



Food marketing with movie character toys: Effects on young children's preferences for unhealthy and healthier fast food meals



Helen Dixon*, Philippa Niven, Maree Scully, Melanie Wakefield

Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, Cancer Council Victoria, 615 St Kilda Road, Melbourne, VIC 3004, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to test whether movie tie-in premiums (MTIPs) accompanying unhealthy and healthier fast food meals influenced children's meal preferences and their perceptions of these meals. Nine hundred and four Grade 1 and 2 students (aged 5–9 years) from Melbourne, Australia participated in a between-subjects online experiment comprising the following conditions: (A) unhealthy and healthier meals with no MTIP (control); (B) unhealthy and healthier meals with MTIP (current situation in Australia); (C) unhealthy meals with MTIP and healthier meals without MTIP; (D) unhealthy meals without MTIP and healthier meals with MTIP. The latter condition tested a potential regulatory model restricting premiums to healthier meals. Participants were shown a trailer for a current children's movie followed by an advertisement for an associated McDonald's Happy Meal® (conditions B–D) or an advertisement for a children's leisure activity (condition A). They were then shown four McDonald's Happy Meal® options on screen and asked to select their preferred meal before completing detailed meal ratings. Overall, children showed a preference for unhealthy meals over healthier ones. Children were significantly more likely to select a healthier meal over an unhealthy meal when only the healthier meals were accompanied by a MTIP (condition D) compared to the other three conditions. When healthier meals were accompanied by a MTIP, children reported the meal looked better, would taste better, they would be more likely to ask their parents for this meal, and they would feel happier if their parents bought them this meal, compared to when the healthier meal was not accompanied by a MTIP. Results suggest that modifying the food marketing environment to restrict MTIPs to healthier meals should encourage healthier fast food meal choices by children.

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1. Introduction

To advance global obesity prevention efforts, policy-relevant research concerning the impacts of prominent, universal food marketing strategies is needed. Commercial marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and beverages (collectively called 'unhealthy food') has been identified as contributing to population levels of overweight and obesity and poor diet worldwide (World Health Organization, 2010). Systematic reviews have found that food promotions have a direct effect on children's nutrition knowledge, preferences, purchase behaviour, consumption patterns and diet-related health (Cairns, Angus, Hastings, & Caraher, 2013; World Health Organization, 2010). Research examining

effects of specific types of food marketing on children helps identify promotions that are problematic for public health and those with potential utility in promoting healthy eating. The present experimental study explored children's reactions to one pervasive form of child-targeted food marketing - movie tie-in premiums (MTIPs). In addition to exploring how MTIPs influenced children's responses to unhealthy foods, this study also assessed the potential of MTIPs to promote healthier foods to children.

Premium offers linked to products, such as free toys, collectables and competitions, are designed to induce product purchases. Content analyses of televised food advertising in the US, the UK, Europe and Australia have found that premium offers are ubiquitous, typically directed toward children, and predominantly used to promote unhealthy, fast foods (Jenkin, Madhvani, Signal, & Bowers, 2014). Industry investment in these types of promotions is substantial, with US food companies spending US\$392.7 million in 2009 on toy premiums included in fast food restaurant children's meals, representing 22% of their overall youth-directed marketing

* Corresponding author. Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, Cancer Council Victoria, 615 St Kilda Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3004, Australia.

E-mail address: Helen.Dixon@cancervic.org.au (H. Dixon).

expenditures (Powell, Harris, & Fox, 2013).

Movie tie-in premiums (MTIPs) are a particular type of premium offer frequently used by major fast food restaurant chains and distributors of top box office films to co-promote their products to children. They involve offering meal plus free toy deals where the toys are lead characters from new release children's films. Typically, marketing campaigns for MTIPs involve paid television advertising coinciding with the launch of the target movie in various markets throughout the world. Often the television ads for MTIPs feature actual movie footage or customised animation and special effects combining imagery of branded food products with film content. The MTIP is also promoted through in-store merchandising such as window posters, drive-through displays and movie-themed food packaging. For example, during McDonald's exclusive global alliance with Disney between 1997 and 2006, McDonald's Happy Meals® featured toys promoting movies such as *A Bug's Life* and *Toy Story* (Vignali, 2001). More recently, McDonald's entered into movie tie-in deals with other major production companies including Twentieth Century Fox (e.g. *Night at the Museum* and *Ice Age* sequels) and DreamWorks (e.g. *Shrek 3*) (Christian & Gereffi, 2010; MediaPost, 2009). Such high-profile MTIPs have vast audience reach, raising awareness of new release movies and fast food brands alike.

Theory and prior research offer insights into why MTIPs are well-positioned to influence children. Inclusion of a free giveaway (toy) with a meal may serve as a form of positive reinforcement. Behaviour (e.g. buying a meal) is more likely to be repeated if it is positively reinforced or rewarded (e.g. accompanied by a free toy). A toy premium paired with food may also facilitate an associative learning experience for children which may sway food preference (McAlister & Cornwell, 2012). As the toys used in MTIPs are licensed characters from current, high profile children's movies, this may give them additional market leverage. Familiar media character branding appears to have a particularly powerful influence on children's food preferences, choices and intake, especially for unhealthy foods (Kraak & Story, 2015b). As occurs with sports sponsorship (Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009), pairing fast foods with popular movie characters that children already have a relationship with might encourage 'image transfer' whereby positive perceptions of favoured characters are transferred to the associated brand, providing children who are favourably disposed to certain movie characters reason to purchase the associated product.

The manner in which marketing for MTIPs is executed is also likely to engage children. Just as animation is frequently used to appeal to children in food advertising (Cairns et al., 2013; Page & Brewster, 2007), the movies and associated television advertising for MTIPs typically employ animation. Animation effectively engages younger children as its perceptual salience helps to overcome the cognitive processing difficulties of younger children (Neeley & Schumann, 2004). MTIPs typically market a collectable set of character toys relating to the associated movie. Acquiring the complete set therefore requires repeat purchases (Page & Brewster, 2007), and the advertisements often explicitly encourage this (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008). Experimental research has revealed the majority of preschool-aged children have the requisite skills for collecting a set, and the desire to collect can be very strong (McAlister, Cornwell, & Cornain, 2011). Thus, MTIPs are well positioned to be a highly persuasive form of food marketing with children.

Ethical concerns have been raised about using premiums and licensed characters to market unhealthy foods to children, based on the nature of the promotional strategies employed and children's vulnerability to being misled by advertising. Advertising for food-

related MTIPs tends to employ multiple elements to engage children. These elements, which are used in child-targeted food advertising generally, include cross-selling, collectables, and editorial elements to attract and maintain children's attention and engage them emotionally (e.g. action, rapid pacing, rapid cuts, animation, story-telling, loud music, and suggesting product consumption is associated with fun, happiness or mood improvement) (Page & Brewster, 2007). Advertising that incorporates characters from movies and television shows is also likely to blur children's capacity to distinguish between entertainment and advertising (Page & Brewster, 2007). Children's immature cognitive abilities coupled with the affect-based nature of contemporary advertising mean they are not always aware of the persuasive intent of advertising, and they are especially susceptible to its influence (Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal, & Buijzen, 2011).

Given these ethical concerns, public health and child advocates have argued for stricter regulations surrounding the use of licensed characters and premiums to market foods to children. Internationally, self-regulatory guidelines regarding the use of premiums have been implemented with many major global food and beverage companies pledging adherence to such standards (Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, 2014). However, studies suggest many food advertisements continue to focus on premiums (Jenkin et al., 2014) and industry self-regulation has been unsuccessful in de-emphasising toy premiums and tie-ins in child-targeted fast food advertisements (Bernhardt, Wilking, Gilbert-Diamond, Emond, & Sargent, 2015). A number of jurisdictions have introduced mandatory regulations that prohibit the use of promotional techniques such as licensed characters or toy premiums to market unhealthy foods to children (World Cancer Research Fund International, 2016). For example, in San Francisco in 2011, a city-wide ordinance was passed preventing free toy giveaways or other incentives with children's meals sold at restaurants unless nutritional criteria were met. Rather than changing menus to meet ordinance criteria, some restaurants responded by selling toys separately from children's meals. One restaurant chain changed to having healthier beverages and side-dishes with meals (Otten et al., 2014). To help refine public policy in this area, there is a need for research examining the impact of such policies on actual advertising content and in-store promotions, as well as on children's food preferences.

Previous research exploring associations between food-related premiums and children's food choices suggest these promotions have an impact, but point to the need for further experimental studies providing direct measures of response to MTIPs. Qualitative studies with mothers of young children have found that food-related toy premiums stimulate a barrage of requests by children for promoted products that parents must manage (Henry & Borzekowski, 2015; Pettigrew & Roberts, 2006). Cross-sectional studies also suggest an impact of food-related premiums. Longacre et al. (2016) found that McDonald's restaurants released cross-promotional tie-in toy premiums with kid's meals three times more frequently than other fast food restaurants, and that young children's knowledge of fast food toys was associated with a greater frequency of eating at McDonald's. Emond, Bernhardt, Gilbert-Diamond, Li, and Sargent (2016) found that among 3–7 year olds, greater exposure to commercial television that aired child-directed advertisements for fast food premiums was associated with more frequent family visits to fast food restaurants and the collecting of toy premiums from these restaurants.

Experimental evidence is emerging concerning potential impacts of regulating child-targeted food marketing using toy premiums. McAlister and Cornwell's (2012) experiment with 3–5 year

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