

Ethical Implications of Marketing Strategies on Consumer Behaviour in the specific case of Baby Care Products

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Abstract

This study evaluates the ethical implications of marketing strategies adopted by companies producing baby nutrition and skin care products, with a focus on their influence on consumer behaviour among parents in Tamil Nadu. Drawing on responses from 218 parents belonging to Millennial and Gen Z generations, the research investigates parental awareness of regulatory norms, reading of product labels, and the impact of emotionally targeted advertisements. The findings revealed a significant lack of informed decision-making among parents due to limited awareness of regulations issued by the government and misleading advertisements. Furthermore, the promotions made by companies in the baby care market indicate non-compliance with ethical marketing guidelines as well as WHO recommendations. This research emphasises the urgent need for enhanced regulatory enforcement, transparent labelling practices, and targeted consumer education to mitigate the risks posed by unethical marketing in this sensitive baby product category.

Keywords: Ethical Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Baby Care Products, Parental Awareness

Introduction

The baby care market is highly profitable and growth-oriented, especially in India, where the population keeps alarmingly expanding. The marketing tactics used by companies manufacturing baby nutrition and skin care products are often misleading in spite of stringent laws governing advertisements. Every new parent is led to believe that all kinds of baby skincare products are essential when, in reality, babies do not need plenty of cosmetics. Some brands even go to the extent of calling themselves ‘earthy’ or ‘organic’ for the sake of promoting themselves as a baby-friendly brand. The research gap has been identified as the lack of consumer awareness, especially in young parents, and blindly believing reputed brands that advertise false information. This study delves into how marketing strategies influence the purchasing patterns and consumer choices with respect to baby nutrition and skincare products, examining the underlying ethical considerations. The objective of this study is to determine whether the marketing strategies adopted by companies with respect to baby care products are ethical and to understand whether they have any real implications on consumer behaviour.

Review of Literature

According to a study done over 20 years ago which exhibits relevance even today, it has been found that nursery school children demand to purchase at least over 25 products per day based upon the influence of marketing strategies targeting little children (Schor, 2004). In this day and age, even substitutes for breastmilk are advertised targeting new young parents on social media as there are no regulations specifically imposing a ban upon it (Pedro Javier Mota-Castillo et al., 2023). Such unethical marketing practices are highly condemnable and the consumer behaviour has also undergone many changes in the recent era. Studies indicate that consumers expect companies to be socially and morally responsible as they are more responsive to marketing done by socially responsible companies (Lois A. Mohr et al., 2001). Their willingness to purchase products and services of socially responsible companies is higher compared to the willingness to buy from those companies which do not exercise any kind of moral obligations (Pat Auger et al., 2006).

Companies do not give due importance to ethical selling practices and neglect it altogether as their main aim is to increase the profitability of shareholders rather than consumer wellbeing (Dharmendra Chavda et al., 2022). In a research study conducted upon Polish parents, it was revealed that parents disagreed with the imposition of value-added tax on baby food products (Jarczok-Guzy, 2022). It is unethical on the part of the government to impose huge sums of tax upon essential items. As new parents struggle to navigate by purchasing baby food products that are affordable, it is worse that some companies do not follow medical guidelines leading to a lack of nutrients in infant food products (Janet Cade et al., 2020). This leads to potential health issues later in life of babies consuming such products. A recent research study conducted in Russia also indicated that companies were not following WHO guidelines on infant nutrition and many baby food products contained alarmingly higher level of sodium and sugar than necessary (A. V. Kontsevaya et al., 2023). Though e-selling has penetrated the doorsteps of parents in countries like India with advanced logistics and GPS, parents prioritize ease of buying over carefully considering nutritional information of concerned baby products (Aswathy and Chandrasekar, 2019).

In spite of stringent government regulations governing the marketing of infant milk substitutes, the marketing practices in Thailand are not compliant either with the country's regulations or with WHO as they specifically target young mothers with promotional pricing and discounts (Nisachol Cetthakrikul et al., 2022). Though parents take informed decisions thoroughly going through reviews, recommendations, blogs and product information, such decisions are not backed by scientific evidence (Farooqui and Waghlole, 2024). Stay – at – home mothers were willing to pay a little over the market

price for products which were advertised as eco – friendly and sustainable in order to instill environmental values in their children (Michel Laroche et al., 2001). Therefore, it is evident that majority of the companies indulge in unethical marketing practices despite strict government regulations across countries and the guidelines issued by WHO.

Research Methodology

Objectives of the Research

- To understand whether parents make fully informed decisions while purchasing baby care products.
- To understand whether companies comply with regulatory frameworks and WHO guidelines while promoting baby care products.

Primary Data

Data was collected from 218 parents in Tamilnadu belonging to Millennial as well the Gen Z generations to analyse the impact of unethical marketing strategies upon their shopping behaviour. A questionnaire was designed to understand whether the parents were familiar with unethical marketing practices. It was analyzed whether the parents read information labels of the products thoroughly, made comparisons and were aware of the regulatory norms that the companies needed to comply with.

Secondary Data

The information has been collected from journals, government reports, business articles and magazines

Research Design

The research adopts a descriptive and analytical design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess parental awareness and company compliance with ethical and regulatory marketing standards.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling method was employed to select 218 parents from different cities and towns in Tamil Nadu, representing both Millennial (born 1981–1996) and Gen Z (born 1997–2012) consumers. Diversity in education and income levels was ensured to gather a comprehensive view.

Tools and Techniques

- **Questionnaire:** The questionnaire was structured with both closed-ended and Likert-scale items to assess awareness, attitude, and behaviour.
- **Data Analysis Tools:** Microsoft Excel and SPSS were used to calculate frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and Chi-square tests to test hypotheses.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

Awareness/Behaviour Indicator	Response Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Reading product labels thoroughly	Always	59	27.1%
	Occasionally/Rarely/Not at all	159	72.9%
Comparison of nutritional facts/ingredient lists across brands	Rarely or Never	142	65.1%
	Frequently	76	34.9%
Awareness of regulatory bodies (FSSAI, WHO, etc.)	Unaware	157	72.0%

Table 1: Parental Awareness and Behaviour Regarding Baby Care Products (n = 218)

From the above analysis, it could be interpreted that only 27% of the respondents always read product labels thoroughly. 65% of parents stated they rarely compare nutritional facts or ingredient lists across brands. 72% admitted they were unaware of regulatory bodies like FSSAI, WHO guidelines, or the Code for Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes.

Hypothesis Testing

- **Null Hypothesis (H0):** Parents make fully informed decisions while purchasing baby care products.
- **Alternate Hypothesis (H1):** Most parents do not make fully informed decisions.

Chi-square test results showed a $p\text{-value} < 0.05$, indicating statistical significance and supporting the alternate hypothesis (H1). Thus, it could be interpreted that most parents do not make fully informed decisions, often influenced by advertising rather than regulatory awareness.

Compliance with WHO Guidelines and Regulations

Secondary Data Findings

The analysis of advertisements from leading baby product brands across the world revealed that 40% of the advertisements featured vague or unverifiable health claims (e.g., “clinically proven”, “recommended by experts”). There was no evidence to back these claims. 30% of the brands used emotional appeals over factual information like “protect your loved one” or “all that your baby needs”. It was clear that the advertisements were targeting emotionally vulnerable parents. Paediatric endorsements were directly used in 20% of ads, a direct violation of WHO Code norms.

Hypothesis Testing

Null Hypothesis (H0): Baby care product companies fully comply with the regulatory framework and WHO guidelines in their marketing practices.

Alternate Hypothesis (H1): Most baby care product companies do not fully comply with the regulatory framework and WHO guidelines in their marketing practices.

Based on content analysis, there is strong qualitative support for H1. Thus, it could be interpreted that compliance with WHO guidelines is inconsistent, and many companies stretch or bypass ethical marketing practices.

Findings

The results of this study indicate significant shortcomings in consumer understanding and corporate adherence within the baby care market. A key finding from the analysis reveals that merely 27% of parents regularly read product labels, while majority of them (72%) acknowledged their lack of awareness regarding fundamental regulatory frameworks like those set by the FSSAI or WHO. This absence of awareness significantly restricts the capacity of parents to make educated buying choices in purchasing baby care products.

Additionally, it can also be deduced that around 65% of participants compared ingredients or nutritional information among different brands, indicating that emotional marketing strategies like

attractive visuals, emotional stories, and misleading endorsements from doctor were viewed as more powerful than factual information. These findings are consistent with earlier research studies (Griebel-Thompson et al., 2023), indicating that emotionally impactful advertisements tend to influence consumer behaviour, particularly more in delicate markets such as infant care which is unethical and inconsiderate.

The research also highlights the pressing need for stricter regulations, increased responsibility, and enhanced transparency in the marketing of baby care products. Regulatory agencies need to focus on monitoring and enforcement to guarantee that ethical limits are upheld as infant health is quite sensitive. Moreover, the results highlight the necessity for educational initiatives aimed at consumers, specifically for new and expectant parents. Measures need to be taken should concentrate on equipping to equip new parents with the ability to critically assess marketing material, comprehend regulatory labels, and value safety over brand appeal.

Limitations of the Study

The sample was limited to respondents from the state of Tamil Nadu. Consumer behaviour and awareness levels may differ significantly in other regions both within and outside the country. The sample included 218 respondents, which may not be sufficiently large to generalize the findings across diverse population groups. The data was collected through self-reported questionnaires. Hence, there is also a possibility of bias in responses, where respondents may have overstated socially desirable behaviours or underreported negligence. The analysis of marketing practices was based on a select number of advertisements and may not capture the full extent of industry-wide compliance or deviation from ethical norms.

Conclusion

Government agencies must conduct periodic audits of marketing practices and impose stricter penalties for non-compliance with ethical advertising standards. Regulatory authorities should mandate more standardized as well as consumer-friendly product labelling. This includes the disclosure of all ingredients, safety certifications, and the absence of unverified claims. Hospitals, and educational institutions should collaborate to create awareness campaigns to educate young parents about how to evaluate baby care products critically and make evidence-based choices.

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