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THE INFLUENCE OF JUNK FOOD COMMERCIALS IN CARTOON CHANNELS ON CHILDREN'S CONSUMING BEHAVIOUR IN JORDAN

Kholod Saleh Huneiti¹

ABSTRACT

Obesity epidemic among children in Jordan recently has increased, over the last two years; Jordan has one of the highest percentages in child-obesity amongst Middle Eastern countries. Based on Jordan Times reported, "Around 40 per cent of Jordanian adults are obese, while child obesity in the Jordan stands at more than 50 per cent, due to genetics, environmental factors and lifestyle changes, said endocrinologist Abdelkarim Khawaldeh" (Goussous, 2016). Taking into consideration, that there is a need to check the extent of this issue on childrens' behaviour, in relation to consuming junk food, started to become compulsory. The purpose of this research was to explore the daily lifestyle of a sample group of children from Amman, Jordan. The aim being to observe the influence imparted by viewing cartoons with embedded junk food advertisements on those children. The target group of children consisted of ages 6 to 10 years, sampling them during a relaxing week of summer holidays for the period 8 – 13 June 2017. The study employed ethnographic qualitative research as a method for collecting data. Results clarified and explained the different aspects of the main problem. The indications were that there is a serious behavioural and social predicament whereby children's' eating habits changed dramatically, resulting in very unhealthy eating habits. The conclusion of this study revealed the urgent necessity to create media literacy, to raise awareness among the population, not least in Jordan, for the need to understand the risks associated with processed food, on children's health.

Keywords: Consuming Behaviours, Junk Food, Child Obesity, Cartoon Channels.

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INTRODUCTION

There is serious concern regarding the increasing rates of child-obesity and calls for a solution to the potentially damaging junk food influence of television advertisements, on children's eating habits. Children are bombarded with an unlimited number of different types of junk food commercials whilst they are watching television, especially cartoon channels. A recent study indicates a focus of this heavy stream of commercials, specifically aimed at children in the first instance. Mohamed & Al Zien (2012), argued that:

"To reach a target audience of children, the commercial has to be aired during the early evening hours during weekdays because most children are at school during the day. Alternatively, the advertiser can air the commercial during the day on weekends because most children are home on weekends apart from days of worship" (p. 269).

This article examines the relationship between using television during the prime time and children's consumption of junk food. Due to this statement, there is a need to clarify the relationship between media and consumer attitudes and the perceived increase in obesity in children. A thorough research is seen to be required into child influence and attraction, and the strategies employed by television media. A number of researches have discussed children's attention to television, Anderson & Pempek were stressing that, "Most research, children's attention to television is inferred from overt looking at the screen. Also Anderson (1986) has found that children's "attention to television at home increases with age, peaks at about 12 years of age, and thereafter slightly declines among adults" (p. 508).

Another study was done by Spears (2003), which clarified children's behavior responding to television influence:

"The Canadian Teachers' Federation (2003) conducted a study to investigate the impact of television on children and their behavior. The study revealed that the constant marketing of junk food to young audiences can contribute to childhood obesity. In addition, the study argued that only 4 percent of commercials advertise healthy food. Advertising causes children to be concerned with their body image, leading to eating disorders in children as young as six years old" (Spears, 2003).

From an advertiser's point of view, the advantage of targeting advertisements at children is for their ability to pay attention carefully to detail. They do not easily forget, and their minds are not yet overcrowded with information. For children, audio and visual attracts their attention more, so that television as a medium is more acceptable to them and easy to access and use. However, Brand (2005) in his book mentioned that, "Studies indicate that between the ages six to 11 years children begin to develop the ability to think skeptically about advertising, but may not respond critically without being prompted to think about intent and appeals" (p. 5). Children's food choice preferences were shaped by individuals, parents, societal and cultural factors. In Jordan kids are exposed to a plethora of messages, both verbal and nonverbal about food preferences, and from different influential people around them, such as peers, teachers at school or from media. These messages shaped their preferences and expectations of what type of appropriate food would be fit for them. TV is the single largest medium that combines lots of source-messages about food preferences. A food company spends a vast majority of their money on food commercials, especially fast food chains. TV used to be the primary medium for fast food companies and junk food considered the most intensively advertised on TV cartoon channels, the tendency to be overconsumed by children, whereas vegetables and fruits, being rarely advertised on cartoon channels are under consumed by children. MBC3 TV cartoon channel is followed by the majority of children in Jordan, and junk food commercials on this channel has a great influence on food preferences between children,

this is based on a result of the study conducted by the writer of this article, Table 1 below, shows the repetition of junk food commercials on cartoon channel MBC3. There is greater importance, therefore, to determine the relationship between children watching television and of their consumption of junk food. There were advertisements for popular junk food brands from different companies that are well known to most children watching their cartoon channels. The table below reveals the enormity and the repetition within the schedule on the TV Arabic cartoon channel MBC3 that targets children in Jordan and generally in the Middle East, this channel is considered to be one of the more popular cartoon channels among children in the Jordan. The researcher created a hypothesis of the connection between the increase of childhood-obesity in Jordan among Jordanian children and the increase to watching advertisements on cartoon channels; Results from the study connected the exposure to repeated TV commercials and the increase in consuming junk food and consequently increasing the percentage of obesity among children in Jordan.

Table1. List of junk food advertisement repetitions in MBC3 cartoon channel, during the children's program periods in prime-time" (Alhuneiti, 2017).

NO	Product type	Daily repetition:	Weekly repetition
		- Weekday hours between (16:00-19:00) - Weekend hours between (12:00 to 19:00)	
1.	Sun Top (Juice)	2 to 8 times	26 times
2.	COCOPOPS Kellogg's (Cereals)	2 to 6 times	22 times
3.	OZMO chocolate	2 to 3 times	12 times
4.	DeemaH(Different products) +Salted Peanuts	1 to 3 times	16 times
5.	Nesquik (Cereal)	1 to 2 times	6 times
6.	McDonald's (Junk food)	2 to 8 times	29 times
7.	Saudi Milk (for children)	1 to 2 times	4 times
8.	President chees (fatty)	1 time	1 time
9.	Big baby bob (Candied)	1 time	1 time
10	Sevendays (Chocolate)	1 to 2 times	3 times
		Total: 14 to 36 time's daily repetition of junk food ads to which children are exposed.	Total is : 120 times weekly children exposure to ads

AIMS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the researcher aimed to record childrens' behavior, live, while watching junk food commercials. To capture their responses, in order to investigate the direct influence from junk food commercials on their eating and consumption habits, and to focus on this issue from different aspects digging deep to investigate this problematic and arguable issue, concerning scientists from different fields around the world. In this study, and while observing the children,

the researcher sought to identify the following:

- The reaction of children during watching junk food advertisements on T.V cartoon channels.
- Whether they imitated and repeated what they had heard and watched during and following the airing of the advertisements.
- Whether the children asked to buy junk food products whilst watching the advertisement.
- Record children's comments and conversations while watching television with their parents.

On the other hand, after children finished watching television, the researcher evaluated different matters:

- Type of conversation with their parents and whether they requested junk food.
- The Parents responses and reaction to their children's request for junk food.

METHODOLOGY

This study was non-random. Children were assigned from extended families, living together in the same area, but not sharing a house. The study was conducted in line with the qualitative methodology. Collected data used by the ethnography method. Ethnography is simply explained by Herbert (2000):

"Is generally recognized to rest upon *participant observation*, a methodology whereby the researcher spends considerable time observing and interacting with a social group. These observations and interactions enable the ethnographer to understand how the group develops a skein of relations and cultural constructions that tie it together" (p. 551).

Ethnography is considered to be one of the qualitative research methods whose main task is to document the practices and perspectives of people's culture. By using ethnography, the researcher may get inside and involve the way that each group is used to seeing the world. Ethnography method could also explore and identify the social phenomena in society and link it to each other, providing a small connection between each other on the surface. Reeves & Kuper & Hodges (2008) stressed that:

"The central aim of ethnography is to provide rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations and interviews" (p. 512).

In order to enhance the quality of the ethnographer's work, they often provide a detailed data of the description of their research, which is based on direct observation of people for many hours and/or interviewing them and probably by using other types of collecting data. There are different ways to collect data by using the ethnography method; however, the main and most widely used technique is observation, interviewing participants and archival research. For the purpose of this study the researcher used only observation to record children's daily life routine while watching television, as this research is connected to previous research, undertaken by this researcher to prove the hypothesis that there is a connection between watching junk food commercials in cartoon channels and the increase in consuming processed food. By using ethnography research way, the researcher intended to collect rich and detailed information about the phenomena that he/she conduct a research for. This is not an option. The researcher should always be objective whilst conducting research, and it follows that the researcher should observe the culture\society\groups as they appear, witnessing their own characteristics not imposing the researcher's judgement or reality upon the group or subject. Mindful that the

researcher undertook different types of interviews in her previous research, she decided to enter the field of the society as an observer only, to evaluate the data gathered the previous year. Data such as this will form the basis of a media literacy that could help to control this dangerous issue that is occupying the Jordanian society.

SAMPLE

Five different families from the suburbs adjacent to Amman City attended this research, as voluntary participants to assist in this research. Parents who participated were educated at university, and had a median family income. Children, numbering five were from the age group 6 to 10. Socioeconomic data and information used on television were collected before embarking into the research field, proper. Of the 5 participating children, four were boys and one girl. Demographic and media use data was collected while observing the children watching prime time television between 16:00 and 17:00, on week days from 8-13, June 2017. The researcher used her notes to value the research, Reeves & Kuper & Hodges, claimed that "Owing to the complex nature of social life, ethnographers need to record a variety of elements in their field notes" (p. 512). The place of research was Amman, Jordan, using one of the children's grandfather's houses. The researcher obtained consent from parents to intrude on their privacy to record their child's daily life events, while watching cartoon channels on television. Each day, during the six days of collecting data, each child was observed by the researcher. The children were seated on a sofa or lying on the floor watching his or her preferable cartoon channel.

The researcher was sitting some way away to observe the children and record their actions and reactions while junk food advertisements were broadcasting. Parents accompanied their children during the viewing, so the children were in their normal comfort zone during the research being conducted. Following the observed periods of television viewing, each child moved away to participate in another activity, whether playing or chatting with friends, family, or eating, or something else. The researcher continued to follow and observe the children for half an hour after ending the television viewing, to record any other reactions that would be relevant or of value to the research. Simultaneously, the researcher recorded the conversation between the child and parent(s) where it included requesting junk food products; during or after watching television.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Analysing ethnographic information tends to be conducted in an inductive objective method; information is tested to identify and classify topics and key issues that "emerge" from the information. Over careful analysis of the information, using this inductive operation, ethnographer's researcher generates empirical theoretical explanations from their tentative work. Five children participated in this experiment, to test whether exposure to junk food commercials influenced children's food preferences. Children were assigned, non-randomly, to watch a cartoon channel each day during the experiment. The participant children lived in houses that would qualify as constant television households, and children's television viewing was significantly correlated with parent viewing. Below are thematic details for the children's responses to the television junk food commercials:

Table.1: Theme 1: Action and reaction of children while watching television

Age	Thematic
6	Recorded high interactivity with commercials.
7	Same as in age 6, but sometimes selective to react with the commercial.

8	Sometimes the child responded to the commercials if it was liked.
9	Selective to react to some commercials.
10	Most of the watching time the child was controlling the T.V remote, to change the channel while ads were broadcast, avoiding watching some of the commercials.

The researcher found that the response for junk food commercials was significantly higher in the age group 6 and 7, and the opposite effect for age 8 and above. As shown in table 1.

Table.2: Theme 2: Imitating and repeating what they heard and viewed of the ads, during and after viewing.

Age	Thematic
6	Clearly high imitating with music and movements accompanying the commercials.
7	Same as age 6.
8	Just watching with carefully concern.
9	Watching without imitating.
10	Preferred sometimes to change the channel to watch different cartoon programs.

Table.3: Theme 3: Children asked to buy junk food products while watching it on television

Age	Thematic
6	All age groups asked their parents to purchase junk food while watching television, as it helped to relax and enjoy watching, this was from the children's' point of view to persuade parents to buy for them.
7	
8	
9	
10	

Table.4: Theme 4: Record children's comments and conversations while watching television with parents.

Age	Thematic
6	This age group insisted on buying preferable junk food as soon as it is viewed on television. Most of the time refusing any advice from parents about consuming too much junk food having an effect on their health.
7	
8	Tended to listen more to their parents advice about consuming too much junk food that they had requested, but still wavering in their decisions to reduce the amount of eating junk food.
9	
10	This child was significantly clearer on its response to their parents' advice and discussion. It was clear to the researcher that this age had started to grow up and to distinguish what surrounds them rationally.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of data collected contributes to our understanding of the relationships between television and children's eating habits. Although the researcher's previous study proved a link between junk food commercials and children requesting junk food, the results of this latest study go further. There is a suggestion that there is association also between the junk food commercials and the size of children's actual consumption; of excessively more than their normal consumption. Children learn television-watching habits, and eating habits, originally from their parents, where the choices parents make about television influences their children. The children, who watched commercials on the cartoon channels, picked the junk food products advertised or insisted on obtaining them, this was especially the case for ages 6, 7 and 8. The largest grouping of preferred items were screened repeatedly during the same cartoon, the lesser preferred items were of the least frequently screened advertisement. Moreover, the commercial item broadcast suggested to the viewer the ease of use or consumption. With the advertisement being screened at a time for children's pleasure time, the items gave the indication also of the ease of preparation, with minimal effort and fast results. The interaction between the parents' nutrition knowledge and their responsiveness to children's requests for purchasing junk food has been documented; that the influence of television commercials is inversely correlated with parents' nutrition knowledge and children's consuming behavior. The increase in consumption of junk food actually relates with increased viewing of television. Unfortunately, most of the time, parents were in tune with children's requests; insisting on the purchase of advertised junk food while they are watching television, as entertainment pleasure for them or to purchase it after watching has finished. There was a study completed in USA by several researchers which clarifies similar issues in this current study, Coon & Goldberg & Beatrice & Tucker argued that:

"The presence of television at meals and the number of nights per week parents chose foods for supper "because they are quick and easy to prepare and because the children eat them without complaining" were closely related, suggesting a link between television at meals and family behaviors that minimize the work of feeding children. Several studies have documented widespread cultural attitudes in the United States that define vegetables as tasting bad to children, expensive, and trouble for adults to prepare" (p. 7).

Parents concur that television has had a negative effect on their children's eating habits. During the research, conducted children requested junk food items advertised on television for no less than 3 times in one hour. Most of them requested to go to visit a store or restaurant advertised on television as they became motivated and influenced by and from the commercials. Parents who attended this study thought that their child could differentiate between television programs and advertisements, but only children above 8 could clearly differentiate. At the same time parents knew that commercials were attempting to convince children to buy junk food items. But their attempts to persuade their children to reduce consumption were not successful for most of the time, as they did not have sufficient knowledge regarding commercials techniques and limited ways to counsel their child. Parents would ban their children from buying junk food, most of the time, without any clarification, conversely, children would attempt to gratify their desire to eat junk food by different methods; hidden from their parents. On the other hand, during ethnographic observations in children's homes, the researcher observed little active play from children. Because of space constraints in the house, physical activity was limited to (for example) a small space around house. Children were kept indoors and spent time either with high-technology toys such as play stations or watching television. On the other hand, families who attended the study spent an extended period of time at home, watching television, in the preparation and consumption of

healthy and junk food, or watching the child at play. The researcher noticed and recorded that few children, for example, regularly visited other children's homes to play and enjoy; instead, their parents would arrange to meet in a junk food restaurant where they could enjoy the advantages of a clean, spacious, air-conditioned environment with services, in which their children could meet and interact with their peers.

RESULTS

This study indicates that there are negative impacts between junk food advertisements and major behavioral and social troubles in children, such as eating habits changing dramatically becoming seriously less healthy. An equally unhealthy point is that although there are many forms of junk food advertisements that affect children's behavior negatively, the influence of television commercials was particularly very noticeable to the researcher whilst following the children on their daily life routine. Findings reported in this study need to be qualified by the study's limitations. Sample was not randomly selected by the researcher, so these findings cannot be generalised beyond the types of families included in the study. There is overwhelming evidence that those child-targeted advertisements have a serious and negative impact on the social attitudes and eating habits of young and impressionable children. There is an unfair race for a lifetime of trade, between the commercial advertiser and the naturally unaware parent; the winning post is forever increasing in distance as the attraction of the product is planted in the immature brain, for profit and for future attractions.

CONCLUSION

The researcher noted that the dietary regime of the children's' families participating and may have included fewer healthier meals of fruits and vegetables, and more pizzas, snack foods, and sodas. This is also supported by the junk food commercials broadcast, and the requests from children to eat such processed food. Focusing on the suppositions about childhood which divides industry promoters from their critics, and proposal that the qualitative comprehension of children's experiences of advertising, should have a significant function in complementing the predominantly positivist study on which this discussion draws.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS\ IMPLICATIONS

This study is limited to recent Jordan discourse on children and commercials (which may, potentially, extend possible studies to the whole of the Middle East), drawing on a very small pilot research. It does, however, point the way to future research in Middle East using informal methods. Unfortunately, the period of research afforded to the researcher, was limited to a small sample and in a specific area.

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