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How familiar characters influence children's judgments about information and products



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ABSTRACT

Children are exposed to advertisements and products that incorporate familiar characters, such as Dora the Explorer and Bob the Builder, virtually from birth. How does the presence of these characters influence children's judgments about information and products? Three experiments ($N = 125$) explored how 4-year-olds evaluate messages from familiar characters and how their trust in a familiar character's testimony relates to their product preferences. Children endorsed objective and subjective claims made by a familiar character more often than those made by a perceptually similar but unfamiliar character even in situations where they had evidence that the familiar character was unreliable. Children also preferred low-quality products bearing a familiar character's image over high-quality products without a character image up to 74% of the time (whereas control groups preferred the low-quality products less than 6% of the time when they did not include a character image). These findings suggest that young children are powerfully influenced by familiar characters encountered in the media, leaving them vulnerable to advertising messages and clouding their judgments about products.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, children have come to wield unprecedented purchasing power. Companies spend billions of dollars annually on advertising directed specifically toward children (Campaign

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for a Commercial-Free Childhood, n.d.). These advertisements often incorporate characters from popular children's television shows and movies or novel characters created for marketing purposes (Connor, 2006). Characters in advertisements are intended to capture children's attention, induce positive affect, and provide memory cues for products (Neeley & Schumann, 2004). This strategy appears to be effective; children show excellent recall and recognition of characters that appear in advertisements even when the characters have only been encountered in the context of advertising (e.g., Toucan Sam and other characters associated with cereal brands; Batada & Borzekowski, 2008) or the characters promote products intended for adults (e.g., the Budweiser Frogs; Lieber, 1996).

In addition to their presence in advertisements, familiar characters sometimes appear on the actual products for sale. Brand licensed products—including toys, food, and clothing—that incorporate images from children's media programs accounted for more than \$5 billion in sales in 2011 (NPD Group, 2012). Food packages incorporating characters from children's media are common in American supermarkets, and the foods they contain are often of low nutritional value (Harris, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2009). Furthermore, the presence of a licensed character on food packaging influences children's evaluations of the product's taste and desirability. Children ages 4 to 6 years prefer food products with a licensed character on the package and rate foods that come out of a package with a character on it as tasting better than identical foods from a package without a character on it (Lapierre, Vaala, & Linebarger, 2011; Roberto, Baik, Harris, & Brownell, 2010).

Despite the widespread use of characters to market products to children, little is known about how the presence of a familiar character influences children's evaluations of advertising messages. In particular, to what extent do children trust what a familiar character says? Recent research has demonstrated that by 4 years of age children consider a number of factors, including prior accuracy (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004; Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007) and confidence (Birch, Akmal, & Frampton, 2010; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001), when deciding whether to trust another's testimony (for reviews, see Mills, 2013; Sobel & Kushnir, 2013). Familiarity can also strongly influence children's trust in an individual's statements. When seeking out information about a novel object, for instance, children are more likely to consult their mother than an unfamiliar woman and show more trust in their mother's responses (Corriveau et al., 2009). Children ages 3 to 5 years also prefer learning the name or function of novel objects from a familiar source (their teacher) over an unfamiliar source with similar characteristics (a teacher from a different school), at least when they have no other information to use to make their decisions. If children later hear a familiar teacher making statements that the children recognize as inaccurate (e.g., calling a spoon a duck; Corriveau & Harris, 2009), developmental differences emerge in how they respond to that new information. Whereas 3-year-olds continue to trust the familiar teacher over an accurate yet unfamiliar teacher, 4-year-olds begin to moderate their trust in a familiar individual based on the individual's history of accuracy. If the familiar teacher is 100% accurate, 4-year-olds show increased trust in the teacher's statements, but if the teacher is 100% inaccurate, their trust weakens (although they do not necessarily shift to trusting an accurate unfamiliar source). Thus, there is evidence that at 4 years of age, familiarity with an informant is an important factor in children's trust in testimony, yet children take an informant's prior accuracy into account as well.

The current experiments build on this research to examine how familiar characters influence children's trust and consumer choices, with three specific goals. Our first goal was to understand whether 4-year-olds prefer to seek out information from a familiar cartoon character and whether children take into account a familiar character's history of accuracy when deciding whether to trust the character's statements. By 4 years of age, children show increased trust in adults with whom they have a close relationship (Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Corriveau et al., 2009). But crucially, our study involves characters that, although they may be quite familiar to children, have had no meaningful interactions with the children (e.g., even if a child has encountered a life-size costumed version of the character, this was unlikely to have been a meaningful social interaction). The absence of a reciprocal social relationship with familiar characters may allow 4-year-olds to prioritize accuracy over familiarity, whereas for familiar people such as mothers and teachers children may need to take into account the potential repercussions of distrust for their relationships.

In addition, 4-year-olds understand that most fictional characters encountered in the media are not real and that they cannot act in the real world (Corriveau, Kim, Schwalen, & Harris, 2009; Skolnick &

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