

# HOW CHILDREN PERCEIVE FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS ON TV: A SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

In digital era, advertising can reach people wider than before. Children are one of targeted consumers for food advertisements. Everyday children are shown by food advertisements while they are watching TV. These advertisements functioned both to deliver and utilize a wide variety of meaning, symbols and message called semiotics. Moreover, children are treated with variety of signs and symbols, but they have different ways of interpreting them.. This study investigated ten children (8-to-10 years old) to know about their perception towards food advertisements. Using semiotics analysis researcher interviewed children about ten food advertisements that are broadcasted on TV. The result shows that most of children can perceive well all signs and symbols communication conveyed by food advertisement. The most influence symbol that affected children to try product is food image that are usually performed in zoom mode and slow motion. Children also get understanding message, culture and value conveyed by food advertisements in positive side. It can support children to behave positively. While brand personal get less attention that brand character of food advertisements which children prefer more cartoon character as a brand mascot of food product.

**Keywords:** *Children' perception, food advertisements, semiotic*

## Introduction

Advertisement is one of the way producers communicate their product to consumers in which the purpose is to affect the customers and the communities around them (Sharma & Gupta, 2015). Producers will try to emerge unique and new ways in promoting their product, so that consumers will be attracted and do not feel bored to pay attention to watch the product on media. In order customer can receive the message of the product on advertisement, producers use

language, sign and symbol which is packaged in an attractive advertisement that can represent the quality of the product sold. Advertisement is also a means to convey newest innovations of the product that can attract the attention of the costumers, both old and new costumers. Television is one of advertising media that still has great demand by producers in Indonesia to promote and sell their products.

One of the most advertised products on television is food, which accounts for nearly 50% of daily adverts. Even the

food industries had burned through billions of dollars consistently to advertise meal which has low quality in supplement but has high in calories (Qutteina, Y., Backer, D.C, & Smith T, 2019). Utilizing language, sign and symbol, food advertisement seem continuously bombards the consumers' attention by affecting them on realizing the existence of the product, carrying attention to its reality and later attracting their emotionally to be preferable to marketed food which finally persuade the consumers to buy them (Lavidge RJ, Steiner GA. A, 1961; Kelly B, King MPsy L, Chapman Mnd K, Boyland E, Bauman AE, BaurLA., 2015) . Therefore producers compete to create advertisement that can convey messages easily to targeted consumers.

One of the most targeted consumers of food advertisement is children. Even some parents worried to their children being influenced by the advertisements. Advertisement tries to get attention of children by using some symbolic communication such as; image, ads language, climate of promotion, social viewpoints and qualities, brand character and feelings. (Sharma & Gupta, P., 2015). Those symbolic communication will be interpreted differently among of the children. Some children can be affected by the hues on the

advertisement because those are their favorite hues. Likewise, if brand character on promotion is popular youngsters who presented their life style through the product, it would become a powerful message that would be easily received and interpreted by the children. This point of view can be inspected by 'semiotic analyses' on children's reactions to recognize meaning constructions which are perceive by children in verbal and nonverbal communication used in ads. This present study tries to investigate how children perceive food ads on TV by using semiotic analysis.

### **Review of related literature**

'Semiotics' is one of the interesting tools used by the ads maker to manage and create a picture that is in line with the mindset of children as consumers in interpreting the meaning so that advertising can build a picture in accordance with the reality. Here semiotic can be the most dominant and compelling of pondering media (Bignell, 2002). The semiotics terminology was taken from ancient Greek word which has meaning of 'sign'. Numerous pioneers, researchers, professionals and creators of semiotic such as De Saussure, Sanders Peirce, Barthes, Roman Jakobsen, Charles Morris and Umberto Eco (Eco, 1979; Leeds-Hurwitz,

1993; Panuti & Zoest, 1996; (Chandler, 2007)) have concurred on the basic meaning of semiotic that is the investigation of signs or an epistemology about the presence or the fact of sign in cultural life. To make clearer in getting the purpose, semiotics sees everything can be translated as a sign which can be taken fundamentally substituting for something different. Ferdinand de Saussure emphasized language as the arrangement of signs which language was better system on presenting signs than any other framework sign in the world. He expressed that we did not only utilize language or offer meaning to something existed in the real world, but also for something didn't exist (Chandler, 2007). Charles Sanders Peirce viewed that human mind and sign limited the three-dimensional framework (triadic/trichotomy) and the relativity in regard to the three typologies or scientific categories of signs (icon, index and symbol). Thus semiotics is a way for analyzing meaning by looking at the signs which communicate meaning. The sign can be in the forms of words, picture, symbol, etc. now the question is will children have the same interpretation towards signs in TV ads?

Before arising digital media, advertisement on printed media is become the most choices for advertiser to promote their product since it is able to make sense of

sign by blending color together in harmonious way which create intertextuality and beauty on magazine (Bignell;2002). From its color and image, consumers can interpret the taste, the quality, even the prestige. Nowadays, ads can be performed in the form of audio-visual which can be as a compelling methods for description and meaning, establishing people ideology by externally affecting the culture that existed in people community (Dyer, 2009). The ideological power is not only a matter of meaning, but making the meaning stay and stick in people minds. One of the broadest and impacted sources in making meaning is culture.

Culture is the total procedures by which the implication of meaning are made, saved and moved where the norms, quality of life were established both material and non-material. It also facilitated us to perceive our world which existed around us (Mortelmans, 1998). The signs for instance, are formed by internal social interaction which was usually called by transfunctionalisation. This indication would interpret differently between the first instruction and the second instruction in forming meaning. In the first instruction may perceive in the level of denotative meaning while for the second one in the level of connotative meaning which

closer to its social setting. This level transfunctionalizes the instruction to socially recommended implication (Gottdiener, 1995).

Some certain regularity in advertisement such as image, words and color are few of many semiotics modes that usually used to code social meaning in ads. There are many more semiotics modes that usually used in advertisement. Anything that are in the progress which causes the audiences or the viewers presumed a meaning is a sign in commercial advertisement (Nahai, 2013) which can make better market for the consumer to be familiar with the product. Mick in his research explained that “the consumer world is a web of meanings among consumers and marketers woven from signs and symbols ensconced in their cultural space and time.” He debated that the significance of signs and images has been broadly perceived, however not many scientists taking a shot on buyers have created hypothesis and research on semiotics, the teaching of signs. He also stated that “the strengths of semiotics is, it positions meaning at the nucleus of consumer behavior, which provides a rich meta-language for semiotic consumer research, and recommends a multi-paradigm philosophy of science” (Mick,

1986). The doctrine will be easier for children to be received.

The blend of semantic sign with the various media, audio and visual, in the advertisements enabled children to investigate the terms and though (Bignell, 2002). These compositions will produce a sintagmatic sequence of image, sound and words which guide consumers to be able to interpret easier. A sport star will be easier to be recognized both of by adult and children. He is able to influence the consumers with his performance. Moreover children often view the national sport star as a national hero (Sevilla & Rubio-hernandez, 2011) which they will proud of if they can imitate what the hero had done. This is a result of the interpretation of sign, in this case sport stars.

The emotion that was shown by the character in advertisement is also a sign that can be easily interpreted. Food advertisement with some children who are gathering while enjoying food after doing spot will give impression that they are happy. And the happiness can be caused by the food. This scene is a powerful capacity to impact how individual see an object and thought (Nahai;2013).

## Methods

This research uses survey method which the subject is 10 children, 5 male and 5 female with the age 8-10 years old. These children were chosen since they have been interviewed to be familiar with some food advertisements that used in this research (likes ice cream, pizza, burger, fried chicken, snacks, etc). These advertisements covered local and international brand which usually broadcast on TV. The data collected by conducted interview to the children relating to food ads on TV. The interviewer showed 10 food advertisements which is divided in two meetings.

The first meeting, children watched advertisements of bread, ice cream, burger, pizza, and fried chicken. While second meeting they watched advertisements of Instant noodle, biscuits, crackers, candy, and chocolate. After watching the foods advertisements, researcher interviewed children relating with food advertisements that they had watched. The researcher used open questions relating to various symbolic communications. They used to analyze both of students perception and the impact of each signs and symbol to children. Some symbolic communications generally utilized on TV is performed in table 1. The result of the interview will be analyzed to see children's

perception the food ads on TV and whether it gives impact to them. This study tries to explore some visual semiotic sign on food ads which affect to children pertaining to their choices.

*Table 1: Various Symbolic Communication used on TV advertisement*

<b>Symbolic Communication</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Symbols	Object, Images, Public Symbol, etc.
Colors	White, Red, Blue, Orange, Black, Green etc.
Ambience of ads	Adventure, Family gathering, Party, travelling, etc.
Cultural Aspects and Values	Gender equality, Family Drama, Children oriented, etc.
Ads Message	Words and Dialogue, Storyline, Musical
Type of ads	Family, men/woman Oriented
Brand characters	Brand Mascot

Brand Personality	Actor, Actress, Athletes, etc.
Mood/Emotions in ads	Happiness/ Patriotism, Fun, Anger, Togetherness, etc.

## Result

Based on the observation seem that not all food advertisements got attention from children. Even a few children said that they did not like some food on the advertisements that researchers showed to them. This enjoyment is influenced by environmental factors such as the influence of friends, brand-name product and also the frequency of children to buy this product. Two children weren't interested in chocolate and candy advertisements since they forbid eating this food because they will get cough if they eat them.

The first interpretation is relating with symbol which can be objects, images, social symbols, shape, etc. Most of food advertisements usually showed food image in zoom mode completed with visual slow motion how this food has good material to describe the taste. The zoom mode of food image can be interpreted easily by most of children with the taste and texture of the food.

When children watch the image of pizza with the sticky mozzarella cheese, hot fried chicken, burger with meat in it, and fried noodle instant, they got most attention of all the children. All children directly responded with their gesture of eating the food while saying 'yummy...' From the image of food, it seemed they can feel the taste and all of them were sure that the taste is delicious. Two children watched the image of bread, directly they said that the bread had soft texture and delicious. The images of cheese, bread, cake, etc are signs that are interpreted as the taste of food by the children. The image of food product that broadcasted in advertisement can possibly attracted children more when contrasted with depiction of shape, sizes and social class appeared in the advertisements.

The second is about the colors. Most of children interpreted the color with the product or the brand. For example all children associate color of burger with color in brand McDonalds, eight children associate choco-chip with chocolate biscuits. All children interpreted candy with fruits, e. But most of children didn't know when they asked about the dominant color on food advertisement that usually shown through the characters' clothes. Only two of children can associate the characters' color clothes with

brand of product, the rest said they didn't know. One of the causes the color didn't get more attention for children since most of the food advertisements didn't show dominant color. The color of brand is usually link with the characters' cloth color.

Ambience is another symbol communication that often used by advertisers in their advertisements. Advertiser often showed the ambience of party, family drama as the packaging of their advertisements. From ten advertisements, six of them showed the ambience of being together with friends, the rest of them is family. The ambience with friends is easy interpreted by children when they watch these advertisements. All of children said that they like with their friends very much. Children are also familiar with family ambience. They interpreted the ambience bring in food advertisement as a message that if they gather with their friends or their family would be more cheerful and warming while eating that food. Five children said that they often spend their time gathering with their family which their mom bought pizza eaten together. Some children also said they often gather with their friends while eating such kind of products. This symbol can be caught by children fast to make interpretation since it gave code that are link with children social life. This means that

children preferred gathering with friends on their spare time or in party. From ten children eight of them preferred gathering with friends theme, while the rest of them with family.

Message and cultural aspects and value are also raised in advertisements. Traditional culture such as having breakfast with family, having lunch with friends and snaking together with mom are often a source of culture that want to be conveyed to children by food advertiser. Almost all children can interpreted the symbol of culture and value covered in every food advertisements. First, in ice cream advertisement, all children can get the message of making friendship with children with special need. They said that it is no matter to make friendship with a child with special need. Some of the said that they had. They often share their toys, food and other school equipment with them. Second, in burger, pizza, and crackers, most of children also can get the message of sharing with their friends would bring happiness. Sharing, gathering, laughing are sign of happiness for children. All children can interpret that gathering with friends while sharing the food would make them laugh, cheerful and color their life which leaded to happiness. The third advertisement covered the message of nationality. Instant noodle advertisement

showed parts of Indonesia with their culture, their nature, their life environment from Sabang till Merauke. It showed how children can have the same spirit and warmth wherever they live in Indonesia. Three children interpreted this advertisement with unity of Indonesia, four of them interpreted with unity and diversity in Indonesia, while rest of them interpreted that Indonesia is beautiful country which has good natural resources as the material of food. The next are the advertisements of bread, and biscuits which showed togetherness with family, mother, father and children. All children interpreted the family as symbol of people whom they love, warmth, peaceful, and happiness. The last advertisement is chocolates and fried chicken. Chocolate advertisements convey a message of doing kindness to brother, while fried chicken advertisement convey message of 'treating mom used my own money'. Both those two advertisements can be interpreted by children about sacrificing theirs for the sake of someone whom they love. The sign of 'mom', 'brother' he represent of love. And they want to do something for those loving people. They really appreciate the culture and value conveyed by the advertisements. The message through the dialogue can also be interpreted well by children.

Gender and brand personality oriented usually existed in adult product advertisements; otherwise in food advertisements it didn't exist since the consumers of the food product is general, both male and female, children and adult. Thus ten children in survey also interpreted that the food is for both of girl and boy. For children brand personality is not an influenced thing. Ten children made respond that they didn't see who is the character in the advertisement. They were more influenced with the brand character as in bread advertisement which use cartoon character as their brand character. Seven children said that they preferred this cartoon character but it didn't influenced more in buying the product. It just made them prefer to watch the food advertisements.

The last is mood or emotions in advertisements. This symbol communication is really easy to be interpreted by children. On visual performed on TV, children can see clearly ho the advertisements characters showed the mood or emotion while they were eating the food

All children seemed able to interpret the symbol communication in advertisement easily; however when children asked whether they wanted to buy those food products and share with their friends or family, most of



them said that not all the products are interesting for them. Only some of them which they had bought and prove that those products are delicious. It means that children in this stage (8 – to 10 years old) have capacity to perceive that advertisements planned to sell. In another side children may also comprehend that advertisement did not consistently tell the truth and bound to express wary perspectives toward advertisements institutions (Moore & Lutz, 2000). At the age of 8, children have ability to perceive in various ways towards similar objects (Flavell, 2000; Kuhn, 2000). Through the implication of advertisements, advertisers predicted that children are able to form their perception about the commercial product through the replication of a realistic which stimulated them to judge the product for its pleasure and esthetic qualities. Children accept that the prime function of advertisements is to illuminate new product and give insights concerning the current brand, yet they know that advertisements were broadcasted to sell the product. (ChildWise, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

This study intended to investigate how children perceive food advertisements on TV using symbol communication shown.

It can be concluded that children can perceive well with the symbols and sign covered in food advertisement. The most influenced symbol that can affect children to try the food products is image. Zoom mode with slow motion of food image really effective to arouse the appetite of children to taste the products advertised. They also had good interpretation with color, ambience, cultural & value, and message cover in the advertisements since those symbols are really link with their social life. Brand personality such as celebrity who performed in advertisement did not get pay attention more for children. They prefer to brand character such as brand mascot of cartoon character. While moods or emotion shown in food advertisement is the easier sign interpreted by children than others, but this sign is often missed to get attention for children.

However this study is only used a few number of object to be surveyed since the limited time, so the researcher suggest for the next researcher can study this semiotic analysis toward the advertisement using wider object and wider kind of advertisements.

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