



Designed to Appeal: Child Focused Packaging of Sugary Beverages in Bangladesh

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Background

Sugary beverages (SBs) are a leading source of free sugars in children's diets and a major contributor to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Bangladesh.¹ According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2022, 32% of children aged 6–23 months were given a sweet beverage in the previous day, indicating that exposure begins very early in life.² This early and sustained exposure is shaped by deliberate marketing strategies that reach children and adolescents directly through packaging. While Bangladesh regulates the price of SBs (through tax) and is currently preparing front-of-pack warning labels, neither measure fully addresses marketing practices on the package. This policy brief describes both direct and indirect child-focused marketing found on SB packaging in retail settings and outlines policy options to close this regulatory gap.

Packaging: A Powerful Tool of Child-Focused Marketing

SB packaging is far more than a container; it represents a powerful medium for child-focused marketing (CFM) targeted at children under 12 years of age. Unlike television or online advertisements, packaging accompanies the product onto store shelves, home refrigerators, and dining tables, reaching children directly at the point of choice.³ CFM refers to commercial techniques designed to make products attractive to children, such as cartoon characters, bright colour palettes, playful typography, images of children, appetising food graphics, toys, and promotional giveaways.^{4,5} Packaging colours strongly influence expectations of taste and healthfulness: cool or green tones often imply healthfulness, whereas bright, warm colours signal sweetness, fun, and intense flavour.^{6,7} Furthermore, packaging can appeal to parents via health-related claims^{8,9} and fruit imagery, which parents report makes sweetened drinks appear to contain real fruit or to be a healthy choice.¹⁰ This creates a misleading health halo around unhealthy products. Parents who perceive sweetened fruit drinks as healthy provide them to their children more often.¹¹ Consequently, a single package design can attract children while simultaneously reassuring purchasing parents.

KEY MESSAGES

- Nearly 9 in 10 domestically manufactured beverage products (89.4%) used child-focused marketing: 82.8% (894) used indirect cues, while 6.7% (72 out of 1,080) used direct child-directed marketing.
- The average sugar content across all products was 10.7 g per 100 ml, with fruit-based drinks displaying the highest average sugar content (12.0 g/100 ml).
- Fruit imagery was common: 49.2% of all products displayed fruit imagery without any direct child-directed marketing.
- Bright and warm colours were widely used: colours such as red, orange, yellow, or pink were the most common indirect cue (72.3% of all products) and appeared on 91.7% of child-marketed products.
- Health-oriented marketing, such as emphasising nutrient content, was also present on 20.6% of all products as an indirect cue. Such claims risk creating a “health halo,” making sugary drinks appear healthier or more nutritious than they are.

What we measured

We conducted a cross-sectional retail pack survey in Dhaka, Bangladesh, between January and April 2026. Eight areas were selected: four urban areas within the Dhaka North and South City Corporations (Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Khilgaon, Bangshal) and four semi-urban areas outside the city corporations (Savar, Dhamrai, Dohar, Aganagar). Field teams collected unique packaged sugary beverage products in retail outlets following the Tobacco Packs Surveillance System (TPackSS) approach.

The total analytic sample comprised 1,080 unique products produced domestically. We evaluated each pack using a structured coding tool adapted from the INFORMAS¹² food-packaging framework, assessing cues such as dominant colour palettes, health-halo claims, cartoon characters, appetising food imagery,

depictions of children/youth, and promotional premiums.

Products were classified as having direct child-directed marketing if the product had a child-directed feature (cartoon characters, images of children, celebrity endorsements, or giveaways) or if the package displayed appetising food imagery such as chocolate. Products without any direct feature were classified as having indirect child-appealing cues if they used warm, bright colours (red, orange, yellow or pink), fruit imagery, or health-oriented marketing, cues identified in the literature (6–10). Total sugar was standardised to grams per 100 ml using the declared reference basis; values declared per serving were rescaled using the recorded serving size.

What we measured – at a glance



STUDY SETTING
Dhaka, Bangladesh
8 study areas
4 urban + 4 semi-urban



STUDY PERIOD
Jan–Apr 2026



SAMPLE SIZE
1,080
unique domestically
manufactured sugary
beverage products



ASSESSMENT
**Packaging appeal +
sugar content**
direct & indirect child-focused
cues coded; sugar standardized
to g/100 ml



**Direct
child-directed
marketing**



**Indirect
child-appealing
cues**



Nutrition
sugar standardized
to g/100 ml



Product details
brand / category /
manufacturer

Findings

Direct Child-Directed Marketing Was Rare, but Indirect Cues Were Common

Of the 1,080 products, only 72 (6.7%) used direct child-directed marketing, 894 (82.8%) used indirect cues and 114 (10.6%) used no child-focused marketing. Most direct marketing used attractive food images, mainly chocolate and chocolate-milk graphics (49 products; 4.5% of all products), while cartoon characters appeared on 25 products (2.3%). No product used celebrities, giveaways or images of children, and the 72 child-marketed products came from only 8 of the 35 brands in the sample.

In contrast, indirect cues were common. Among products without direct child-directed marketing, 781

used bright, warm colours such as red, orange, yellow or pink (72.3% of all products) and 531 displayed fruit imagery (49.2%), providing other visual ways to catch attention.

Additionally, health-oriented marketing appeared on 222 products without direct child-directed marketing (20.6% of all products) and on 14 of the 72 child-marketed products (19.4%). Such messages may give a product a “health halo”, that is, make it appear healthier or more nutritious than it might otherwise seem.

FINDING 1 | INDIRECT CUES DOMINATE

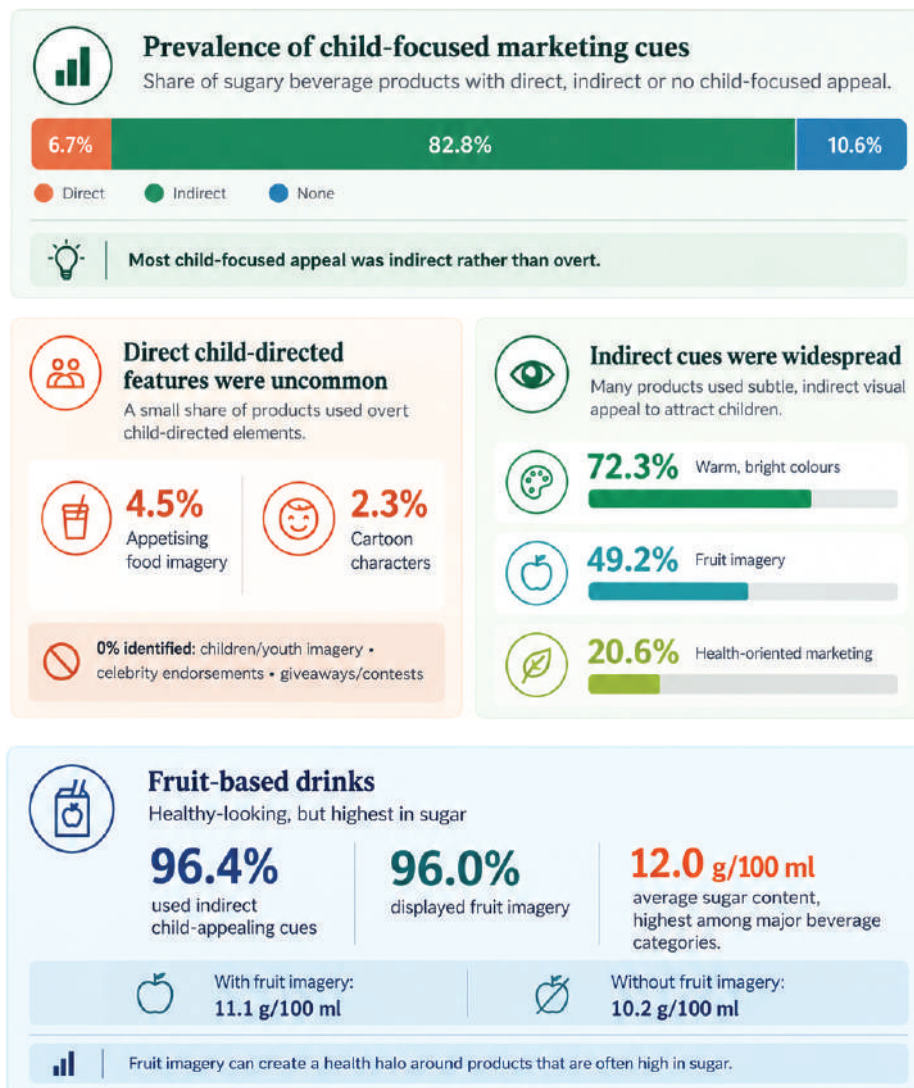
Indirect child-appealing cues alone appeared on 82.8% of the 1,080 products; direct child-directed marketing appeared on 6.7%. This makes the definition of covered packaging cues central to policy design.

FINDING 2 | FRUIT IMAGERY AND SUGAR

Fruit-based drinks averaged 12.0 g sugar per 100 ml, the highest category mean reported, and 96.0% carried fruit imagery.

FINDING 3 | FLAVOURED MILK HAS THE MOST DIRECT MARKETING

Direct child-directed marketing appeared on 26.8% of flavoured milk products, the highest prevalence among the beverage categories reported.



Fruit-Based Drinks: Fruit Imagery on Almost Every Pack and the Highest Sugar Content

Direct child-directed marketing varied significantly by beverage type, appearing most frequently in flavoured milk (26.8%) and artificial flavoured drinks (15.2%), while being almost absent in carbonated soft drinks (0%) and discarded packs (1.9%). Conversely, indirect cues alone were used on nearly all fruit-based drinks (96.4%), most carbonated (89.5%) and artificial flavoured drinks (83.3%), and half of flavoured milk (50.2%), with 22.9% of milk drinks using no child-focused marketing.

Regarding sugar content, fruit-based drinks averaged the highest at 12.0 g/100 ml (compared to an overall mean of 10.7 g/100 ml), followed by artificial flavoured drinks at 11.1 g/100 ml and carbonated soft drinks at 10.5 g/100 ml. Furthermore, 96.0% of fruit-based drinks carried fruit imagery, and products featuring it contained more sugar on average than those without

(11.1 vs. 10.2 g/100 ml). This is impactful because parents often perceive fruit images as indicators of real fruit or healthfulness, leading them to serve these drinks to their children more frequently.

Discarded packs closely mirrored retail findings, showing similar mean sugar content (10.7 and 10.8 g/100 ml), widespread warm, bright colours (78.4%), and frequent fruit imagery (48.5% on discarded vs. 50.7% on retail packs). Ultimately, these findings indicate that policies protecting children from unhealthy beverage marketing must look beyond cartoons and child characters. Since direct marketing is rare, regulators should also focus on pervasive packaging cues like bright colors, which signal sweetness and fun, and misleading fruit imagery or "healthy" claims on sugary drinks.

Limitations

Although enumerators were trained and colours were coded against a standardised palette, agreement between coders was not formally assessed, and visual features such as dominant colour involve some judgement. Because warm, bright colours alone were enough to classify a product as having indirect cues, the indirect group is broad and describes exposure to child-appealing cues rather than intent to target children. The survey describes what appears on packaging and does not measure how children or parents respond to it.

Conclusion

Child-focused marketing on SSB packaging in Bangladesh operates as a cohesive visual system rather than an isolated cartoon graphic. While overt child-directed cues appear on only 6.7% of domestically manufactured retail drinks and are concentrated in flavoured milk and artificial flavoured drinks, indirect cues such as warm, bright colours and fruit imagery appear on a further 82.8%, including almost all fruit-based drinks, the category with the highest sugar content. As Bangladesh advances taxation and labelling policies, closing the regulatory loophole on packaging design and marketing conduct is essential to protecting children's dietary health.

Policy Recommendations

1. Clearly define and regulate child-appealing packaging: Regulations should clearly identify packaging features that can attract children, including cartoon characters, appetising food or chocolate images, and bright, child-appealing colour schemes.
2. Extend marketing restrictions to flavoured milk, fruit-based drinks and other sugary beverages: Flavoured milk had the highest prevalence of direct child-directed marketing (26.8%), while fruit-based drinks had the highest sugar content (12.0 g/100 ml) and almost always displayed fruit imagery. Marketing policies should therefore cover flavoured milk, fruit-based drinks and other sugary beverages, rather than focusing only on carbonated soft drinks.
3. Regulate health and nutrition claims on sugary beverages: Health-oriented marketing appeared on about one in five products (20.6%). Policies should consider restricting such claims on sugary beverages where they may create a "health halo" or give consumers a misleading impression of the product's healthfulness.
4. Introduce clear front-of-pack warning labels: Prominent and easy-to-understand front-of-pack warning labels should be considered for beverages high in sugar, helping parents and consumers identify products with high sugar content at the point of purchase.
5. Monitor packaging practices and strengthen enforcement: Regular monitoring of beverage packaging in retail settings should be established to identify child-appealing marketing practices, including indirect cues such as colour schemes and fruit imagery, and support enforcement of packaging and marketing regulations.

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Ethics Clearance

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