Abstract

Background: Healthy children are the future of the world, as well as the target for promotion of non-core food and beverages through television advertisements. Such advertisements use persuasive tactics to exploit the underdeveloped advertising literacy skills of child consumers leading to poor food choices, obesity and non-communicable diseases. External solutions such as regulations are inadequate, needing to empower older children especially in urban settings to improve their literacy to counteract harmful advertising. Research on advertising literacy is limited globally.

Objectives: To describe the advertising literacy on non-core food and beverages, inter-relationships between its dimensions and associated factors among grade 12 children in type 1AB schools in Colombo District

Methods: A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted among 636 grade 12 students in six Type 1AB schools in Colombo Educational Zone recruited using a two-stage stratified cluster sampling technique. Children with diet restrictions were excluded. A self-administered questionnaire, including two valid tools (CALS-c and AALS-c) adopted after cultural adaptation were used to assess conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy and advertising literacy performance. Based on a scoring system, participants were divided into sufficient/insufficient levels of literacy, using the mean score as cut-off. Associations were assessed using t test, ANOVA and Chi-squared tests.

Results: The response rate was 97.5%. The mean age of students was 16.62 (SD=0.6). Majority were girls (n=331, 52.0%); in Science Stream (n=375, 59%); having a monthly family income less than Rs. 100,000/= (n=343, 54%); receiving pocket money less than Rs. 1000/= (n=423, 66.5%); and watching television less than two hours a day (n=526, 82%).

The mean conceptual, attitudinal and performance food advertising literacy scores were 70.6% (SD=8.2%), 66.8% (SD=8.8%) and 55.8% (SD=14.4%), respectively. The mean score obtained for overall food advertising literacy was 67% (SD=5.9%), giving 51.9% (95% CI=48.1-55.7) having a sufficient food advertising literacy level.

The majority of students showed awareness and attitudes to counteract, in relation to many aspects, such as on selling intent, intended target audience, persuasive tactics and intent, advertising bias, scepticism and disliking in relation to such advertisements.

Food advertising literacy performance showed weak yet positively significant correlations with conceptual (*Pearson r*(636)=0.106, *p*=0.007) as well as attitudinal (*Pearson r*(636)=0.133, *p*=0.001) advertising literacy dimensions. No correlation was noted between the conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy (*Pearson r*(636)=-0.003, *p*=0.946).

Food advertising literacy was significantly higher in females (*p*=0.014) and those with monthly family income of Rs. 100,000 or more (*p*< 0.001), receiving pocket money of Rs. 1000 or less (*p*=0.04), in A/Level Science Stream (*p*=0.003), watching television less than two hours (*p*=0.012) and having parental influence on food advertising contents (*p*=0.001). There was no difference in relation to the type of school (*p*=0.12) or with ethnicity (*p*=0.073).

Conclusions and Recommendations: A little over half of the sample had sufficient advertising literacy, which was determined by some behavioural factors. Performance significantly correlated with both knowledge and attitudes on literacy. School curricular should be further strengthened with skills on advertising literacy to empower them to counteract advertising tactics.

Key words: Advertising literacy, non-core food and beverages, children