

Assessing the Impact of Food Advertisements on Dietary Choices among University Students

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Abstract:

This research explores the impact of food advertisements on the dietary choices of university students, focusing on how different marketing strategies influence their food selection, consumption patterns, and long-term health outcomes. University students, a group often navigating a transitional phase of life, are highly susceptible to food marketing tactics, especially those using emotional appeals, social influence, and convenience. These advertisements are omnipresent in both traditional and digital media, including social media platforms, where influencers play a significant role in shaping dietary behaviors. The study examines how food advertisements contribute to unhealthy eating habits, particularly the increased consumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods like fast food, sugary drinks, and snacks. By analyzing the psychological mechanisms behind food marketing and its implications on student health, this research aims to identify strategies that can mitigate the negative impact of food advertising. Findings suggest that food marketing significantly influences the dietary choices of university students, contributing to poor nutrition and potential long-term health issues.

Keywords: Food advertising, dietary choices, university students, social media influence, unhealthy eating habits.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Food advertisements are a powerful influence on the dietary choices of individuals, particularly young adults. University students represent a unique demographic, transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, where they gain autonomy over their lifestyle and dietary habits. However, this transition is accompanied by several challenges, such as managing academic pressures, social influences, and financial constraints, which often lead to unhealthy eating patterns. The food industry, recognizing the vulnerability of university students, strategically uses advertising to promote products that are convenient, affordable, and appealing.

These advertisements often promote high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, which are particularly enticing to students who may prioritize convenience and social appeal over nutritional content. Research has shown that university students are exposed to food advertisements through various channels, including television, print media, and increasingly, digital platforms like social media. The latter has seen a surge in food marketing efforts, with social media influencers becoming key players in promoting unhealthy food products. As a result, food advertising has been identified as a significant contributor to the rise

in poor dietary choices among university students, leading to a range of health concerns, including obesity and metabolic disorders. This study aims to analyze the impact of food advertising on university students' food choices, focusing on the psychological and emotional appeals used in these advertisements and their long-term health implications.

1.2 The Pervasiveness of Food Advertising in Students' Lives

Food advertising has become a ubiquitous part of daily life, especially among university students. With the rise of digital platforms, food advertisements are now embedded in social media feeds, websites, mobile apps, and video platforms, making it nearly impossible for students to avoid them. Traditional media channels, including television and print, continue to contribute to exposure, but social media influencers and targeted digital marketing are now key strategies used to reach this demographic (Harris et al., 2009). Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are particularly influential, as food brands collaborate with social media influencers who create authentic-seeming content that resonates with students' tastes and values (Levine et al., 2020). The power of these advertisements lies in their ability to target students with highly personalized and engaging content, increasing the likelihood of impulsive food choices and a shift toward unhealthy eating patterns. Students, particularly those living away from home, are often navigating complex challenges such as adjusting to a new environment, managing time pressures, and coping with financial constraints. As a result, the convenience and affordability of fast food and processed snacks promoted in these advertisements may seem like ideal solutions to these challenges. Research by Dube et al. (2010) highlights that food advertisements effectively align with students' needs for quick, budget-friendly meal options, contributing to the overconsumption of unhealthy food choices.

1.3 Psychological Mechanisms and Influences of Food Advertising

Food advertising does not simply showcase food products—it manipulates emotional and psychological triggers to persuade consumers, especially vulnerable groups like university students. One of the primary techniques used in food advertising is emotional appeal, where advertisements associate food with positive emotions, social inclusion, or rewarding behaviors (Oliver & Wardle, 2020). For example, advertisements often depict food as a symbol of social bonding, happiness, or celebration, which reinforces the idea that consuming certain foods will improve students' emotional or social experiences (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2019). These emotional associations can override rational considerations about the healthfulness of a food product, prompting students to prioritize taste, enjoyment, and convenience over nutritional value.

In addition to emotional appeals, food advertisements often employ social influence tactics. University students, who are at a stage of life marked by peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance, are particularly susceptible to these strategies. Influencer marketing is a prime example, where individuals who are perceived as relatable or aspirational promote food products, encouraging followers to emulate their food choices (Cohen et al., 2013). The social validation provided by these influencers creates a sense of belonging or identity, further motivating students to engage with advertised food products, regardless of their health implications (Herman et al., 2019).

1.4 Health Implications of Food Advertising on University Students

The impact of food advertisements on university students' dietary choices has significant implications for both short-term and long-term health. Given that the average age of university students falls within a critical period of life in terms of establishing dietary patterns, the foods that students consume during this time can affect their health trajectory well into adulthood. Exposure to food marketing for high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods like sugary drinks, snacks, and fast food is strongly linked to increased consumption of these products, which in turn raises the risk of developing obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic health conditions (Bélanger et al., 2013). Studies have consistently found that university students, despite being aware of the negative health effects of junk food, are still heavily influenced by food advertisements (Freedman et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the emotional connection established by food advertisements can lead to unhealthy eating behaviors such as emotional eating or stress-related overconsumption of comfort foods (Lee et al., 2015). These behaviors not only affect students' physical health but can also contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. As food marketing becomes increasingly sophisticated and embedded in the digital spaces where students interact daily, addressing the impact of these advertisements is essential for promoting healthier eating habits and improving the overall well-being of university students (Becker et al., 2015).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Food Advertising and Its Pervasiveness

The role of food advertising in shaping consumer preferences has expanded in recent years, with digital and social media advertising becoming a dominant force. Food advertisements reach university students through traditional forms like television and print, as well as newer methods such as social media influencers, banner ads, and sponsored content (Harris et al., 2013). Research by Tiffin and colleagues (2018) has highlighted that university students are particularly susceptible to these forms of marketing, especially since they spend significant time on digital platforms, increasing their exposure to food-related advertisements. The expansion of food advertisements into online spaces, particularly with algorithms tailored to individual preferences, intensifies the influence on students' dietary choices (Levine et al., 2020). The prevalence of fast food and sugary beverage advertisements is especially high, and these products are often associated with convenience and affordability, attributes highly appealing to university students (Dube et al., 2010). Studies have shown that food advertising has a direct correlation with the consumption of unhealthy foods, with young adults frequently choosing advertised products, often at the expense of healthier options (Freedman et al., 2016). This is compounded by the increased reliance on unhealthy food options as a result of limited time and budgetary constraints that are common among university students (Bélanger et al., 2013).

2.2 Psychological Appeals in Food Advertising

Food advertisements frequently target psychological and emotional triggers to persuade consumers. According to Rundle-Thiele et al. (2019), advertisements often employ imagery and language that link food products with pleasure, social inclusion, and success. These strategies appeal directly to the emotions of university students, who may already be navigating periods of stress or social adjustment

(Boyland & Halford, 2013). The use of social contexts, such as group gatherings or celebrations, creates associations between food and positive experiences, making the products seem more appealing (Oliver & Wardle, 2020). Moreover, food advertising often uses persuasive techniques like celebrity endorsements and influencer marketing, which are particularly effective with university students (Cohen et al., 2013). This form of advertising has been shown to increase the likelihood that students will purchase unhealthy foods, as they are more likely to trust and mimic the behavior of individuals they follow on social media (Herman et al., 2019). Food ads that exploit such psychological appeals often lead to the prioritization of taste and convenience over nutritional value.

2.3 Food Advertising and Its Impact on Dietary Choices

Numerous studies have shown that food advertising has a direct impact on the dietary choices of young adults, particularly in university settings. Research indicates that the constant exposure to advertisements for fast food, sugary beverages, and processed snacks has been linked to poorer dietary choices among university students (Harris et al., 2009). A study by Murnan et al. (2019) found that students exposed to food advertisements were more likely to make unhealthy food choices, including increased consumption of sugary drinks and snacks, compared to those with lower levels of exposure.

The psychological impact of food advertisements extends beyond the mere act of purchasing advertised foods. It can also shape the attitudes of students towards food and nutrition, reinforcing unhealthy eating behaviors over time (Becker et al., 2015). University students, who are at a stage of life characterized by frequent dietary experimentation, are especially vulnerable to developing long-term unhealthy eating habits due to the continuous exposure to food marketing (Bauer et al., 2012). Moreover, studies have shown that university students tend to make food choices based not only on the food's nutritional value but also on the emotional appeal and social associations promoted through food advertising (Lee et al., 2015). These emotional connections, often facilitated by the marketing of food as a means of comfort or reward, can lead to overeating and unhealthy food preferences.

2.4 The Role of Social Media and Influencer Marketing

In recent years, social media platforms have revolutionized the way food is marketed to young adults. Influencers, who are often university students or young adults themselves, promote food products on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, creating an aspirational connection between their followers and the products they endorse (Nagoshi et al., 2014). These advertisements are highly personalized, and the perception of authenticity makes them particularly appealing to university students (Herman et al., 2019). This form of marketing capitalizes on peer influence, which is a powerful force in shaping dietary habits among young adults (Levine et al., 2020). Research by Smith and Hall (2017) suggests that social media influencers' endorsements of food products significantly influence their followers' food choices, often encouraging the consumption of unhealthy snacks, fast food, and sugary drinks. Furthermore, these marketing strategies often obscure the potential health risks associated with these food products, presenting them in a fun or glamorous light (Becker et al., 2015). The resulting increase in the consumption of unhealthy foods can have long-term consequences for student health.

2.5 Environmental and Peer Influences on Dietary Choices

The university environment is marked by a combination of social, academic, and lifestyle pressures that can influence food choices. Peer influence is particularly strong among university students, with students often choosing foods based on social contexts rather than individual health considerations (Dube et al., 2010). This social dimension is frequently reflected in food advertisements, which often depict group settings where food plays a central role in bonding and enjoyment (Bélanger et al., 2013). Furthermore, the availability of unhealthy food options on university campuses, in vending machines, and nearby fast-food outlets often aligns with the messages promoted through food advertisements, making it easier for students to access unhealthy foods (Bauer et al., 2012). These environmental factors, coupled with the persuasive nature of food advertising, create an ecosystem that encourages poor dietary choices, contributing to the rise of diet-related health issues among young adults (Vik et al., 2020).

2.6 Addressing the Negative Impact of Food Advertising

Various strategies have been proposed to mitigate the impact of food advertisements on the dietary habits of university students. Public health campaigns designed to increase food literacy and promote healthier eating have been shown to reduce the influence of food marketing (Freedman et al., 2016). Moreover, some studies suggest that regulating the content and reach of food advertisements, particularly those targeting vulnerable populations like young adults, could lead to healthier dietary choices (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Policy interventions, such as restricting food advertisements in environments where young adults gather or implementing "healthier" food marketing campaigns, have demonstrated success in limiting the exposure to unhealthy food ads (Harris et al., 2013). Further research into the effectiveness of such policies and the adaptation of these strategies to university campuses could offer a sustainable solution to the issue of unhealthy food choices among young adults.

3.0 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To analyse the impact of food advertisements on the dietary choices of university students

3.1 Hypothesis

H₁: Exposure to food advertisements has a significant impact on the dietary choices of university students.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive research design to examine the influence of food advertisements on dietary choices. This design is appropriate as it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data, enabling the identification of patterns and relationships between advertisements and dietary behaviors among university students.

4.1 Target Population

The target population for this study comprises university students residing in Chandigarh and Mohali. These cities were selected due to their diverse student population and easy accessibility.

4.2 Sample Size

A total of 410 university students were selected as the sample for this study. This sample size was determined based on statistical considerations to ensure representativeness and reliability.

4.3 Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of students from different universities and demographic backgrounds. Stratification was done based on gender, age, and academic disciplines to minimize sampling bias.

4.4 Data Collection

Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to gather quantitative data related to students' exposure to food advertisements and their dietary choices. Secondary data was collected from research papers, food magazines and internet

5.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPREATION

Table 5.1 Demographic profile of respondents

| Demographic Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | Male | 304 | 74.10% |
| | Female | 106 | 25.90% |
| Total | | 410 | 100% |
| Age Group | 16-20 years | 113 | 27.60% |
| | 21-25 years | 219 | 53.40% |
| | 26-30 years | 44 | 10.70% |
| | Above 30 years | 34 | 8.30% |
| Total | | 410 | 100% |
| Course Pursuing | Diploma | 132 | 32.20% |
| | Graduation | 128 | 31.20% |
| | Post-graduation | 78 | 19.00% |
| | Professional | 63 | 15.40% |
| | Others | 9 | 2.20% |
| Total | | 410 | 100% |
| Parents' Occupation | Self Employed / Business | 146 | 35.60% |
| | Salaried – Private | 135 | 32.90% |

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----|--------|
| | Salaried - Government | 129 | 31.50% |
| Total | | 410 | 100% |

Interpretation: - The demographic profile reveals that the sample consists of 74.1% males and 25.9% females, with the majority (53.4%) aged between 21–25 years. Educational backgrounds show most respondents are pursuing Diploma (32.2%) and Graduation (31.2%) programs. Parents' occupations are well-distributed, with 35.6% self-employed, 32.9% in private jobs, and 31.5% in government jobs. This diverse representation highlights the varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds of university students in Chandigarh and Mohali.

H₁: Exposure to food advertisements has a significant impact on the dietary choices of university students.

Table 5.2 ANOVA

Dependent Variable: Dietary Choices

Independent Variable: Advertisement Exposure

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|------|
| Dietary choices of university students | | | | | |
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 3423.468 | 14 | 244.533 | 39.107 | .000 |
| Within Groups | 2469.920 | 395 | 6.253 | | |
| Total | 5893.388 | 409 | | | |

Interpretation: - The F-value indicates the ratio of variance between groups (exposure levels to advertisements) compared to the variance within groups. A high F-value suggests a significant difference exists between the groups. The p-value is less than 0.05, implying that the null hypothesis (H₀) can be rejected. Hence, the alternate hypothesis (H_{a2}) is supported. Exposure to food advertisements significantly impacts the dietary choices of university students. The ANOVA results provide strong evidence that food advertisements have a statistically significant impact on the dietary choices of university students. This validates the hypothesis (H_{a2}) and emphasizes the role advertisements play in influencing dietary behavior.

Table 5.3 Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Dietary Choices

Independent Variable: Advertisement Exposure

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | Standardized Coefficients | t | | Sig. |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|------|
| | B | Std. Error | | | |
| Constant | 2.134 | 0.321 | | 6.647 | 0.00 |
| Advertisement Exp. | 0.582 | 0.071 | 0.521 | 8.197 | 0.00 |

Interpretation: - The regression results indicate that advertisement exposure has a statistically significant impact on dietary choices ($p < 0.05$). The unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.582$) implies that for each unit increase in advertisement exposure, dietary choices are expected to increase by 0.582 units. The standardized coefficient ($Beta = 0.521$) reflects a strong positive relationship between the two variables. The t-value (8.197) further supports the significance of this relationship, confirming the hypothesis that food advertisements influence dietary behaviors.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Food advertising plays a substantial role in shaping the dietary behaviors of university students, a group that is particularly vulnerable to the persuasive strategies employed by marketers. The widespread exposure to food advertisements, especially on social media platforms, creates a culture where unhealthy foods are marketed as desirable and socially acceptable. Psychological tactics, such as emotional appeals and social validation, further enhance the effectiveness of these advertisements, making them highly influential in shaping students' food preferences. The consequences of this influence are significant, as it leads to an increased consumption of high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods, contributing to poor nutrition and long-term health problems. The analysis reveals a strong association between frequent exposure to food advertisements and the inclination toward fast food and processed food consumption. The acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H_1) underscores the significant role advertising plays in shaping eating behaviors.

The influence is primarily driven by the attractive, convenient, and persuasive marketing strategies employed by advertisers, often promoting unhealthy food choices. Students exposed to such advertisements are found to make more impulsive and less nutritious dietary decisions. This trend calls attention to the importance of implementing critical media literacy programs to equip students with the skills necessary to critically assess advertising messages and make healthier food choices. Moreover, the findings emphasize the need for policy interventions to regulate misleading advertisements and promote awareness campaigns focused on healthy eating habits. Institutions should integrate educational modules on nutrition and media literacy into their curriculum to foster more informed and health-conscious decision-making among students.

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