

The Impact of Technological Advancement, Digitalization and Economic Transformation on Food Advertisement and Children's Food Habits in Malakand Division

Dr. Sana Ullah¹, Dr. Waseem Khan², Dr. Arab Naz^{*3}

¹Assistant Professor Department of Sociology, University of Chitral

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand

^{*3}Professor & Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Malakand

¹sana_871@yahoo.com, ²waseemk2319@gmail.com, ^{*3}arab_naz@yahoo.com

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Arab Naz

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ABSTRACT

In this postmodern world, technological innovations and digitalization are recognized as fundamental forces for economic growth and development across the globe. Technological innovation is recognized as a prerequisite for economic growth, production of variety of goods and services, and reduction of costs of different goods and services available in the market. It is evident that technologically advanced countries of the world are economically stable and high competitor in the global economic market with highest per capita income, however; in many parts, the poor countries highly pay for this development. This paper analyzes the process of technological innovations, digitalization and economic transformation and attempts to know food advertisement impacts children's dietary habits and health, huge marketing and advertising campaign are launched to attract children as consumers, and the consequences of food advertising on the health and wellbeing of future generation. This study critically investigates digitalization, economic change and the impact of food advertisement and marketing on children's food habits and health. Primary data was collected from a sample of 45 conveniently selected participants from District Dir Lower of Malakand Division. Further, data was collected from different categories of respondents including parents, children and general community, while 15 respondents were selected from each category. The study concludes that economic growth often narrowly focuses on increasing the production of goods and services and does not always reflect the quality of life. In constant pursuit to accumulate profit, excessive advertising is made that usually focuses on children and results in different behavioral and health related issues in children with dire consequences on the overall living standard and well-being.

Keywords: Digitalization, Economic transformation, Children food habits, Living standard, Food advertisement, Profit making, Health issues, Indigenous food products.

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation has revolutionized all aspects of human life including economies. There has been no specific marketing and advertising strategy and for centuries, different strategies and tactics has been used in marketing and advertising campaigns at global level (Story & French, 2004). The marketing and advertising strategies, has introduced new concepts including internet

marketing, international marketing, interactive marketing and direct marketing etc. The advent of technological advancement and innovation has made online advertising special and productive business technique and a tool that promote sale of a product, reduce surplus production, attract audience and identify their latent needs and demands (Kotler, 2009). Online or telecast and e-

marketing is a widely prevalent and remains a famous medium for advertising food production and its use. Usually, advertisement is a powerful tool which share key features of a product and influence people's attitude towards the use of a particular product (Mansoor, Zainab, & Bukhari, 2022; Nooh, 2012). It makes the product easily available to service seekers and providing them free or cheap access to get an insight and understanding of a product or item without physical proximity (Onkvisit, & Shaw, 2009). In development context marketing and advertising are closely associated to economic opportunities, better living standard and civic freedom and quality of life (Klein, & Nason, 2001). It plays product promotional and audience motivational role as well as fulfil the different taste and demands of the audience both adult and children (Hwang, McMillan, & Lee, 2003; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Usually, innovation and technology are associated to cost reductions, improvement in quality, increase in the variety of goods, and enhancement in the methods and techniques of production. It also helps in improving life conditions and strengthening people by empowering them through economic independence.

In the current marketing practices the advertisements are thought and organized under capitalist economic model, largely based upon profit motive rather improving the life standards of people at large. The marketing and advertisement have been taught from dominant global north perspective and has been positioned in the minds of both scholars and business communities, undermining local context, age, culture, gender and communities (Kline, 1995; Lantos, 2001). In recent marketing trends a huge space has been created for children through television and social media networks and children are targeted as consumers because they have the power over their parents in purchase of certain products including food products. In particular, these advertisements spotlight foods having high fats and sugar with low nutritional ingredients. In addition, the money hungry marketing and advertising agencies are involved in stealth marketing and they embed such products in content of films, children's games, school curriculum and other activities. This makes children the target and victim due to their lack of cognitive abilities to understand the hidden intent and contents of such advertising (Calvert, 2008; Gul, Ullah, Ullah, & Naz, 2024).

The commercial promotion of energy-rich, nutrient-poor food and different beverages remain a major contributor to childhood obesity and occurrences of other chronic illness diseases (see Panayi, Agha, Sieber, & Orgill, 2018 for details). Similarly, public health practitioner also asserts that powerful food marketing that promote consumption of fats, sugar, and salt included food products remain a significant factor of obesity (Brownell & Horgen, 2004; International Organization for Migration, 2006). In Europe 22% boys and 24.3% of girls aged 5–10 years are overweight, while in the United States 23.5% boys and almost 23% girls are overweight, and this figure has been doubled in the last three decades (World Obesity Report, 2015). Obese children became obese adults and face several socio-psychological and physiological issues including stress, low self-esteem, poor quality of life, cardiovascular risks, asthma, orthopedic abnormalities, liver disease, as well as diabetes (Reilly & Wilson, 2006).

This study is based on the premise that although technological innovation and digitization is seen a major driving force in promoting economic transformation across societies. However; it is argued that the technology geared food marketing and advertising poses threats to the life and health of children and presents a blur picture of the capitalist economic growth model. It also undermines the numerous other benefits related to technology and innovations, as formation and promotion of economic capital in no way compensate loss of human capital. Further, the prevailing food and beverages advertisements develop sustained dietary habits among children and also create an environment of indirect threat to the next generation as some diseases are transmitted from unhealthy parents to the upspring (s) (Kraak, Gootman, & McGinnis, 2006). This study also criticizes and negate marketing and advertising theories that claim to be complete and corresponding to the needs of people and helping them to improve their lives.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of cultural hegemony through media and advertising is not new and a thick chunk of scholarship is available on the issue in different disciplines. Different social scientists have debated the impact of media in shaping people's behavior and ingraining foreign ideas. In this context, this study has utilized different theories for developing

a study framework for developing a broader understanding of the issue. The cultivation theory (George Gerbner-1969) explain that prolong exposure to media shapes people's attitude and behavior in life (Riddle, 2010). This theory investigates the impact of television watching on viewers and concluded that excessive exposure to media impact our interpretation and explanation of different social realities. Children who watch commercial media (TV) were found immensely affected by media realities and they have formed sex-stereotypical views as compared to those who remain untouched with watching television (Settle, 2018). Further, this study utilized a range of sociological theories including Bourdieu concept of cultural capital and habitus (1984), Antonio Gramsci theory of cultural hegemony (Prison Nootebook, 1937), Manuel Castells theory of "The information age: Economy, Society and Culture (1996) & Manuel Castells, of informatized capitalism, and of the network society (Castells, 2001). In this study, I argue that under capitalist advertisement model the prime purpose is not uplifting people's lives rather the focus is on the generation and accumulation of profit at the cost of children's health. Thus, technology, innovation, and media are used as a means of commercialization of human bodies and objectification of their social lives. The advertisement agencies make children as their long-term consumers and exploiting them under the guise of service provision and stealth marketing, thus reinforcing global divide between the global north and global south.

Methods and Procedures

This study aims to investigate the impact of technological development, digitization and economic change on food advertisement and marketing of different food products. The study adopted qualitative research design. Primary data was collected from a sample of 45 participants which involved fifteen (15) parents (identified through a pilot survey) whose children were active users of different media networks with high food advertisement and marketing. Further, at least one child of each parent making in total fifteen (15) children was also interviewed for collection of primary data while fifteen (15) participants were selected from general community. The purpose behind selection of three different categories of respondents was to collect comprehensive information about the issue. For data collection,

in-depth interviews using interview guide were conducted with both parents, children and general community to make triangulation and obtain detail information about the different dimensions of the issue. Interviews were conducted both in Urdu and Pashto languages which allowed the participants to freely express their opinion and share maximum information (Creswell, 2008), while the data collection continued until a point of saturation was reached (Ahmed, 2025). In addition, data was also collected through online participant observation wherein I join different social media groups on Facebook. Being a researcher, I posted twelve different questions related to the research question and obtained information from the groups including their choice for food brands/products, preferences for flavor and their timing of taking food. In this process, relevant posts, contents, comments, feedback and discussions were collected in the form of screenshots and note taking (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). For sample selection, convenient sampling technique was applied, for maintaining heterogeneity male and female were selected for undertaking the study, while all the respondents were educated (Matric for children and graduation and above for parents and general community). The collected data (interviews) were first transcribed, that familiarized us with the data. Further, different codes were given to the data for developing common patterns and contents and then I collated different patterns and thus, broad themes were developed (Bekele, & Ago, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2014). Finally, specific themes were identified and presented in the analysis section of the study to derive findings and conclusion.

Results and Discussion

The primary focus of this study is on the transformation of economies and food advertising on the food habits and health of children. The study also explains that food marketing is detrimental for the lives and well-being of children and produce ill generation in near future. The study broadly highlighted the consequences of profit-driven capitalist advertisement on social, psychological and economic life of children in long run. The data has been passed from different phases under the thematic research model (Clarke & Braun, 2014), of analyzed under different themes.

Theme-I

Development of Technology, Media, Food Marketing and Children

During the past few decades, technology has impacted all arena of human life and children are not an exception. Children bear the high burnt of digitization as children focused marketing and advertisement has gained immense popularity. In past, children were not the primary focus of marketing and their exposure to media was limited, and usually children socialization was an evolutionary process initiated in the family by parents and was carried forward by different institutions (Moore, 2004; Grad, 2015). At present, different food products i.e. cold drinks, sugar rich candies, fats rich biscuits and chocolates and noodles etc. are advertised in attractive manner and children being unable to understand their negative influence are buying and utilizing these products. Most importantly, the marketing and advertising agencies spent huge financial resources on children focused food and beverage products. The major reason of such marketing includes 1. children's inability to make mature and rational decisions due to their age and accept as well as adopt the message conveyed in such advertisements, 2. the needs and numbers of children are considered as a great financial power, 3. They have massive influence over parents and influence parents' decision and directions of purchasing advertised food products.

In this regard, my interviews with parents in different localities during data collection process found that children influence parents' decisions in purchase of food products from market. A parent stated:

"Our children are influenced by the media and they demand what they watch in TV advertisements and other media networks. Children are unable to understand the impact of these products on their health and future life"

In this context, another respondent told:

"Surprisingly, in this society very few people know about the consequences of inorganic and processed foods and beverages advertised and glamourized on the media. He claimed that our children use high fats, salty and high sugar food products will acquire certain disease particularly diabetic, obesity and blood pressure in early life. He also suggested interventions from government

and other relevant organizations to protect the future of children".

A respondent expressed:

"Despite our constant advise to children about the use of homemade food, they prefer and eat junk foods. He further explained that usually our children have become habitual of fast foods. Different advertised food products are abundantly available and children demands these attractive foods and beverages instead of taking their traditional lunch and dinner. He expressed fear and concern over children's changing food habits and predicted different types of diseases in near future".

Marketers and advertisers are constantly exploiting the consuming and economic potentials of children and they have been extensively targeted as they are considered a huge future market. In a study conducted by Adler (1977) it was found that 85% of children who eat a readymade cereal and 86% of candy and different snakes' users have developed their ideas about their favorite brands from advertisements and insist their parents for purchasing these brands. The study also found that children have developed their loyalty towards these food products/brands because they had watched these constantly on television screen (Adler, 1977; Coreil, Levin, & Jaco, 1985). Field data also reflect similar

findings and a community member told:

"Children usually demand what they watch on TV and on other media networks. Children are unable to understand the hidden contents and it looks very attractive for them to purchase and use it"

A child further expressed:

"The advertisements on TV screen and other media networks obviously seems very healthy, clean and nutrient. Once we taste these foods and cold drinks, then it becomes difficult to get rid of. The different foods and cold drinks that I use is the result of imitation or change of food habits imitated from media"

In last few decades a significant rise has been observed in obesity which is largely the result of environmental rather than genetic factors (Swinburn, Sacks & Losk, 2009). The primary drivers of obesity are within our food in which high quantity of cheap, tasty, and energy-rich nutrient-poor ingredients have been added. The increase in obesity at global level is driven primarily by changes in the food system which is highly processed, usually accessible and affordable, and significantly marketed /advertised (Swinburn et al., 2011; Vozar, Jankelova, & Belovicova,

2024), remains a significant means of profit earning as well a threat to the health of children. A Professor from University of Malakand stated: *"The readily available food is a short-term facility and long-term challenge for our children. Although, advertisement is best way to reach a product to community and increase the number of users. However, children health and future are more important. He stressed upon policy formulation for checking the issue of uncontrolled marketing of food items that influence children's food behavior"*.

Theme-II

The Power of Media, Indigenous Food Products and Children Food Habits

Generally marketing and advertising is a tool for promoting a product establishing networks and attracting local communities. It is commonly observed the current marketing and advertising is mostly driven by capitalist profit motive and often promote branded products of multinational corporations. The marketing and advertising companies make a negative portray of the local products, rarely promote indigenous products and associate use of branded products with modern lifestyle and high status. In fact, any sustainable development is not possible without focusing on upgrading local communities and building on their indigenous resources. However, in

recent years the marketing and advertising of multinational corporations has eroded the economic base of local economies (indigenous products) and spending huge amount on promoting consumer base for branded products (Vyas, Sharma, & Sharma, 2016; Spink & Moyer, 2011).

Television has been a major medium which expose children to different food products through frequent advertisements (Boyland & Rosa, 2015). Relevant research studies indicate that children watch television for almost 23-26 hrs in a week and nearly 4 hours in day. In addition, they are exposed to approximately 24,000 commercials/advertisements in a year (Moor, 2004, 2011), while Bakir and Vitell (2010) found that children watch up to 7500 advertisements related to high fats and energy rich junk food, biscuits and candies and other sugary food products in a year. Children in their early stages of cognitive development are unable to separate TV programs from advertisements and unable to

understand the hidden purpose of these advertisements. In this stage they are unable to evaluate the marketing techniques of food producing corporations and remains the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of these food advertisements (Gorton, 2011; Oehlmann, & Czirfusz, 2023; Malik et al., 2013). The findings of the study are also consistent with primary evidences and one respondent uttered:

"The wide prevalence and use of TV and other media networks have been a powerful tool in influencing our culture, artifacts and indigenous food product. Televised or online media has changed the food behavior of our children, as they prefer and demand branded products usually watched in television advertisements and commercials. This is a systematic and by consent erosion of local products".

There has been greater response among children towards television advertisements and it promotes brand related attitudes among children. In a study conducted by (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009), took a sample of 118 children, 62 children was shown a cartoon with food advertising included in it, while the remaining children was shown a cartoon with no-food advertising. All the children were given a snack during cartoon watching, and it was found that those children who watched food advertising consumed 45% more of the given snack compared to those who viewed non-food advertisement during cartoon watching (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009; Mohan Kathuria, & Gill, 2013). This indicates the widespread effects of television food related advertisement on children. It is also evident from this study that children who have access to television watching and other media network have different food likes and habits.

A respondent from Timergara explained:

"Children who are watching television on daily basis have more information about different food products (cookies, biscuits, drinks, snakes etc) as compared those who did not watch television. Food timing also remain different among the children who regularly watch television against those who watch television periodically (for sports or festivals)".

Televised/online advertising is widespread and almost every household has television/internet and it affects us in several direct and indirect ways (Ashraf, Younas, Shafiq, Khan, Ibtahaj & Samin, 2015). Children mostly remains at home and watching television and advertisement has been a

primary source of entertainment for them and affects their life choices and habits. The constant development of a likeness for branded products results in the disappearance of indigenous brands from local markets and lead to the hegemony of multinational corporations. The disappearance of local products increases the economic dependency of local population and widens the already existing gap between the economically rich and poor communities. Majority of the respondents claimed that media projection of branded goods and service has declined the demands for local products. They further added that although local products are richer in micro-nutrient, however; majority of people particularly children like branded products as these are more attractive and appealing.

A respondent said:

"I own a food café from the last ten years. In my opinion, branded food items are economical, attractive and seems tasty as compared to indigenous food products. I have very small number of customers (mostly above 40 years of age) who demand local food such as Kabli Palao, Lassi, Maiz Bread, Desi Ghee, Milk, Cheese, Custard etc while majority of customers mostly 18 years or below demand advertised/foreign food including Pizza, Burger, Sandwich, Barani. This indicate that food advertising has influenced food habits of the children in our society". The extensive food advertisement and marketing on different media channels have negative impacts on the promotion and use of indigenous/local food products. The local food products though rich in nutrient are not as attractive as advertised food products. Although children require nutrition food in childhood for growth, health and well-being and the habits developed during childhood are carried forward to adulthood and results in long-term health issues among during adult life.

Conclusion

The process of globalization has transformed economies and human lives in several ways. It has also impacted food related advertisement and marketing wherein children and adolescents are viewed as a huge market force and a source of major profit making under capitalist market economy. Usually, children are the primary target of intense specialized food marketing and advertising practices because of their eating interests, spending power, and as future adult consumers. Food advertising being a vital tool of

profit making is thus targeting children and exploit their vulnerabilities of comprehending and resisting marketers' business strategies. They are persuaded in a way that pose numerous threats to their life and health in future. This study concludes that the propensity to accumulate profit, the marketing agencies turned into money hungry organizations and uses children as their primary targets for the purchase of their products. As children are unable to know the intent of food advertising and to interpret their message, they fall easy victims to these advertisements and adopt dangerous food choices and habits. Further, the huge food advertisement/marketing of food products create an image on children mind about the branded products and gradually results in erosion/disappearance of the indigenous food products from the market. Due to televised/online food advertisement children also develop virtual food experiences and develop their brand related attitudes that remains more lasting as compared to traditional experiences and exposure. Finally, this study concludes that deconstruction of food advertising is necessary because capturing children attention for few minutes in their early life may haunt them for years in their later life and would create challenging health related issues for them in future.

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