Introduction: Children are the target of non-core food and beverages through television advertisements which exploit them leading to poor food choices and non-communicable diseases. Children should be empowered with advertising literacy to counteract harmful advertising. Aim of the study was to describe the advertising literacy on non-core food and beverages, its inter-relationships and associated factors among grade 12 children in type 1AB schools in Colombo district.

Methods: A cross-sectional analytical study conducted among 636 grade 12 students in six Type-1AB schools in Colombo educational zone by two-stage stratified cluster sampling. A self-administered questionnaire was used to assess conceptual, attitudinal advertising literacy and advertising literacy performance. Using means, participants were divided into sufficient/insufficient levels of literacy. Associations were assessed using t-test, ANOVA and Chi-squared tests.

Results: Response rate was 97.5%. Mean age of students was 16.62 (SD=0.6). Majority were girls (n=331,52.0%); Science Stream (n=375,59%); monthly family income less than Rs.100,000/=(n=343,54%); pocket money less than Rs.1000/=(n=423,66.5%); and watching television less than two hours a day (n=526,82%). 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. Mean score of overall food advertising literacy was 67% (SD=5.9%) with 51.9% (95% CI=48.1-55.7) of sufficient food advertising literacy. Food advertising literacy performance showed weakly positive significant correlations with conceptual (Pearson r(636) =0.106, p=0.007) and attitudinal (Pearson r(636)=0.133, p=0.001) advertising literacy and no correlation between conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy (Pearson r(636)=-0.003, p=0.946). Food advertising literacy was significantly higher in females (p=0.014), high monthly family income (p< 0.001), low pocket money(p=0.04), A/Level Science Stream (p=0.003), less television screentime (p=0.012) and having parental influence on food advertising (p=0.001). There was no difference with type of school (p=0.12) or ethnicity (p=0.073).

Conclusions: A little over half of the sample had sufficient advertising literacy. Performance significantly correlated with both knowledge and attitudes on literacy. High family income and parental influence, low pocket money and screentime are associated with high advertising literacy.