

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

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Introduction

- Packaging is an under-researched marketing activity, but could have a significant impact on the foods children choose and how they perceive the foods to taste.
- Licensed-characters (e.g. Shrek) affect children's food choices and taste preferences in favour of the product they appear on.¹ However, no study has examined the influence of brand equity (BE) characters in this context (characters developed specifically to represent a particular brand/product, e.g. Coco the Monkey for Kellogg's Cocopops).
- It is crucial that we increase understanding of their impact on children's taste preferences and dietary choices, given that they almost exclusively promote high fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) foods and are currently exempt from UK regulations.²



Design

This study used a mixed measures, counterbalanced design adapted from a previous study.¹ Children were presented with 3 matched food pairs in clear packaging, one with BE character and one without.

Participants

Congruent Phase

60 participants aged 4 – 8 years (mean 7.0 years ± 0.1) were recruited. 34 (57%) participants were female.

Incongruent Phase

149 participants aged 4 – 8 years (mean 6.8 years ± 1.1) were recruited. 59 (43%) participants were female.

Procedure

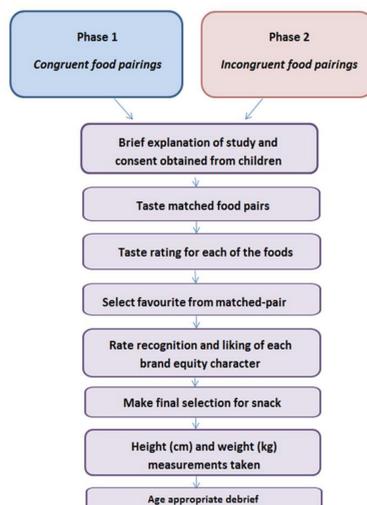
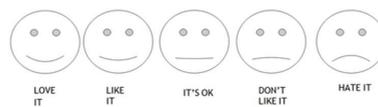


Figure 1. Flow diagram outlining the experimental procedure

Results

Congruent Phase

Taste Preference



Children significantly preferred the taste of both Cheestrings and Coco Pops cereal bars when the BE character was present on the packaging ($p < .05$). No significant difference in taste ratings for the Pom Bear matched-pair was found ($p > .05$).

Snack Choice

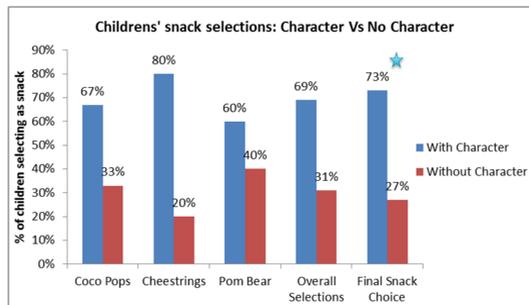


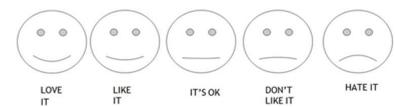
Figure 2. Frequency of selection for the overall snack selection for each of the 6 food items: Phase 1

For their final snack selection, children were significantly more likely to choose a snack with a BE character on the packaging, ($X^2(1) = 13.07, p = 0.000$).

Across the 180 individual choices (60 pts x 3 within-pair choices), there was a notable trend towards selection of the items with BE on packaging ($p = 0.06$).

Incongruent Phase

Taste Preference



Children significantly preferred the taste of both Cheestrings and Coco Pops cereal bars when the BE character was present on the packaging ($p < .05$). Also, a strong trend emerged, in favour of Pom Bear crisps presented with an incongruent BE character present on the packaging ($p = .052$).

Snack Choice

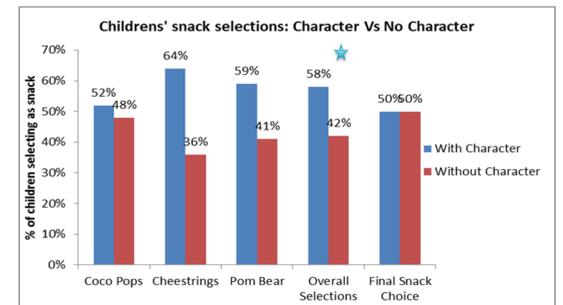


Figure 3. Frequency of selection for the overall snack selection for each of the 6 food items: Phase 2

For their final snack choices, there was no significant differences, with 50% of the children selecting a snack with the BE character on the packaging and 50% selecting the snack without ($p > .05$).

Across the 447 individual choices (149 pts x 3 within-pair choices), significantly more selections were made of the item in the BE embossed packaging (58%) compared to control ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusions

- These findings suggest that the use of BE characters on food packaging does have an influence on children's food choices and can also affect children's perceptions of food taste, which is consistent with findings for other types of promotional characters which are currently regulated in the UK.
- The results applied to both congruent and incongruent food-character associations, suggesting a beyond-brand effect may exist for familiar BE characters.
- BE characters contribute to the persuasive power of marketing and are often used to promote HFSS foods to children, therefore these findings are likely to have implications for current policy regarding the regulation of food advertising to children in the UK and elsewhere.
- 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.



References

1. Roberto, C.A., Baik, J., Harris, J.L., Brownell, K.D. (2010). Influence of Licensed Characters on Children's Taste and Snack Preferences. *Pediatrics*, 126, 88-93
2. Ofcom (2010) *HFSS Advertising Restrictions – Final Review*. Available online.