use of TV during mealtimes by children, yet, eating practices of younger and older children do not differ in front of TV.

The study highlights that media habits of Indian children are well in control and closely supervised by other family members for children watch TV with other members of the family also. However, it is noteworthy that some families (nearly 10.0 per cent) report that children watch TV for more than three hours and up to seven hours on weekdays. Importantly, the proportion of younger children is higher than the proportion of older children (as older children are seen to be busier with school work). This finding needs attention for the impact of promotional elements in ads is highest among the younger children who lack the necessary ability to understand persuasiveness of TV advertising. Therefore, it seems that media habits of children could be showing a transition as faced by the western world, owing to similar patterns of socio-economic changes as that happened in the West. Marketers are also turning their attention to the more lucrative developing markets like India where the potential is quite high (Witkowski, 2007). The parents here also witness rampant advertising of unhealthy foods when children watch TV. Ads on TV are found initiate requests by children for advertised products. Therefore, they also need to monitor TV viewing by their children and control media exposure of their child (ren) to protect them from undesirable effects of advertising to children.

More research is needed to understand the nature of products requested and parental response to those requests. Observational studies should also be conducted to uncover actual viewing behaviour of children, the type of programs watched, the frequency of ads appearing in them and the consequent impact on children.

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