

# **CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY TO IDENTIFY FACTORS UNDERLYING THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF TELEVISION MEDIA ON DIETARY PRACTICES OF ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN A SEMI-URBAN COMMUNITY IN ANURADHAPURA DISTRICT**

KVDHB Karawita<sup>1\*</sup>, GGN Duminda<sup>1</sup> and C Arambepola<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo

\* [harshikarawita@yahoo.com](mailto:harshikarawita@yahoo.com)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence (10-19 years) is a crucial period in the human life cycle during which, major physiological, biochemical, cognitive, emotional and social changes take place. Therefore, adolescent's nutritional status is vital for optimal attainment of all these changes and inappropriate dietary practices during adolescence can have several long term and short term consequences. (WHO, 2006). Challenges in improving adolescents include bringing about desirable changes in attitudes, social value and behaviour, improvement of knowledge and practices. According to research evidence, mass media are capable of shaping the attitudes, values and behaviour of people at large scale (Walsh, 1999). As such, as much as a facilitator, it could also act as a barrier for making healthy changes in attitudes, social values and behaviour, and improvement of knowledge and practices related to diet. It has been shown that the television is influential towards adolescents' diet more than any other medium.

In Sri Lanka, the exposure of adolescents to mass media is high (UNICEF, 2004). The strategic behaviour of television media is mostly towards the promotion of food products that are high in sugar, fat and salt while neglecting healthy foods high in fibre, vitamins and minerals such as fruits and vegetables. Due to rapid development processes in the country, semi-urban communities are undergoing life style alterations. In these areas, traditional rice and curry based meal patterns are being fast replaced by unhealthy eating habits of the modern world. These lifestyle changes enable more vulnerability among adolescents to television and thereby eating unhealthy food items promoted through television. Thus the present study was aimed to identify factors

underlying the negative influences of television media on dietary practices of adolescents living in a semi-urban community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A cross sectional study was conducted in two villages in two MOH divisions that represent semi-urban communities in the district of Anuradhapura .These two communities were comparable in socio-demographic characteristics, television media exposure and availability of food and beverage items promoted through television media. The study unit was a household located in the study area with at least one adolescent and mother (if mother is not available, a female caretaker). Adolescents and mothers who are not exposed to television media for at least ½ hour per day were not recruited for the study. Each of these two villages selected were consisted of approximately 60 eligible households. From each study area, a sub-sample of 35 eligible households were selected for the cross sectional study by using simple random sampling method. The study population included 70 households and there were 51 female adolescents, 46 male adolescents and 70 caretakers among these households.

In the cross sectional study, the already proven underlying factors such as Exposure time to food advertisements among adolescents; television viewing pattern of households; adolescent's and caretakers' skills in understanding television food advertising strategies; peer influence on adolescents and caretakers and adolescents knowledge on the nutrition of food products promoted through the television media were assessed. Parental participation during the television viewing of adolescents; time duration the television set is switched on per day in households and television viewing hours per day of mothers; controllability of television viewing and active viewing of television during food advertisements are the household television viewing patterns which were assessed during this study. At the same time, the local factors that were assumed to have increased the negative influences of television media on adolescents' food practices were assessed. They were values attached with unhealthy food practices; availability affordability and display of food items promoted through the television media; food culture and food preference.

Focus group discussions with mothers and adolescents, observations, key informant interviews with shop owners were used as qualitative data collection methods to assess these underlying factors.

An interviewer administered questionnaire administered to mothers and pictorial card set administered to adolescents were used as quantitative data collection techniques to assess underlying factors.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In relation to factors underlying negative influences of television media, in 57.7% of households, adolescents view television more than three hours per day. The parent participation during the television viewing of adolescents was 35.7%. The time duration at which the television set is switched on per day was more than three hours in 68% of households. However, only 22.8% of mothers viewed television more than three hours per day. Adolescents of more than 50% of households had the controllability of television watching. More than 75% of households did not have the habit of actively watching television food advertisements together with the family. Of the households that actively viewed television food advertisements, the majority accepted the promotion of unhealthy food.

In relation to mothers' skills in understanding television food advertising strategies mothers were able to understand most of the strategies except strategies related to health and nutrition claims. Adolescents' skills were poor in recognizing all kinds of television media food advertising strategies.

Qualitative enquiries revealed, that high value placed on unhealthy food products promoted through the television media; fathers' and adolescent's food preference towards the food products promoted through the television media; availability of food items promoted through the television in households and shops; attractive and glamorous display of food items that are promoted through television in shops; time spent for preparing meals; busy life style of adolescents and peer influence were the factors that increased the influence of television media on food habits of adolescents.

With respect to the nutrition knowledge on mothers and adolescents, more than 50% of adolescents recognized unhealthy food items which are frequently promoted through the television media as good sources of Vitamins and Mineral. Mothers scored on average 54.8% (SD = 14.6) marks for the questions that assessed the knowledge on nutrition content of selected food items promoted and not promoted through the television media. At the same time, mothers scored on average 58.2% (SD = 24.1) marks for the questions that assessed the knowledge on unhealthy food practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

High exposure time to food advertisements among adolescents; television viewing pattern of households; adolescents and caretakers poor skills in identifying television food advertising strategies; peer influence on adolescents and caretakers' and adolescent's poor knowledge on the nutritional value of food products promoted through the television media have already being proven as underlying factors that prevailed in semi-urban community in Anuradhapura district. In addition to these proven factors , local factors that prevailed in these communities were, values attached with unhealthy food practices; availability affordability and display of food items promoted through the television media; food culture and food preference. Therefore designing interventions by considering these factors will be effective to counteract negative influences of television media on dietary practices of adolescents living in semi-urban community in Anuradhapura district.

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