

Does the presence of brand equity characters on food packaging affect the taste preferences and food choices of children?

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Food marketing is a key factor contributing to childhood obesity. Packaging is an under-researched marketing activity, but could have a significant impact on the foods children choose. Licensed-characters, such as Shrek, on packaging have previously been shown to affect children's food choices and taste preferences in favour of the product they appear on. However, no study has examined the influence of brand equity characters (BEC) in this context. These are characters developed specifically to represent a particular brand/product, for example, Coco the Monkey for Kellogg's Cocopops. The use of licensed-characters in TV advertising is regulated in the UK, but BEC are currently exempt. Therefore, it is crucial that we increase our understanding of their impact on children's food choices, as they almost exclusively promote high fat, sugar, salt (HFSS) foods. In a mixed-measures design 136 children (4-8yrs) were asked to rate their taste preferences and preferred snack choice for three matched food pairs, presented to them either with/without BEC on packaging. Phase 1 addressed congruent food-character associations and Phase 2 addressed incongruent associations. Participants were also asked to rate recognition and liking of characters used. Children were significantly more likely to rate the food with a BEC present on packaging as tasting nicer than a matched food without a BEC, for both congruent and incongruent food-character associations. The presence of a BEC (congruent and incongruent) also significantly influenced the children's within-pair preferences, and overall snack choice (congruent associations only). This is consistent with findings for other types of promotional character, suggesting their use in promoting HFSS foods to children should be restricted. Further research could establish whether BEC could be a useful tool for the promotion of more healthful foods, such as fruit and vegetables, amongst children.