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## Research report

# Young children's food brand knowledge. Early development and associations with television viewing and parent's diet <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Brand knowledge is a prerequisite of children's requests and choices for branded foods. We explored the development of young children's brand knowledge of foods highly advertised on television – both healthy and less healthy. Participants were 172 children aged 3–5 years in diverse socio-economic settings, from two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland with different regulatory environments. Results indicated that food brand knowledge (i) did not differ across jurisdictions; (ii) increased significantly between 3 and 4 years; and (iii) children had significantly greater knowledge of unhealthy food brands, compared with similarly advertised healthy brands. In addition, (iv) children's healthy food brand knowledge was not related to their television viewing, their mother's education, or parent or child eating. However, (v) unhealthy brand knowledge was significantly related to all these factors, although only parent eating and children's age were independent predictors. Findings indicate that effects of food marketing for unhealthy foods take place through routes other than television advertising alone, and are present before pre-schoolers develop the concept of healthy eating. Implications are that marketing restrictions of unhealthy foods should extend beyond television advertising; and that family-focused obesity prevention programmes should begin before children are 3 years of age.

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## Introduction

Food is one of the most highly branded commodities (Story & French, 2004), and systematic reviews have found that food marketing significantly and independently determines children's food preferences, eating and health (Cairns, Angus, & Hastings, 2009; Cairns, Angus, Hastings, & Caraher, 2013; IoM, 2005). Family decision-making research demonstrates that children have a strong influence on food and drink purchases when items are for their own consumption, with a particular influence on product type and brands (Boyland & Halford, 2013; Nørgaard, Bruns, Christensen, & Mikkelsen, 2007; Søndergaard & Edelenbos, 2007).

The World Health Organization has called for reduced high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) food marketing to children, and the World

Health Assembly has urged implementation by member states (World Health Assembly, 2010). As brand preference precedes purchase requests, marketing aims to build young children's knowledge of food brands and desires for them (McNeal, 1999; Story & French, 2004). A large body of research has concluded that television advertising influences eating behaviours (Gibson et al., 2012), creates taste expectancies (Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009), and prompts children's food requests (Coon & Tucker, 2002). Television advertising implicitly develops emotional associations with food brands and brand exposure earlier in childhood may create stronger and longer-lasting attachments (Braun-LaTour, LaTour, & Zinkhan, 2007; Nairn & Fine, 2008). Despite growth of digital media, television remains the primary food marketing medium in the UK and Ireland (Boyland & Halford, 2013; Harper, 2010; Landon, 2013) as well as in the US, where television accounted for 35% youth-directed marketing expenditure compared with 7% on new media (Federal Trade Commission (FTC), 2012).

The majority of research on food marketing effects on children has focused on school-aged children (Harris et al., 2009). However, some studies indicate that advertising and branding effects develop earlier: pre-school children aged 2–6 years preferred food items if they had seen advertisements for them embedded in videotaped programming (Borzekowski & Robinson, 2001); children's mental representations of fast food and soda brands at 3–5 years are positively related to their HFSS preferences (Cornwell & McAlister, 2011);

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and fast food brand knowledge at 4–8 years has been linked to higher body mass index (BMI) (Arredondo, Castaneda, Elder, Slymen, & Dozier, 2009).

Research exploring factors influencing pre-schoolers' eating has focused on parenting styles and practices (Schwartz, Scholtens, Lalanne, Weenen, & Nicklaus, 2011; Skouteris, 2012). Parents, the major socialisation agents in early childhood, have significant direct and indirect impact on children's food knowledge and eating. This takes place through food provision; responses to children's requests; restriction and monitoring of eating; use of foods as rewards; and modelling of eating behaviours (Birch, 1999; Gibson et al., 2012; Skouteris, 2012; Slusser et al., 2012).

Both parents and marketing are therefore likely to have an effect on young children's food brand knowledge and preferences. However, understanding the interplay of influences is critical, as early food preferences strongly predict eating through life (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2004; Skouteris, 2012). One recent experiment explored the relative influences of parents and television advertising, finding that a few minutes after pre-schoolers viewed television advertisements, parental persuasion had little moderating effect on their children's choice of coupons for McDonald's Apple Dippers versus French fries (Ferguson, Muñoz, & Medrano, 2012).

However, overall, the interplay of factors influencing early food brand knowledge and preferences is poorly understood (Jansen, Daniels, & Nicholson, 2012; Skouteris, 2012).

#### Measuring young children's brand knowledge

Researching with pre-schoolers can be challenging, as they cannot always verbally communicate their knowledge, and so visual methods are often devised: for example, in brand research, pre-school children's visual brand logo recognition is substantially better than their brand name recall, at least in part because recognition develops earlier than recall memory (Siegler & Alibali, 2005; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005).

Brand researchers have therefore usually employed visual recognition tasks, asking children to match logos to product images for brands such as cars, sportswear, petrol, washing products, toys, foods and fast food restaurants (Arredondo et al., 2009; Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, & Rojas, 1991; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). Valkenburg and Buijzen (2005) studied visual recognition and verbal brand name recall in children from 2 to 8 years of age, for 12 general consumer goods including HFSS foods. They found high visual brand logo recognition at 2–3 years (75% matching), but strikingly lower verbal brand name recall (8% recall); even by 8 years, children only knew the names for 42% logos. This suggests that verbal studies of brand knowledge may achieve floor effects in very young children. However, Valkenburg and Buijzen's study did not focus exclusively on food brands; children may have greater verbal recall of these, as they interact daily with food from an early age.

When exploring children's brand knowledge, studies to date have typically examined HFSS foods. However, in a shifting advertising landscape in the UK and Ireland, healthier items are also frequently advertised when young children watch television. In 2010, TAM/Nielsen audience research data for the Republic of Ireland indicated that the top 20 food and drink advertisements seen by children aged 4–6 years included not only HFSS sugar-sweetened cereals, crisps and fast food items, but also many healthier items including milk, water, fruit smoothies, low sugar/low salt breakfast cereals, and yoghurt-based dairy products. It is important to understand the effects of marketing healthy food as well as HFSS food (IoM, 2005); for example, in school-aged children, healthy food advertising has been found to affect their preferences (Dixon, Scully, Wakefield, White, & Crawford, 2007). Therefore it is important to identify young children's knowledge of widely advertised healthy foods as well as HFSS ones.

**Table 1**

Age ranges, means, standard deviations and percentages by gender, for each age group.

	N		Age (months)	M	SD	Males		Females	
	%	n				%	n	%	n
Full sample	100	172	36–71	52.16	8.55	48	82	52	90
3 years	31	54	36–47	42.52	3.00	52	28	48	26
4 years	47	81	48–59	53.02	3.63	42	34	58	47
5 years	22	37	60–71	64.35	3.35	54	20	46	17

Finally, a limitation of previous studies of young children's brand knowledge is that brands have not been selected systematically (e.g., Arredondo et al., 2009; Fischer et al., 1991; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005), with the result that relationships with young children's television viewing patterns are challenging to interpret. Selecting brands from those most advertised on television should ensure any relationships found are more robust.

#### Aims

In this study we sought to identify the development and determinants of children's early food brand knowledge, for brands highly advertised on television. We had two specific objectives: (i) to identify age-related brand knowledge, for both healthy and less healthy food items; (ii) to explore mother's education, family eating and children's television viewing as predictors of children's food brand knowledge.

#### Method

The study was conducted in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Advertising restrictions for HFSS foods have been in force in the UK (including Northern Ireland) since 2007 (Ofcom, 2007). However, no HFSS restrictions were in force in the Republic of Ireland at the time of conducting the study.

The study formed part of a larger project examining aspects of pre-schoolers' food, drink and advertising-related knowledge and practices across the island of Ireland. The pre-school quota sampling procedure, sample, and measures completed by parents have been described in detail elsewhere (Tatlow-Golden, Hennessy, Hollywood, & Dean, 2013); we therefore summarise them here before describing the development of the brand recognition stimuli.

#### Participants

Participating children ( $n = 172$ ) were aged 3–5 years (see Table 1); 48% were boys. They attended 11 pre-schools and three primary schools across the island of Ireland (25% Northern Ireland, 75% Republic of Ireland). Just over half ( $n = 94$ ; 55%) attended pre-school/school in disadvantaged communities, ascertained with Northern Ireland local government data and Republic of Ireland Department of Education and Skills data.

Parents gave information about family demographics, eating habits and children's television viewing. Of the 100 parents (58%) who returned completed questionnaires, significantly more did so in advantaged communities (68%) compared with disadvantaged communities (50%);  $\chi^2 5.643$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .018$ . We therefore examined the education levels mothers reported in returned parent questionnaires. One-third (32%) had completed secondary (high school) education; nearly a third (29%) had a diploma (post high school qualification, lower than degree level), and just over a third had a university degree (39% bachelor or higher degree), reflecting a spread across socio-economic levels. Finally,  $t$ -tests and chi-square analyses identified no significant differences in any of the study's dependent variables, depending on whether parents returned a

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