

Preference for Promotional Strategies Directed at Children: An Empirical Investigation

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Children's role in family's purchase decisions is increasing as they frequently visit retail stores for shopping. Various food promotional strategies are deployed in retail stores to target children. Hence, the key objective of this paper is to study the effectiveness of those strategies by looking into children's preferences for food promotional strategies used in retail stores. For this purpose, a sample of one hundred and seventy nine respondents (mothers) was taken from Amritsar city of Punjab, India and their responses were gauged through a structured questionnaire, administered personally. Data have been analyzed through means, standard deviation, Factor analysis and ANOVA. The present study shows that 'free gifts' highlighted on packaging' is the most effective promotional strategy followed by 'foods assortment', 'co-operative sales-force', 'ease in accessing child's favourite foods' and 'placement of packaged foods at reachable shelf locations'. As preference for promotional strategies may differ across gender, the preferences have also been sub-classified for female and male children. The results show that food purchase requests of male children are much more strongly affected by promotional strategies as comparison to female children. As no such study has already been conducted in India (to the best of researcher's knowledge), this study potentially helps in abridging gaps in literature. Additionally, the findings of the study can be useful for marketers as they can use effective promotional strategies to target children and to escalate the sale of food items in store.

Keywords: Promotional strategies, children, packaging, retail stores, India.

Introduction

Children are a prime target of marketers. Marketers' interest in children is mounting because of their spending power, their purchasing influence and their treatment as future adult consumers (Story and French, 2004). Marketers believe that brand awareness, loyalty and preferences developed at a young age would continue till they become old (McNeal, 1999). Therefore, to influence purchase decisions of children, marketers always try to develop a perpetual image of their products/brands in their minds. Various marketing channels are used by them such as television advertisements, in-school marketing (direct and indirect), product placements, kids clubs, the internet, toys, product with brand logos, viral marketing, brand licensing, contests/sweepstakes (Story and French, 2004; Linn and Novosat, 2008 and Kaur, 2011) to deliver messages and raise interest (Nicole and Story, 2008). Being a naive consumer, children do not know the real intention of marketers and request their parents to buy promoted goods.

Children play a pre-dominant role in purchase decisions for the family. Nearly seventy-five percent shopping trips and purchase decisions are made by women and children accompany their mothers very frequently on shopping trips. They go to retail stores with their parents and help them to buy groceries and other food items in stores (Kaur and Singh,

2006). Thus, family food decision making is a joint activity of parents and children. The major reason of children's overall influence on family food buying decisions is their interest and participation in food shopping (Norgaard et al., 2007). Children's influence on family food decision making can be seen either in different stages of purchase decisions or in selecting nature and type of foods. As the purchase decision-process framework is segmented into four stages namely, initiation, general decision, choice and purchase act, Norgaard et al. (2007) have noted that children gain most influence on food decisions in initiation and choice stage and least influence on purchase act stage. Berey and Pollay (1968) also found that children influence family food decisions by selecting food items of their own choice. They further noted that the chances of purchasing the child's favorite brands of breakfast cereals also increase if a child is more assertive or if a mother is child-centered. Atkin (1978) observed nearly two-thirds of children in supermarkets express a desire for breakfast cereals and in one-third cases (34%), parents either initiate their children for selecting breakfast cereals or they select cereals themselves. Further, the frequency of initiating requests is higher in case of younger children than the older ones. O'Dougherty et al. (2006) observed that in supermarkets, nearly half of the food purchase requests are initiated by children and a majority of them are for sweets and snacks. This finding has also been corroborated by Norgaard et al. (2007) that children mostly

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request unhealthy foods such as sweets or easy to cook foods. They exhibit strong peer power and nag their parents to buy food items of their choice. But, at the same time, they do not consider nutrient contents of foods while selecting food items.

The purchase decisions of children are seen to be influenced by various promotional strategies used in retail stores (Gelperowic and Beharrell, 1994; Hastings et al., 2003; Chapman et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2009). These food promotional strategies include attractive packaging, stocking foods in retail stores, offering child incentives / freebies / premiums / collectives along with food items, keeping the foods at reachable shelf locations. Out of these promotional strategies, packaging and its various attributes attract children's attention and appear to stimulate demand for products (Hawkes, 2010). There can be different attributes of food packaging like bright colour of package, character depicted on the package, game depicted on the package, shape or the picture of food etc. make children notice food items. Words like "Special", "New", and "Improved" may make children look at a package and buy it. Packaged foods are the most heavily advertised in a retail store. Many food retail stores offer various types of incentives/freebies/premiums/collectives such as toys, contests, games, movie tie-ins and coupons along with children food products that attract children. Children's purchase decision is basically influenced by these incentives (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2006; Mehta et al., 2012). Another promotional strategy followed by marketers is to keep children's food products at reachable shelf locations so that children can easily catch them and influence purchase decisions of their parents. For example, candies are placed at child's eye level in the stores (Ebster et al., 2009). More so, visual communication also plays an important role in influencing buying behavior of children. Berry and McMullen (2008) tried to identify as to how elements of child targeted marketing—cartoons/spokes characters, appealing box color schemes, cereal shapes/colors, child oriented incentives on the box and the accessibility and visibility of products on store shelves are linked to the sales of breakfast cereals in the supermarket. It was found that boxes with spokes characters, highly child oriented colors, shapes and themes, and premiums occupied more space than cereal boxes which failed to provide any of these cues. Besides these strategies, McNeal (1999) reported that kid-friendly store personnel also played an effective role in influencing buying behaviour of children in stores.

As children are central to all decisions in a family, parents try to fulfill most of their desires. They take their children to organized retail stores with them and buy foods and other products of their choice. More so, organized stores provide a unique shopping experience to their children as they could get a wide variety of products at one place and select desired products accordingly. Nowadays, organised retail stores have become a preferred location to spend weekends with whole family. Children love to play hide and seek, run through the

premises and dive into boxes of trolley (Pettersson et al., 2004). Sometimes, apart from making purchases only, children show interest in reading, spelling or counting foods in supermarkets (O'Dougherty et al., 2006). More so, share of organized retailing is also increasing in India. Therefore, marketers target children through various promotional strategies and it is imperative to study children's preferences for these promotional strategies.

Review of literature

A brief review of work done with regard to various promotional strategies used in stores to influence buying behavior of children is presented here.

Atkin (1978) found that children prefer a particular brand of breakfast cereals because of premiums and incentives offered on a purchase than the nutrition features of the product. Gelperowic and Beharrell (1994) stated that appealing packaging of a product had a strong influence on shopping decisions of mothers and children in a shopping center. However, mothers were ready to buy food products with appealing packaging only if they considered the food product in question to be healthy and were also given an assurance of food being eaten by children. Pettersson et al. (2004) highlighted that promotional strategies that were mainly used in a grocery store to attract children included use of cartoons and multicolored figures in designing packages for foods and placing the products at suitable levels. Dixon et al. (2006) also noted that a majority of chocolate bars having colorful packaging were stored at a reachable shelf location in order to attract children while mints, luxury chocolates and chewing gums/bubble-gums were usually at the mid-top levels. Products with children's promotions inside (chocolate eggs containing a toy) were generally observed to be positioned at the lowest point in the display within reach of child sitting in a pusher or walking through the aisle. A majority of checkouts within each supermarket displayed confectionery items, food or drinks, sweets, chocolates, chewing gums or bubble-gums. Pettigrew and Roberts (2006) found that toys were offered with fast food meals as a promotional strategy. Children were not interested in quality, taste or nutrient content of a meal. Most of the time, they requested a meal (that offered a toy) which was uneconomical and also nutritionally inferior. Sometimes, after getting toys, children lost their interest in restaurant meals. Chapman et al. (2006) conducted research in nine selected supermarkets in Australia. For this research, the number and types of promotions were measured within seven food categories like sweet biscuits, snack foods, confectionery items, chips/savoury snacks, cereals, dairy snacks and ice creams. The study found that on an average 35% of confectionery items in supermarkets used promotional tactics such as discounts, premiums and prizes. The use of television/movie celebrities and cartoon characters for promotion was most common, making up for a majority (75%) of all promotions. More emphasis was given on themes of fun and fantasy in packaging of food items whereas giveaways

accounted for very small percentage (13%) of all promotions. Mehta et al. (2012) conducted a study in a supermarket to look into the nature and extent of marketing techniques used on the packaging of child-oriented food and beverage products. They segmented all marketing techniques into five major categories namely semiotics (child-oriented graphics, child-oriented cartoons and celebrities, and claims about health and nutrition), cross promotions (links to television, movies and websites), packaging form (lunch box/kids-size packaging and unusual shapes), price promotions (discounts and bonus offers) and premium promotions (giveaways (toys and games) and competitions). They found that 10% or more than those child-oriented food products used sixteen unique marketing techniques on packaging namely bright colours, childish script, lunch box/kids-size packs, directed to food company website, unlicensed cartoon characters (generic cartoons, sports equipment), references to play or education and flavour, captions exaggerating attributes ('bliss bombs', 'dangerously cheesy'), licensed cartoon characters, discounts, directed to brand website, unusual packaging shape, cross-promotions (links to movies or television), bonus offers, images of children, celebrities-sports or entertainment and others like puzzles, games, novelty items etc. On an average, more than six marketing techniques were used on each food product. Further, out of 157 discrete food and beverage products targeted at children, almost all food items (99.4%) used on packages semiotics to market foods. This was followed by cross-promotions (77.1%), attractive packaging designs (55.4%), price promotions (33.1%) and premium promotions (24.8%). Semiotics such as graphics, cartoon and celebrities, claims about health and nutrition and cross-promotions were also used in a majority of child-oriented food items. Their respective percentages were 99%, 85%, 64% and 77%. Filipovic and Djordjevic (2009) found that most of children preferred to go to retail stores where they found kind sales personnel.

The foregoing review illustrates that promoted foods are always kept at a reachable shelf location in retail stores so that children can touch and hold them easily and influence family food buying decisions through requests, hints, and outright demands. More so, attractive packaging and its attributes such as use of bright colours, licensed/cartoon characters, movie celebrities, shapes or pictures of the food, free gifts, attractive offers, discounts and premiums also wield an influence on children's food buying behaviour. But a majority of promotional strategies are used to increase sale of unhealthy/non-core food items. The discussion brings out that not much research has been conducted in India to understand the preferences for promotional strategies amongst children. Hence, the present study seeks to make an attempt in this direction and bridge gaps in existing literature.

Research Methodology

Data were collected from Amritsar city of Punjab. Mothers were the basic sampling unit for the present study as they are

seen to be the primary care givers for children. Schools were selected (randomly) out of all schools in the city that enrolled students with various socio-economic backgrounds. Parents of children in two schools were approached through the schools. The children were asked to take the questionnaire home and get it filled by their mother. Mothers of children in age category 4-11 years were contacted. In case two children were studying in the same school, the mother was requested to fill the questionnaire keeping in mind the child who had brought it. Of the 200 questionnaires that were distributed to children, 179 (89.5%) usable questionnaires were returned. This resulted in a total sample of 179 mothers of children.

Data were collected through a structured, pre-tested, and non-disguised questionnaire. Mothers were asked about preference of their children for food items such as carbonated beverages, packed fruit juices, sugared snacks, salty snacks, confectionery items, ready to cook foods, ice-creams and biscuits. In order to uncover preferences of children for promotional strategies which influenced their purchase requests in stores, a battery of 15 statements was prepared. The statements were devised on the basis of a review of previous literature (for example, recently published review reports of Hastings, 2003; Cairns, 2009, etc.) and other empirical research (such as Gelperowic and Beharrell, 1994; McNeal, 1999; Pettersson et al., 2004; Chapman et al., 2006; Pettigrew and Roberts, 2006; Berry and McMullen, 2008; Kelly et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2009; Ogba and Johnson, 2010).

The respondents (mothers) were asked to respond on a five-point scale, 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree, about the level of agreement/disagreement regarding their children's preference for promotional strategies in retail stores. The suggestions led to minor but valuable and meaningful modifications. The preliminary draft of the questionnaire was pre-tested through personal interviews with 20 mothers. This helped in improving the questionnaire. With a few deletions and additions, the final questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire closed by asking respondents to fill out their demographic information. In the present sample, 84 (46.9%) are female and 95 (53.1%) are male children. A majority of parents such as mothers (87.7%) and fathers (77.7%) fall in age group 30-40 years. The respondents conformed to four income categories with household's income: less than INR 20,000 (42.5%), between INR 20,000 and 30,000 (27.9%), between INR 30,000 and 40,000 (11.7%) and more than INR 40,000 (17.9%). SPSS 19 has been used to analyze the data. Means, standard deviation, Factor Analysis and ANOVA have been used to analyse the data.

Analysis and results

In order to gauge the extent of agreement/disagreement regarding influence of promotional strategies on purchase requests of children in stores, the fifteen statements used along with their weighted average scores (w.a.s.) and standard deviations (SD) are presented in Table I. This table exhibits

that the promotional strategies used in retail stores 'influence' purchase requests of children as the weighted average scores are close to 3. Further, mothers (from the overall sample) report that 'Free gifts (e.g. tattoos, toys, stickers, small boxes) highlighted on the package often attract the child in the retail store (S5, w.a.s. =4.32) is the most influential promotional strategy. Other promotional strategies such as easy accessibility

of food items which are of child's choice in a retail store (S14, w.a.s. =4.11), availability of packaged food items in the store (S1, w.a.s. =4.08) or availability of a wide variety of food items in a preferred store (S15, w.a.s.=4.08) also influence purchase requests of children.

Table-1 Weighted average scores for promotional strategies directed at children

Statement Label	Statements	w.a.s. (Overall)	S.D. (Overall)	w.a.s. (Female Children)	w.a.s. (Male Children)
S1	Most of the time, packaged food items are available in the store	4.08	0.771	4.01	4.15
S2	Packaged food items often attract my child in the store.	3.89	1.016	3.64	4.11
S3	The bright colours of the package influence my child's purchase decisions as he/she sees them in the store	3.50	1.206	3.44	3.56
S4	The licensed characters (e.g. Tiger image on Britannia Tiger Krunch biscuits pack) used on package often attract the child in the store	3.53	1.018	3.30	3.74
S5	Free gifts (e.g. tattoos, toys, stickers, small boxes) highlighted on the package often attract the child in the retail store	4.32	0.870	4.13	4.48
S6	My child's product preferences in the store are influenced by games depicted on the package (e.g. Puzzle game on Cadbury Gems pack)	3.87	0.994	3.75	3.98
S7	A majority of food items that children like are placed at reachable shelf locations in the store	3.79	0.854	3.85	3.74
S8	My child's product preferences in the store are influenced by premiums (e.g. 10% extra on Kurkure/chips) on package	2.88	1.143	2.75	3.00
S9	Sweets, confectionery items or beverages that are available on billing counters as well as at the entrance of a retail store influence my child's purchase decisions.	3.37	1.096	3.24	3.49
S10	Availability of food items in many tastes/flavours increase the chances of purchase requests by my child (e.g. Lays chips in tomato tango, classic salty, american style cream and onion, magic masala flavours)	3.77	0.988	3.73	3.81

S11	Availability of different brands of a food item increase the chances of purchase requests by my child (e.g. Biscuits of Britannia, Parle G, Cadbury, Cremica, Priya Gold Brand)	3.65	0.896	3.63	3.66
S12	Sales personnel in retail store are always ready to help my child in finding food items	3.38	1.060	3.42	3.35
S13	Whenever we (me and my child) go to the store, sales personnel welcome us in a very friendly way	3.46	0.979	3.51	3.41
S14	My child prefers to go to a store where goods of his/her choice are easily accessible	4.11	0.818	3.98	4.22
S15	My child often prefers to go to a store where he/she gets a wide variety of products.	4.08	0.951	4.02	4.13

Similar patterns are observed for responses of mothers of male children. They 'agree' that promotional strategies that influence purchase requests of their children are S5 (free gifts (e.g. tattoos, toys, stickers, small boxes) highlighted on the package often attract the child in the retail store) (w.a.s.=4.48), S14 (my child prefers to go to a store where goods of his/her choice are easily accessible) (w.a.s.=4.22), S1 (most of the time, packaged food items are available in the store, w.a.s.=4.15), S15 (my child often prefers to go to a store where he/she gets a wide variety of products) (w.a.s.=4.13) and S2 (packaged food items often attract my child in the store) (w.a.s.=4.11). Whereas, mothers of female children 'agree' that promotional strategies that influence purchase requests of their children are free gifts (e.g. tattoos, toys, stickers, small boxes) highlighted on the package often attract the child in the retail store (S5, w.a.s.=4.13), my child often prefers to go to a store where he/she gets a wide variety of products (S15, w.a.s.=4.02), most of the time, packaged food items are available in the store (S1, w.a.s.=4.01), my child prefers to go to a store where goods of his/her choice are easily accessible, (S14, w.a.s.=3.98) and a majority of food items that children like are placed at reachable shelf locations in the store (S7, w.a.s.=3.85). Another important finding is that male children are much more influenced by promotional strategies used in retail stores than female children as weighted average scores of responses of mothers of male children is higher in comparison to female children.

Factor analysis for promotional strategies

To summarize the preferences of children for promotional strategies directed at them in retail stores, Factor Analysis has been applied to the 15 statements. Reliability of the scale (Cronbach Alpha) is 0.761 and acceptable (Hair et. al, 2011). Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) such as correlation matrix, Anti-image correlations, Bartlett's test of Sphericity

and KMO value (0.722) showed that data were fit for factor analysis. Principal Component Analysis has been used for extracting factors and the number of factors to be retained is based on latent root criterion, variance explained and Scree plot analysis. The results were obtained through orthogonal rotations with Varimax. Promotional strategies with Eigen values greater than one were extracted and all factor loadings greater than 0.4 (ignoring the sign) were retained. The analysis gave a five-factor solution. The names of the factors, the statement labels and factor loadings are summarized in Table II. The factors extracted above have been explained hereafter.

Factor 1: Attractive packaging attributes

This is the first and most important factor that accounts for 17.269 percent of the total variance. Five statements load on to this factor. The statements include S2 (Packaged food items often attract my child in the store), S3 (Use of bright colours in the package), S4 (Use of licensed characters on package), S5 (Free gifts highlighted on the package) and S6 (Games depicted on the package). The factor structure suggests that different attributes of packaging such as bright colours, licensed characters, free gifts and games influence purchase requests of a child for food products in a store.

Factor 2: Foods assortment

The second factor, that includes statements S9 (Availability of sweets, confectionery items or beverages on billing counters as well as at the entrance of a retail store), S10 (Availability of food items in many tastes/flavors) and S11 (Availability of different brands of a food item), explains 11.518 percent of total variance. The factor suggests that purchase requests of a child increase when she/he finds food items in many tastes/flavors and/or brands at point of purchase (POP) and point of sale (POS).

Table-2 Factor analysis (Promotional strategies that influence purchase requests of children)

Statement Label	Factors					Communalities
	F1 Attractive packaging attributes	F2 Foods assortment	F3 Co-operative sales - force	F4 Ease in accessing child's favourite foods	F5 Placement of packaged foods	
Attraction towards packaged food items (S2)	0.709					0.575
Bright colours of the package (S3)	0.736					0.608
Licensed characters on package (S4)	0.713					0.554
Free gifts highlighted on the package (S5)	0.563					0.621
Games depicted on the package (S6)	0.622					0.458
Availability of food items at billing counters as well as at the entrance (S9)		0.586				0.445
Availability of food items in many tastes/flavours (S10)		0.836				0.736
Availability of different brands of a food item (S11)		0.606				0.539
Helpful sales personnel (S12)			0.813			0.706
Friendly sales personnel (S13)			0.858			0.755
Premiums on Package (S8)				0.423		0.432
Easy accessibility of goods of child's choice (S14)				0.854		0.760
Availability of a wide variety of food items (S15)				0.796		0.726
Availability of packaged food items (S1)					0.818	0.744
Placement of food items at reachable shelf locations (S7)					0.565	0.459
Eigen Value	2.590	1.728	1.697	1.685	1.418	∑ 9.118
Explained %	17.269	11.518	11.313	11.235	9.454	
Cumulative Variance %	17.269	28.787	40.100	51.335	60.789	

Factor 3: Co-operative sales force

Statements S12 (Helpful sales personnel) and S13 (Friendly sales personnel) form the third factor and explains 11.313 percent of total variance. It shows that friendly and helpful sales personnel also influence purchase requests of children since they welcome children as consumers and accord importance to them as potential customers.

Factor 4: Ease in accessing child's favourite foods

Factor four includes statements S8 (Premiums on package), S14 (Easy accessibility of goods of child's choice) and S15 (Availability of a wide variety of products). This factor explains 11.235 percent of total variance. The factor structure suggests that children always prefer to go a store which assorts foods promoted through premiums and where their favorite food items are available in a wide variety.

Factor 5: Placement of packaged foods

This factor suggests that to attract attention of children in

stores, foods are kept at eye level. Children find it easy to catch them and then request their parents to purchase those food items for them. Sometimes, they themselves put food items available at reachable locations in shopping cart. Statement S1 (Availability of packaged food items) and S7 (Placement of food items at reachable shelf location) constitute factor 5 which explains 9.454 percent of total variance.

One-way ANOVA for mothers' responses across child's gender

After extracting the factors, ANOVA has been applied to test the null hypothesis — “There is no significant difference between responses of mothers of female and male children with respect to preference for promotional strategies that effect purchase requests of their children in stores”. Table III shows means, standard deviations and F-values for factors related to promotional strategies across child's gender.

Table-3 Means, S.D. and F-values for factors related to preference of promotional strategies for female and male children

Promotional Strategies	Female		Male		F-value	P-value
	w.a.s	S.D.	w.a.s	S.D.		
Attractive packaging attributes	-0.243	0.999	0.215	0.956	9.823	0.002*
Foods assortment	-0.019	1.034	0.018	0.974	0.062	0.804
Co-operative sales-force	0.096	0.972	-0.085	1.021	1.471	0.227
Ease in accessing child's favourite foods	-0.102	1.094	0.091	0.905	1.669	0.198
Placement of packaged foods	-0.038	1.094	0.034	.914	0.232	0.631

*significant at 1% level

The results of F-values, as seen from the table, show that for promotional strategy “Attractive packaging attributes”, there is a statistically significant difference in mean values of responses of mothers of female and male children at 1% level of significance. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected for this strategy. Whereas, for other promotional strategies such as “Foods assortment”, “Co-operative sales-force”, “Ease in accessing child's favourite foods” and “Placement of packaged foods”, there is no statistically significant difference in responses of mothers of female and male children. Therefore, it can be concluded from above analysis that mothers of female and male children find that promotional strategies are preferred by their children similarly.

Conclusion and implications

Marketers frequently target children towards their food items by deploying various promotional strategies in retail stores.

These promotional strategies influence food purchase decisions of children. The present study reveals that 'attractive packaging and its attributes' such as use of bright colours, licensed characters, free gifts and games on package often attracts the children. However, 'free gifts (tattoos, toys, stickers, small boxes) highlighted on package' is the most effective promotional strategy. A majority of children purchase food items having free gifts and ignore their nutrient contents. The results of the present study corroborate the findings of Gelperowic and Beharrell (1994), Pettigrew and Roberts (2006) and Mehta et al. (2012). Another important finding is that food purchase requests of male children are much more affected by promotional strategies than purchase requests of female children. Male children prefer to go to those retail stores where they find food items of their choice easily. But female children go to retail stores where a wide variety of food items is available. More so, other promotional strategies such as co-

operative sales force and placement of packaged foods at reachable shelf locations also make a store favourite among children.

Marketers can hence target children by framing food promotional strategies appropriately. This requires offering attractive free gifts on food items as it arouses a feeling of 'purchase more' in the mind of children. Marketers should concentrate on food packaging and its various attributes like use of bright colours, licensed characters and games on package. Availability of food items in various shapes, colours and sizes often attracts the child. Presence of child-favourite food items (sweets, confectionery items or beverages) at billing counters as well as at reachable shelf locations also entices the children. Along with it, sales personnel should be well trained. They should have adequate information about availability of food items in stores and always ready to help children in finding a particular food item. Thus, findings of this study would be beneficial for marketers as it guides them in planning effective promotional strategies to target their potential consumers i.e. children.

Limitations of the study

The study is confined to Amritsar city only and the sample size is small owing to time and resource limitations. This may somewhat limit the generalizability of the findings. Also, the present study has been conducted through a questionnaire and survey based techniques are known to be associated with their own limitations.

Suggestions for Future Research

Other methods such as observations or experiments can also be used in future research. In the present study, children's preferences for food promotional strategies in retail stores have been classified across gender. Other demographic variables can also be chosen in subsequent studies.

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