

The current state of television advertising in Pakistan and its impact on children and adolescents

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Abstract: With the proliferation of television channels in Pakistan over the past few years, television advertising has increased correspondingly, with food advertisements constituting the majority. Given that 60% of Pakistan's population comprises children and adolescents, advertisers recognize them as a highly potential market and strategically target this demographic by crafting television commercials tailored to their preferences. Due to the relatively weak willpower of children and teenagers, they are involuntarily influenced by these advertisements. This exposure fosters positive attitudes toward advertised products, thereby triggering purchasing behaviors. Such influence extends beyond mere consumer behavior, significantly impacting the physical health and lifestyle choices of children and adolescents.

Keywords: Pakistan, Television Advertising, Current Status, Adolescents, Impact

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is imperative to understand the economic, cultural, and media development of countries along the route to ensure the smooth implementation of the project. As a barometer of a nation's economy, advertising serves as a crucial lens through which to gauge a country's economic vitality and cultural nuances. Pakistan, a staunch ally of China and the pivotal starting point of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," holds significant strategic importance. Furthermore, as a nation dominated by Islamic culture, Pakistan offers a representative case study for analyzing advertising practices within the Muslim world.

1.2. Practical value of the research

With the continuous advancement of the BRI, economic and multifaceted exchanges between China and Central Asian nations are intensifying. The promotion and expansion of Chinese commodities in these markets rely heavily on effective advertising strategies. Understanding Pakistan's advertising ecosystem provides a foundational insight into other Islamic countries, enabling more culturally sensitive advertising campaigns. Such insights are vital for promoting Chinese products and culture, thereby expanding China's influence and soft power.

Moreover, children in Islamic societies are immersed in religious and cultural values from birth, which inevitably shapes the form and content of local advertising. Consequently, their responses to advertisements differ significantly from those of children in China. Given that the BRI is a long-term strategic plan, today's children represent the future consumer base and the next generation of stakeholders. Studying the impact of advertising on children in Pakistan can shed light on similar dynamics across other Central Asian Islamic nations. This understanding will not only optimize China's advertising placement strategies in the region but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of the BRI.

1.3. Research methods and data sources

It must be noted that domestic research on advertising in Central Asian countries remains largely uncharted territory. Due to limitations in resources and capacity, this study was unable to conduct field investigations. Therefore, the data presented herein were collected and synthesized from existing literature on advertising research within Pakistan.

2. Current status of television advertising in Pakistan

2.1. Proliferation of television channels

In recent years, Pakistan has witnessed a substantial expansion of its television sector. The number of available channels surged from merely five in 2003 to ninety-six by 2008. This figure comprised sixty-six domestic channels and thirty international channels. Compared to the baseline in 2003—which featured five domestic channels and zero international channels—the total number of channels increased by ninety-one within five years, representing an average annual growth rate of 18.2 channels. According to Husssainy (2008), this remarkable growth was driven by the effects of information globalization.

2.2. Escalation of television advertising costs

The proliferation of television channels in Pakistan has fragmented audience attention, reducing the probability of viewers watching commercials and diminishing the overall effectiveness of advertisements. This trend has placed considerable pressure on advertisers. To ensure that advertisements reach a sufficient audience size and capture attention, advertisers have adopted a strategy of multi-channel placement, saturating the airwaves to guarantee visibility.

Data from a 2008 Gallup Pakistan survey illustrates this financial surge. Total spending on television advertising was 390 million rupees during 2003–2004, rising sharply to 1.055 billion rupees in 2006–2007, and further escalating to 1.48 billion rupees in 2007–2008. By 2008, advertising expenditure had increased by 64.3% compared to 2003 levels. While spending on print media and other advertising formats also showed annual growth during this period, their increase was markedly less significant than that of television. Combined spending on print and other advertising was 590 million rupees in 2003–2004, reaching 1.216 billion rupees by 2007–2008, representing a year-on-year growth of only 10.9%. Consequently, the share of television advertising in total advertising expenditure rose from 39.7% in 2003–2004 to 54.8% in 2007–2008.

The data above indicates that the growth of television advertising indeed prompted advertisers to intensify their investment. Ironically, while advertisers increased the volume of advertisements to enhance exposure and effectiveness, this behavior inadvertently heightened the likelihood of channel switching (zapping). With an expanded array of viewing options, audiences are no longer compelled to remain on one channel during commercial breaks; instead, they migrate to alternative channels to avoid advertisements, thereby diluting the very impact the advertisers sought to achieve.

2.3. Dominance of food advertising

An investigation into three major Pakistani television channels reveals that food advertisements constitute the largest proportion of all commercials. Out of a total of 179 observed advertisements, 131 were identified as food-related, accounting for 73.18% of the sample. This was followed by telecommunications and detergent advertisements, which represented 9.49% and 5.02%, respectively. In essence, more than two-thirds of the total advertising content on these channels pertained to food products.

Among these 131 food advertisements, 46 were snack advertisements, accounting for 35.11% of all food advertisements. This was followed by 37 potato chip advertisements, representing 28.24%. Then came ice cream advertisements and beverage advertisements, with 20 and 16 respectively, accounting for 15.26% and 12.21%.

2.4. Creative advertisements outperform conventional advertisements

2.4.1. Defining creative advertising

In the narrow sense, creative advertising functions as a subset of public relations advertising. It involves organizations or enterprises initiating social campaigns or advocating novel concepts under their own name. The core lies in expressing original concepts and ideas regarding the advertising theme, aiming to enhance public understanding and build a favorable organizational image. Generally, such advertisements possess clear objectives and demonstrate an organization's concern for and support of social issues.

From a broader perspective, considering the various classifications of advertisements based on distinct characteristics, creative advertising is a sub-category of the general concept of "advertising." It is defined by the presence of creative thinking, the communication of innovative ideas, and the inclusion of creative elements. The originality and freshness inherent in creative advertising are often lacking in conventional advertisements; consequently, the communication efficacy achieved by creative advertising is incomparable to that of its conventional counterparts. Originality and novelty constitute the primary advantages of creative advertising, as they eliminate the monotonous and tedious information delivery paths typical of conventional ads, allowing for innovative expression in both content and form (Xu, 2012).

2.4.2. Empirical findings in Pakistan

In Pakistan, conventional advertisements have not received any creative awards. A study conducted at universities in Islamabad (Ahmad & Mahmood, 2011) indicated that there was no significant difference in effectiveness between a single exposure to a creative advertisement and a single exposure to a conventional advertisement. The study also confirmed that advertising played three times achieves higher audience attention than playing it once. However, contrary to the results of single exposures, a creative advertisement played three times yields significantly higher effectiveness compared to a conventional advertisement played three times. Table 1 below fully illustrates these findings.

Table 1 Impact of Exposure Frequency of Creative and Conventional Advertisements on Audiences

	Single Exposure		Three Exposures	
	Creative	Conventional	Creative	Conventional
Attitude toward the Ad	4.62	4.69	5.68	5.28
Attitude toward the Brand	4.68	4.8	5.38	5.18
Purchase Intention	4.3	4.49	5.11	4.68

This study offers significant implications for marketers and advertisers, suggesting that creative advertising is highly effective in promoting new brands to the market. Compared to conventional advertising, creative ads are more successful at capturing consumer attention and fostering favorable brand perceptions.

2.5. The diminishing impact of advertising with age

Research investigating the impact of television food advertising on children's purchasing behavior indicates that younger children are more susceptible to advertising cues (Qureshi & Nisar, 2011). Specifically, children aged 4–5 exhibited high levels of attention, viewing time, and purchase intention, with percentages recorded at 75.4%, 53.4%, and 75.4%, respectively. This suggests that children are most vulnerable to advertising influence at a younger age, and this impact manifests more directly in their consumption behavior compared to older age groups.

Corroborating this trend, another study conducted in Bahawalpur found that adolescents become increasingly resistant to advertising as they mature (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013). Among the sampled cohort of 13- to 16-year-olds, 67% reported being unaffected by advertisements.

3. The impact of advertising on children and adolescents

Advertising plays a pivotal role in introducing products and services, shaping consumer behavior in a rapid and efficient manner. Television, characterized by its synchronized audio-visual capabilities, stands as the most prevalent medium and the most potent tool for brand and service promotion. The adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" underscores why television advertising is uniquely capable of showcasing

products in a captivating manner. Children worldwide spend approximately 3–4 hours daily watching television. In Pakistan, the proliferation of television channels has led to a corresponding surge in advertising volume, thereby increasing children's and adolescents' exposure to commercials—a trend that intensifies with longer viewing durations.

Empirical studies indicate that children are subjected to a bombardment of television advertisements, and their behavior is increasingly susceptible to these commercial messages. Recognizing this phenomenon, Pakistani advertisers have identified children as a prime target market and are making concerted efforts to capture this valuable demographic.

3.1. Impact on purchasing behavior

The primary objective of advertising is to capture attention, reshape consumer attitudes toward products, and ultimately stimulate purchasing actions. In Pakistan, research targeting children aged 8–12 revealed significant behavioral intent (Kashif & Altaf, 2012). Of the 36 sampled children, 29 requested that their parents or elders purchase advertised products after viewing television commercials, indicating that 80.5% of the respondents engaged in purchase-related behavior. Although the sample size was relatively small, it reflects adolescent attitudes toward television advertising to a certain extent.

Further evidence from a study on children aged 3–8 found that 32.85% of participants made purchase requests to their parents during or after viewing commercials (Ahmad & Mahmood, 2011). Similarly, a study involving adolescents aged 13–16 reported that 57% of the 400 student respondents either requested or pressured their parents to buy advertised products (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013). Collectively, these three studies underscore the substantial impact of television advertising on the purchasing behavior of both children and adolescents.

Two principal factors contribute to this phenomenon. First, advancements in media technology have established television as the optimal platform for advertising dissemination. The dynamic and colorful nature of television commercials maximizes their ability to attract the attention of young viewers. Second, psychological factors specific to children and adolescents play a crucial role. As they are in a critical stage of cognitive development with relatively weak willpower, this demographic is inherently more susceptible to external commercial influences.

3.2. Impact on dietary habits

3.2.1. *The proliferation of food advertising and the imbalance in children's diets*

Children and adolescents have emerged as a prime target market for advertisers, with a predominant majority of commercials promoting food products designed to capture their attention. Television food marketing exerts a profound influence on the dietary habits and health outcomes of Pakistani youth. Most of these advertised products exceed standard limits for fat, calories, and sodium. Items such as sweets, soft drinks, potato chips, and sugar-laden breakfast cereals have become deeply embedded in the daily diets of children and adolescents. This dietary shift is steering children toward an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.

Empirical data reveals that during children's animation programming slots across three Pakistani television channels, 131 out of 179 total advertisements (approximately 73%) were for food products. Given this high-intensity advertising exposure, it is virtually impossible for children and adolescents to remain unaffected. Among these food advertisements, 46 promoted snack foods, 37 promoted potato chips, 20 promoted ice cream, and 16 promoted beverages—all categorized as high-fat, high-calorie, indigestible, and nutritionally deficient products.

3.2.2. *Habit alienation under advertising bombardment*

Consequently, the incessant bombardment of advertisements has altered children's dietary patterns. Due to these emerging eating habits, obesity and overweight issues are becoming increasingly prevalent among Pakistani youth. Television viewing is a sedentary activity that lowers metabolic rates and fosters a habit of physical inactivity. Research indicates that excessive television viewing negatively impacts children's engagement in physical exercise (Ali & Daniyal, 2013).

3.2.3. *Collaborative intervention by families and schools*

Children rarely consider the nutritional value of the food they consume; instead, they focus on whether the advertisement is appealing, whether they like the taste, or whether the product offers entertainment value. This leads to frequent snacking between meals, resulting in reduced appetite during regular mealtimes, to the extent that snacks sometimes replace proper meals altogether. When combined with physical inactivity, this lifestyle places the health of children and adolescents in serious jeopardy.

Therefore, parents and schools must intervene, as they are the primary agents in shaping children's dietary habits. Both parties should collaborate to provide nutritious yet palatable food options. Parents, in particular, need to regulate their children's screen time and encourage participation in physical activities to boost metabolism and effectively burn off the excess calories consumed from snacks.

3.3. **Impact on academic performance**

Scholarly research indicates a significant correlation between students' academic performance and their exposure to television programs and commercials. Thompson and Austin (2003) posited that the impact of viewing television is contingent upon the duration of exposure. Specifically, students who watch television for more than ten hours per week are likely to experience adverse effects on their academic achievement.

As integral members of society, adolescents are influenced by television across various domains, including language, style, fashion, and behavior. Research suggests that style and fashion are the two dimensions most heavily affected by television content, accounting for 34% and 25% respectively (Ali & Daniyal, 2013). Currently, television programs and advertisements serve as the primary sources of knowledge and information for children and adolescents, representing 23% and 21% of their information intake, respectively. Children frequently emulate the models featured in television commercials. These figures are perceived as intelligent, attractive, powerful, and living a life of luxury on screen, making them highly persuasive role models for young viewers.

4. **Conclusion**

In summary, the proliferation of television channels in Pakistan in recent years has precipitated a substantial increase in both the volume and expenditure of television advertising. Among these commercials, food advertisements constitute the largest and most dominant category. Pakistani advertisers have recognized the strategic value of creative advertising, acknowledging its unique capacity to capture audience attention.

Concurrent with the expansion of media access, children and adolescents have emerged as a pivotal target market due to their increased screen time and accessibility. However, the majority of these advertisements promote nutritionally deficient, visually appealing, yet high-fat snack foods, confectioneries, and beverages. Empirical evidence suggests that these advertisements exert a considerable influence on young consumers, effectively stimulating purchase behavior. Consequently, the excessive consumption of these advertised products poses significant health risks to children and adolescents, rendering them more susceptible to obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

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