



The Influence of Brand Equity Characters on Children's Food Preferences and Choices

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Objectives To assess the influence of brand equity characters displayed on food packaging on children's food preferences and choices, 2 studies were conducted. Brand equity characters are developed specifically to represent a particular brand or product. Despite existing literature suggesting that promotional characters influence children's food choices, to date, no research has assessed the influence of brand equity characters specifically.

Study design We recruited 209 children 4-8 years of age from schools and childcare centers in the UK. In a mixed-measures design, the children were asked to rate their taste preferences and preferred snack choice for 3 matched food pairs, presented either with or without a brand equity character displayed on packaging. Study 1 addressed congruent food-character associations and study 2 addressed incongruent associations. Participants were also asked to rate their recognition and liking of characters used. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests and χ^2 analyses were used where appropriate.

Results Children were significantly more likely to show a preference for foods with a brand equity character displayed on the packaging compared with a matched food without a brand equity character, for both congruent and incongruent food-character associations. The presence of a brand equity character also significantly influenced the children's within-pair preferences, within-pair choices, and overall snack choice (congruent associations only).

Conclusions Displaying brand equity characters promotes unhealthy food choices in children. The findings are consistent with those of studies exploring other types of promotional characters. In the context of a childhood obesity epidemic, the use of brand equity characters in the promotion of foods high in fat, salt, and sugar to children should be restricted. (*J Pediatr* 2016;177:33-8).

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A growing body of literature demonstrates that food marketing has an effect on children's food preferences, choices, and purchase requests¹⁻⁴ and has been identified as an important target for intervention in the prevention of childhood obesity.¹ Food promotion increasingly is conducted as part of an integrated and diverse marketing communications package, by which brand imagery is used across multiple platforms such as websites and social media, advergames, television (TV) commercials, sponsorship, point-of-sale promotions, and packaging.⁵

Promotional characters are a key persuasive tool for advertisers seeking to engage children with their brand, and children 2-7 years of age are increasingly influenced by imagery and symbolism in advertising.^{6,7} Promotional characters are of particular concern because, although they can have positive effects on choice of healthier foods such as fruit and vegetables,⁸⁻¹⁰ they have been found predominantly to promote foods that are high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS). A content analysis of child-targeted TV advertising across several countries found that up to 49% of food commercials contained promotional characters, of which 79% were for HFSS foods.¹¹ Similarly, in an analysis of 577 child-targeted TV food commercials, Castonguay et al¹² found that 73% included familiar characters, of which 72% promoted foods that were classified as being of low nutritional quality. Promotional characters also are used extensively on food packaging; an Australian study found that foods and beverages that displayed promotional characters on the packaging were, on average, less healthful than foods and beverages that did not.¹³

Lawrence¹⁴ suggested that these characters are a tool for fostering a "brand-consumer relationship," whereby characters take on personalities that make them relatable, enabling them to communicate brand values to consumers. Consumers form affective relationships with media characters and personalities¹⁵ and children are particularly susceptible to forming these parasocial relationships with media characters,^{10,16-18} which reflect emotional friendships based on the attractiveness of the characters and the messages that they carry.¹⁹ Thus,

BMI	Body mass index
HFSS	High in fat, salt, and sugar
TV	Television

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de Droog et al¹⁰ suggest that parasocial relationship theory would predict that familiar characters elicit a positive elaborate affective response, which may subsequently lead children to favor products that display these characters.

There is a wealth of existing research indicating that promotional characters influence children's food preferences, choices, and consumption in favor of the foods they are promoting. These studies typically explore the impact of celebrity endorsers²⁰ or licensed characters, whereby characters from popular media are licensed by a company to promote their product.^{9,10,21-26} Specifically, Roberto et al²³ found that licensed characters influenced children's preferences and choices in favor of those foods presented with characters on the packaging. Brand equity characters (also known as trade or spokes characters) are distinct from licensed characters, because they are created by food manufacturers solely for promoting a particular brand or product, having no identity beyond these associations (eg, Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes [Kellogg's, Manchester, United Kingdom]). They are used to build emotional relationships that cultivate brand loyalty, and this loyalty often persists into adulthood.⁴ The power of brand equity characters may lie in the learned associations that consumers make between the character and the food with which they are associated. However, to date, no study has investigated the influence of brand equity characters on diet-related outcomes in children. The distinction is evident in regulatory approaches that restrict the use of licensed, but not brand equity, characters²⁷ when marketing HFSS foods to children, however, this approach does not seem to be evidence based.

To examine the influence of brand equity characters on food packaging on both children's food preferences (self-report of perceived liking) and snack food choices, we performed 2 studies using a modified version of Roberto et al.²³ In the study by Roberto et al, children were asked to taste 3 pairs of identical foods presented in matched packaging either with or without a licensed character and their subsequent preferences and snack choices were recorded. In our first study, character-product pairs were congruent (characters appeared on products they usually promote), and in the second study, the pairings were incongruent (characters appeared on products they do not promote). We hypothesized that children would prefer the food item with the brand equity character displayed on the packaging and that this preference would persist even when character-food associations were incongruent, and be more likely to choose as a snack the food items with brand equity characters displayed on the packaging.

Methods

In total, 209 children aged 4-8 years took part (102 female and 107 male); 60 for study 1 and 149 for study 2 (reflecting the need to randomize to 3 groups in study 1 and 6 groups in study 2). Children were recruited from 5 primary schools and 2 child-care centers in the UK. Head teachers and directors of child-care centers issued letters to parents, which outlined the study and contained parental consent forms and questionnaires. The

questionnaire requested demographic and lifestyle information, including parental education, child's age and sex, ethnicity, and weekly TV and Internet usage. Additional factors measured in the parental questionnaire had no influence on findings so are not described here and these data are not reported. Participating children gave their verbal assent for participation in a food-tasting study and all data were collected on single-test days between February 2014 and February 2015. The studies were approved by the University of Liverpool's non-invasive procedures ethics subcommittee in 2013.

Three study foods were selected for use in these studies based on pilot work (unpublished data) that showed that these were recognized and preferred characters in children of the target age range: (1) Cheestrings (Kerry Foods, Ossett, United Kingdom); (2) Pom-Bear Potato Snacks – Original (Intersnack, Slough, United Kingdom); and (3) Coco Pops Snack Bar (Kellogg's). Images were selected in which the characters' facial expressions and hand gestures were similar, and were then matched for size. Cheestrings and Coco Pops Snack Bars were both presented each time in their entirety, as per the recommended portion size (both 20 g portions). To avoid the risk of children selecting the potato snacks as their final snack choice simply because the portion offered was larger than the other available snacks, approximately one-half the recommended portion of Pom-Bear Potato Snacks (approximately 9.5 g) were given to the children each time, ensuring that the amount of each type of food offered was similar visually.

All foods were presented in clear packaging including a sticker stating the name of the food in plain text (eg, "Cheestrings"). Sticker location, font, and color were kept consistent for each food sample. Children were presented with the foods in matched pairs, that is, 2 identical foods in matched packaging were offered, with the only variation being that 1 package in each pair also featured a brand equity character to the left hand side of the sticker. In study 1, the brand equity character appearing on the packaging was congruent with the food in the packaging (eg, Coco the Monkey on a Coco Pops Snack Bar), and in study 2, the character-product associations were incongruent (eg, Coco the Monkey on Pom-Bear Potato Snacks). All possible product and character permutations were included.

Participants were tested individually while seated opposite the investigator at a small table. Before testing, the investigator ensured that children understood and could use the child-friendly 5-point Likert scales featuring smiley faces. Children were presented with the first matched food pair, and the investigator instructed them to "Please eat a bit of this food" while pointing at one of the food items. When the child had finished eating, the investigator pointed to the other food item and said, "Now please eat a bit of this food." When the child had finished eating, the investigator asked, "Do they taste the same to you? Or point to the food that tastes best to you." The investigator then presented the child with a 5-point smiley face Likert scale, pointed at each of the food items in turn and asked, "Do you love it, like it, it's OK, don't like it, or hate it?" Finally the child was asked, "Which one would you choose for a snack?" This was repeated for each of the 3 matched food pairs; food

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