

## FOOD EQUALS HAPPINESS: ANALYSING HOW ADVERTISERS CONSTRUCT MYTH IN CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES

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### Abstract

Children's magazines have long been a popular medium for food advertisers to connect with school-going children and foster brand recognition among them. This research paper examines how diverse strategies are employed by advertisers to connect food items with happiness by transforming them from mere eatables to 'happiness food.' Using a qualitative approach, the study analyses advertisements from two prominent magazines: Champak, a fortnightly publication, and Tinkle, a monthly magazine (which was weekly until April 2023), targeted at children. Champak and Tinkle have been selected based on a general survey of children conducted by the researcher, which identified them as favourites among children. The analysis includes a selection of four advertisements (two from each magazine) randomly chosen from the first monthly editions published between May 2018 and May 2024. Various discursive strategies, including visual elements like colours, characters, messaging, branding, product features, ad placement, and ad size, all of which act as signifiers, are analysed. The study reveals how these strategies effectively place simple food items as 'happiness foods,' with the happiness aspect often overshadowing their nutritional composition and ingredients used. Roland Barthes' theory of signification has been used to analyse how the 'food equals happiness' myth has been constructed through these signifiers.

**Keywords:** Advertising Strategies; Children's Magazines; Content Analysis; Food; Happiness

## Introduction

According to Webster's dictionary, food is a material consisting of protein, fat, and carbohydrates used in the organism's body to sustain growth, repair, and vital processes and to furnish energy. However, according to Barthes (1961), food is more than just a source of nutrition. As per him, it functions as a system of communication that conveys meaning beyond its basic use. Barthes (1961) argues that food represents a complete system of communication, enabling us to create, share and transform meaning with others (Stano, 2022). In other words, the way we talk about, prepare, and consume food can express cultural values, social norms, and personal identities.

In industrialised societies, the values and cultural significations associated with food and eating practices are reflected in, and shaped by, advertising discourse. Barthes characterises advertising as a key instrument for illuminating the various situations and themes to which food-related significations refer (Barthes, 1961, p. 929). Essentially, advertisements do more than just promote food products; they also communicate messages about social and cultural meanings attached to food.

Children's magazines provide an effective platform for food marketers to reach and influence children. Through targeted advertising, these magazines associate food products with themes of happiness, often reflecting hedonic happiness. This kind of happiness, characterised by the pursuit of maximum pleasure and the avoidance of pain through sensory experiences, is a subjective form of well-being measured by life satisfaction and the predominance of positive over negative emotions (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In contrast, eudaimonic happiness emphasises virtue, self-fulfilment, meaning, and long-term flourishing. While hedonic happiness focuses on maximising pleasure, eudaimonic happiness centres on living authentically and developing one's inner potential.

Interestingly, studies suggest that eudaimonic well-being may be more closely linked to healthy eating habits than hedonic happiness. Conner et al., (2015) found that fruit and vegetable consumption was positively connected with eudaimonic well-being (i.e., engagement, purpose, meaning, creativity, and curiosity). As per this study eating habits that support eudaimonic values, such as feeding the body and the mind, may contribute to a deeper sense of fulfilment.

However, children today, are raised in a world where there is a rush towards hedonic happiness. After all, eudaimonic happiness, with its focus on authenticity and growth, is indeed harder for marketers to package and sell to children. Though hedonic and eudaimonic happiness both are important, the former runs the risk of causing addiction and habituation.

By portraying food as a source of instant gratification and sensory pleasure, advertisers appeal to children's natural inclination for hedonic experiences. This strategy positions certain food products as a means to achieve momentary joy and satisfaction, often at the expense of considering their nutritional value or long-term effects. This study aims to explore how advertisers make food seem integral to a children's world and examine the strategies used to transform simple food items into symbols of 'happiness food' in children's magazines.

The focus on the myth of happiness in this study has been a significant area of interest, leading to insightful analyses. However, it's important to recognise that other myths are also prevalent in advertisements and warrant further study.

## Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, food advertisements from two prominent magazines namely Champak, which is a fortnightly publication, and Tinkle, which is a monthly magazine (weekly until April 2023), targeted at children, were analysed. Champak and Tinkle were selected after a

general survey of children conducted by the researcher, which identified them as favourites among children. As many as four advertisements (two from each magazine) were randomly chosen from the first monthly editions released between 2018 and 2024 (May to May). Later, various strategies, including colours, imagery, fonts, messaging, branding, product features, ad placement, and size were analysed.

### Theoretical framework

Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure introduced the concept of the Sign, identifying its two components: the Signifier (the physical form) and the Signified (the mental concept). He emphasised that the Signifier and the Signified have an arbitrary relationship. Expanding on Saussure's theory, Barthes introduced the concept of two orders of signification. The first order, which is Denotation, is the literal meaning of a Sign. For example, a photo of a street denotes the street itself. Connotation, as described by Barthes, is one of the three ways in which signs work in the second order of signification. The additional meaning/ meanings that a sign carries beyond its literal meaning is referred to as Connotation. It includes emotional or cultural values. For example, different photographic styles of the same street scene may evoke various emotional responses. Barthes distinguishes between Denotation (literal meaning) and Connotation (the way it is photographed). The second of three ways in which signs work in the second order is through Myth. Barthes identifies Myth as a cultural sign that conveys implicit ideological messages and values. Myths are constructed by attaching additional meaning or 'signified' to an existing Sign (signifier). In this two-level system, the initial denotative sign becomes the Signifier in the second-order mythical system Fiske, J. (2010).

Barthes' theory of signification provides a useful framework for analysing the strategies employed by food advertisers in children's magazines to connect food items with happiness, often overshadowing their nutritional composition and ingredients. The advertisements simply present food items at the denotative level. However, at the connotative level, these food products are imbued with additional meanings and associations. By strategically utilising visual elements, messaging, branding, and other signifiers, advertisers construct a second-order system of meaning where a Myth is created and a certain food item is associated with some emotion. By applying Barthes' second order of signification, we can see how advertisers purposefully employ signifiers to construct a mythical relationship between food and happiness.

### Magazines' Description

Table 1 depicts the brief details of both Tinkle and Champak magazines.

**Table 1: Description of Tinkle and Champak**

|                           | <b>Champak</b>                                                                                        | <b>Tinkle</b>                                             |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Publisher</b>          | Delhi Press                                                                                           | Amar Chitra Katha                                         |
| <b>Frequency</b>          | Fortnightly                                                                                           | Weekly till April 2023<br>Now Monthly                     |
| <b>Age group targeted</b> | 6 to 12 ( <i>as mentioned on the website</i> )                                                        | 8 plus                                                    |
| <b>Content</b>            | Short stories, comic strips, puzzles, brain teasers, and jokes that sets the child's imagination free | Stories, comics, puzzles, games, and educational articles |

|                  |                                                                                                |                                                                                                     |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Languages</b> | Published in 8 languages: English, Hindi, Telugu, Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Kannada | Published in English and syndicated in many Indian languages ( <i>as mentioned on the website</i> ) |
| <b>Country</b>   | India                                                                                          | India                                                                                               |

## Results and Findings



**Figure 1: Parle Poppins ad from Champak Magazine's December 2022 issue (first edition)**

Source: <https://www.magzter.com/>

**Ad Description:** The advertisement prominently features the Parle logo in the top left corner. The central focus is the product name 'POPPINS' written in a large, playful, and bold font with each letter in a different colour-red, blue, purple, and green. Below 'POPPINS,' the phrase 'Fruit Flavoured Rolls' is written in a comparatively smaller, white and playful font, highlighting the key feature of the product. The ad showcases a whimsical carnival scene with colourful hot air balloons (yellow showcased as the biggest among all), parachutes, a carnival tent, and a Ferris wheel, each designed to resemble Poppins rolls. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds and a green landscape with trees. The overall design is cheerful and inviting, reflecting a lively and festive atmosphere. At the bottom of the ad, there is a colourful pack of Poppins rolls, showcasing the Parle logo, Poppins rolls, and the 'Fruit Flavoured Rolls' messaging. The ad has been placed on the last page of the magazine and is a full-page ad.

### **Denotation (First Level of Signification)**

- Product Name: 'POPPINS' is written in a large, playful and bold font with each letter in a different colour—red, blue, purple, and green.
- Product Feature: The phrase 'Fruit Flavoured Rolls' is written in a comparatively smaller, white, playful font below 'POPPINS.'
- Central Image: A whimsical carnival scene featuring colourful hot air balloons (yellow showcased as the biggest), parachutes, a carnival tent, and a Ferris wheel. The carnival elements are designed to resemble Poppins rolls.
- Background: The background includes a bright blue sky with white clouds and a green landscape with trees.

### **Connotation (Second Level of Signification)**

- Playful Font and Vibrant Colours: Different colours evoke different emotions Shukla, A. (2023). For instance, the yellow colour is strongly associated with happiness. The playful and multi-coloured font for 'POPPINS'; the playful font for 'Fruit flavoured rolls;' and the vibrant colours throughout the ad symbolise fun and happiness. This visual playfulness suggests that consuming the product brings delight and excitement, directly appealing to children's desire for happiness.
- Whimsical Carnival Scene: The carnival imagery, with hot air balloons and parachutes, a carnival tent, and a Ferris wheel, creates an association with festivities, celebration and happiness. This setting implies that eating Poppins rolls is not just about having a snack but experiencing a mini-carnival of happiness. Additionally, the largest hot air balloon is depicted in yellow- a colour, which is associated with happiness.
- Bright and Cheerful Background: The bright blue sky, white clouds, and green landscape contribute to a lively and happy environment. This vibrant backdrop reinforces the message that Poppins rolls are linked to a cheerful experience, enhancing the product's appeal as a source of happiness.

### **Myth (Second-Order Signification)**

In Barthes' framework, the denotative elements of the ad (such as the carnival scene, bright colours, and playful font) become symbols in the second-order mythical system, constructing a narrative where:

- POPPINS Equals Happiness: The ad constructs a myth that consuming Poppins rolls is akin to experiencing a joyous carnival. The carnival scene and playful design create a narrative where the product is not just a snack but a gateway to fun and happiness, making the enjoyment of the product a natural and expected outcome.
- Naturalisation of Joy: The ad naturalises the idea that Poppins rolls are inherently connected to happiness. Embedding the product in a carnival setting suggests that the delight and excitement of a carnival are seamlessly translated into the act of eating Poppins rolls, making this connection seem intuitive and natural.

### Ideological Messages

- Consumer Culture: The advertisement supports the consumerist belief that purchasing and consuming products like Poppins rolls leads to increased happiness. It implies that the pleasure derived from eating the rolls is directly tied to the product's cheerful and festive presentation.
- Childhood and Happiness: The ad reinforces the notion that childhood is a time for joy and adventure. Associating Poppins rolls with a carnival experience positions the product as an essential part of creating memorable, happy moments for children.



**Figure 2: Parle Happy Happy Cakes from Champak magazine's February 2023 issue (first edition)**

Source: <https://www.magzter.com/>

**Ad Description:** This advertisement promotes 'Parle Happy Happy Cakes,' specifically highlighting their 'Tutti Fruity' flavour. In the top left corner, the Parle logo is prominently displayed. Below it, the product name 'Happy Happy Cakes' is written in a white, playful, bold font. The central image features a red lunchbox containing two smiling yellow slices of cake, with colourful fruit bits embedded in them. The lunchbox is open, and the text 'Slice of Happiness!' is written inside the lid. At the bottom of the ad, an image of the product's packaging is displayed. The packaging is vibrant, featuring a combination of purple, blue, green, and yellow, with an image of the cake slices, emphasizing the fruity bits inside. In the top right corner of the ad, there is a notebook, a sharpener, and two pencils. The ad occupies the entire last page of the magazine.

### Denotation (First Level of Signification)

- Product Name: 'Happy Happy Cakes' is written in a playful, bold font below the logo.
- Central Image: A red lunchbox contains two smiling yellow slices of cake with colourful fruit bits, and the text 'Slice of Happiness!' inside the lid.
- Product Packaging: At the bottom of the ad, the product packaging is shown in vibrant colours, including purple, blue, green, and yellow, with an image of the cake slices.
- School Supplies: In the top right corner, there is a notebook, a sharpener, and two pencils.

### Connotation (Second Level of Signification)

- Playful Font and Bright Colours: The bold, playful font and vibrant colours suggest fun, excitement, and joy, directly appealing to children. These visual elements create a cheerful and engaging atmosphere, setting the stage for the cakes to be associated with positive emotions and happy experiences.
- Smiling Cake Slices: The smiling slices of cake in a red lunchbox personify the product as a source of happiness. The phrase 'Slice of Happiness!' underscores that the cakes offer more than just taste; they promise happiness. Moreover, the colour of the cake i.e. yellow symbolises happiness.
- School Supplies: The inclusion of a notebook, a sharpener, and two pencils suggests that the cakes are an ideal treat for children, especially in a school setting. This association implies that during a demanding school day, these cakes provide a comforting and rewarding snack, thereby enhancing the sense of relief and happiness.

### Myth (Second-Order Signification)

In Barthes' framework, the denotative elements (such as the smiling cake slices and vibrant packaging) transform into signifiers in the second-order mythical system, creating a narrative where:

- Happy Happy Cakes Equals Happiness: The advertisement constructs a myth where consuming Happy Happy Cakes is equated with immediate happiness and satisfaction. The depiction of the cakes as a 'Slice of Happiness' suggests that these cakes transcend mere food; they embody happiness.
- Naturalisation of Happiness: The ad naturalises the concept that Happy Happy Cakes inherently bring happiness. Presenting them as a desirable school snack implies that consuming these cakes is a natural way to enhance one's mood and enjoyment, making this association appear as an obvious truth.

## Ideological Messages

- **Consumer Culture:** The ad promotes the consumerist ideology that purchasing and consuming products (like Happy Happy Cakes) directly leads to increased happiness. It suggests that the joy derived from eating these cakes is an integral part of the consumption experience.
- **Childhood and Happiness:** The advertisement reinforces the belief that childhood should be filled with fun and happiness, positioning Happy Happy Cakes as an essential element in achieving this ideal. It implies that the cakes contribute to a more enjoyable and rewarding school experience.



**Figure 4: Too Yumm Rings from Tinkle magazine's May 2023 issue (first edition)**

Source: <https://www.magzter.com/>

**Ad Description:** This advertisement promotes the product 'Too Yumm!' rings. In the top left corner, the playful and adventurous phrase reads 'Get Ready for a World of Rings Adventure.' The central image features a young girl in an orange top, blue jeans, and white shoes, joyfully running and jumping. She is surrounded by floating Too Yumm rings, the product being advertised. The background is a fantastical, animated landscape with floating islands and a dynamic sky, enhancing the adventurous theme. In the bottom left corner, there is a large image of the product's packaging, predominantly red, featuring an image of the snack and a picture of a smiling young boy, likely a brand ambassador or character associated with the product. The packaging also highlights the 'free toy inside.' Next to the product packaging, there is a QR code with the text 'Scan to Play.' In the top right corner, the 'Too Yumm!' logo is displayed along with the tagline 'Anytime Anywhere.' The advertisement occupies the entire last page of the magazine.

**Denotation (First Level of Signification)**

- Phrase: 'Get Ready for a World of Rings Adventure' in the top left corner.
- Central Image: A young girl in an Orange top, Blue jeans, and White shoes joyfully running and jumping, surrounded by floating Too Yumm rings.
- Background: A fantastical, animated landscape with floating islands and a dynamic sky.
- Product Packaging: Large image of the product's packaging in red, featuring the snack and a smiling young boy.
- Free Toy Highlight: Mention of a 'free toy inside' on the packaging.
- QR Code: Text 'Scan to Play' next to the product packaging.

**Connotation (Second Level of Signification)**

- Playful Phrase: The adventurous phrase 'Get Ready for a World of Rings Adventure' connotes excitement and happiness, suggesting that the product offers a thrilling and enjoyable experience.
- Joyful Girl: The image of the young girl joyfully running and jumping conveys a sense of pure happiness and delight. Her interaction with the floating rings enhances the product's appeal as a source of fun and happiness.
- Fantastical Background: The animated landscape with floating islands, a happy kid, and a dynamic sky reinforces the theme of adventure, imagination, and happiness.
- Smiling boy: The red packaging featuring a smiling boy and the 'free toy inside' emphasises both the product's identity and the additional happiness provided by the toy, suggesting that the snack brings extra happiness.
- QR Code: The 'Scan to Play' feature highlights interactivity and engagement, suggesting that the fun and happiness associated with the product extends beyond just eating.

**Myth (Second-Order Signification)**

In Barthes' framework, the initial denotative signs (e.g., the image of the Too Yumm! rings and the joyful girl) become the signifiers in the second-order mythical system. The ad constructs a myth where:

- Too Yumm! Rings Equal Happiness: The ad uses playful imagery, vibrant colours, and a fantastical theme to create a narrative that consuming Too Yumm! rings lead to a joyful adventure. The rings are positioned not just as a snack but as a key to experiencing happiness and excitement.
- Naturalisation of Happiness: The advertisement naturalises the idea that the product brings inherent joy and fun. The portrayal of the product as part of an exciting adventure makes the association of food with happiness seem obvious and desirable.

## Ideological Messages

- **Consumer Culture:** The ad supports the consumerist ideology that purchasing and consuming products (like Too Yumm! rings) results in increased happiness and satisfaction. It implies that the enjoyment of the product can be bought and experienced through consumption.
- **Childhood and Happiness:** It emphasises the notion that childhood is a time filled with happiness and fun, positioning the product as an essential part of maximising these joyful experiences.



**Figure 6: Parle Orange Bite from Tinkle magazine's August 2022 issue (first edition)**

Source: <https://www.magzter.com/>

**Ad Description:** This advertisement promotes 'Parle Orange Bite,' emphasising a bigger version of their popular Orange-flavoured candy. The Parle logo is prominently displayed in the top left corner. The product name 'Orange Bite' is featured in a bold, playful font at the centre of the ad, making it the focal point. Above 'Orange Bite,' the word 'Bigger' is highlighted in a green rectangular box. The central image features a happy and lively orange character wearing sunglasses and making a 'two' sign with its hand. This character adds a playful and engaging element to the ad. Surrounding the Orange character are images of two candies wrapped in orange and green coloured wrappers, with the packaging prominently featuring the product name, logo, and the word 'Bigger.' At the bottom of the ad, the phrase 'The Fun Goes Bigger' is written in a playful White font. Below the Orange character, the phrase 'Orangee Jhatkaa' suggests a burst of orange flavour. The background is a vibrant mix of Orange and Green, enhancing the lively and

fun atmosphere. The advertisement occupies the entire last page of the magazine, making a full-page, eye-catching impression.

### **Denotation (First Level of Signification)**

- Product Name: 'Orange Bite' in a bold, playful font at the centre of the ad.
- Highlighted Word: 'Bigger' in a green rectangular box above 'Orange Bite.'
- Central Image: A happy Orange character wearing sunglasses and making a 'two' sign with its hand.
- Candies: Two candies wrapped in Orange and Green with the product name and logo prominently featured.
- Phrase: 'The Fun Goes Bigger' written in a playful white font at the bottom of the ad.
- Slogan: 'Orangee Jhatkaa' below the orange character.
- Background: A vibrant mix of Orange and Green.

### **Connotation (Second Level of Signification)**

- Playful Font and Bright Colours: The bold, playful font and vibrant orange and green colours connote fun, excitement, liveliness and happiness appealing to a younger audience.
- Happy Orange Character: The Orange character wearing sunglasses and making a 'two' sign conveys happiness and playfulness. This lively character personifies the product, enhancing its appeal to children. The 'two' gesture highlights that this candy is double the size of a typical treat, reinforcing the idea of added happiness.
- 'Bigger' Highlight: The word 'Bigger' in a green box emphasises that this is a larger version of the original candy, suggesting more enjoyment and value.
- Two Candies: The depiction of two candies implies that this orange candy is twice the size of a regular candy, emphasising the additional happiness associated with receiving a larger product than usual.
- 'The Fun Goes Bigger' Phrase: This phrase reinforces the idea that consuming the product results in increased fun and enjoyment, connecting the product to a heightened sense of happiness.
- 'Orangee Jhatkaa': The phrase suggests a burst of orange flavour, enhancing the sensory appeal and implying an intense, pleasurable taste experience.

### **Myth (Second-Order Signification)**

In Barthes' framework, the initial denotative signs (e.g., the image of the Orange Bite candy) become the signifier in the second-order mythical system. The ad constructs a myth where:

- Orange Bite Equals Enhanced Fun and Happiness: The ad uses playful imagery, bright colours, and happy character to create a narrative that eating Orange Bite candy brings happiness. The emphasis on 'Bigger' and the phrase 'The Fun Goes Bigger' suggest that the larger candy offers more happiness.
- Naturalisation of Joy and Fun: The ad naturalises the idea that a larger candy (Orange Bite) inherently provides more fun and happiness. This association is presented as

common sense and universal, making the enjoyment of the candy appear like an obvious source of greater happiness.

### **Ideological Messages**

- **Consumer Culture:** The ad supports the consumerist ideology that purchasing and consuming products (in this case, a bigger version of candy) leads to increased enjoyment and happiness.
- **Childhood and Happiness:** It reinforces the idea that childhood is a time for happiness and fun and that products like Orange Bite are essential to maximising this experience.

### **Conclusion**

Through our analysis, we can conclude that contemporary food advertising has adeptly targeted children by associating food products with happiness. This is achieved through bright colours that evoke positive emotions, playful and ‘happiness’ messaging, cheerful backgrounds, joyful characters, toy surprise ideas, and interactive features (eg. ‘Scan to play’)—elements that act as powerful signifiers.

Advertisers have effectively transformed food items from mere consumables into sources of joy and satisfaction and this transformation is accomplished by leveraging both denotative elements (product features) and connotative meanings (associations with happiness). The result is a compelling myth where ordinary foods are elevated to symbols of happiness. The advertisements have emphasised two key aspects of happiness: the sensory pleasure derived from food and the additional happiness generated by interactive features, such as toys and games.

Surprisingly, the emotional appeal has been prioritised, overshadowing the product’s nutritional content. By promoting the myth that ‘food equals happiness,’ a narrative that the food item is integral to a joyful experience, has been created. Additionally, the strategic placement of these ads as full-page spreads and on the back covers of magazines ensures maximum visibility, giving significant space to the myth that ‘food equals happiness.’

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