BARRIERS TO IMPROVING ADVERTISING LITERACY RELATED TO UNHEALTHY FOOD MARKETING AMONG EARLY ADOLESCENTS IN SRI LANKA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Aruni Gallage* & Carukshi Arambepola

[1]Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

*Corresponding author: aruni@commed.cmb.ac.lk

Abstract

Advertising literacy enables children to recognize and critically evaluate persuasive marketing messages, particularly those promoting unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages (FNAB). Despite growing exposure to digital and traditional marketing, little is known about contextual barriers to developing advertising literacy among early adolescents in Sri Lanka. This qualitative study explored stakeholder perspectives on barriers to improving advertising literacy among school-going children in Colombo District. Six key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted purposively with stakeholders involved in child health, education and media-related fields, and four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with students, parents and teachers. Semi-structured interviews and FGD guides were used, and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Data were transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify barriers and develop themes. Ethical approval was obtained from Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (ERC/PGIM/2025/041) and informed consent/assent was obtained from participants and parents/guardians as applicable.Seven major themes were identified: biological and developmental factors; complex marketing strategies; social and peer influences; parental and home dynamics; gaps in the education system; weaknesses in the regulatory and legal framework; and socioeconomic and cultural factors. Teachers and parents highlighted exam-driven schooling, parental behaviours and policy gaps as barriers to improving advertising literacy, while children frequently described complex marketing strategies as influential. Improving advertising literacy among early adolescents requires attention to multiple levels, including individual competencies, family engagement, school-based education and the broader marketing environment. Integrating media and advertising literacy into school health programmes, alongside strengthening regulatory policies on child-targeted marketing, may help reduce children's vulnerability to persuasive unhealthy food advertising.

Keywords: Advertising literacy; Early adolescents; Unhealthy food marketing; Barriers; Qualitative study.