

The Use of Brand Mascots and Media Characters: Opportunities for Responsible Food Marketing to Children

Healthy Eating Research

Building evidence to prevent childhood obesity

Issue Brief, March 2016

Introduction

Public health experts have consistently called on food, beverage, and restaurant industry leaders to end all forms of marketing of high-calorie and nutrient-poor food and beverage products to children and adolescents to help reverse overweight and obesity rates in the United States. This call aligns with the 2010 World Health Assembly Resolution and the World Health Organization's recommendations for national governments and other stakeholders to restrict young people's exposure to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products that do not meet the government-recommended dietary targets for fat, sugar, salt, and total calories.¹

Several scientific studies have shown that food and beverage marketing practices strongly influence children's food preferences and purchase requests.²⁻⁷ In 2006, an expert committee convened by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded that food marketing influences children's eating behaviors, contributes to poor dietary habits, increases the risk for obesity among children and adolescents, and may have long-term consequences for their health.⁴

Companies that market high-calorie and nutrient-poor food and beverage products to children often use brand mascots and media characters. *Brand mascots* are owned by food, beverage, and restaurant companies and *cartoon media characters* are owned by entertainment and media companies.⁸⁻¹⁰ Brand mascots and media characters represent a broad range of human or fictional kid-friendly animals or animated objects.^{9,11-15} Children learn about them through television (TV), movies, the Internet, food packaging, merchandising, as well as their parents and peers.¹⁶

Younger children are especially vulnerable to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products that use brand mascots or media characters because they have difficulty distinguishing between advertising messages and factual information.¹⁷ Children develop emotional bonds with brand mascots and media characters as if they were their personal friends. These relationships are based on the attractiveness of the brand mascots and media characters, and they can influence children's food choices and diet.¹⁸

Major U.S. food and beverage manufacturers have made some progress to reduce the calorie content and improve the nutritional value of products sold in the marketplace.^{19,20} Some companies have also adopted uniform nutrition criteria to improve their marketing of healthier food and beverage products to children under age 12 through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), a voluntary self-regulation program administered by the Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc. (CBBB).²¹ However, children ages 12 to 14 face heightened risk from the influence of unhealthy food and beverage marketing due to their greater independence, higher levels of media use, and frequent consumption of high-calorie and nutrient-poor branded food and beverage products.²²



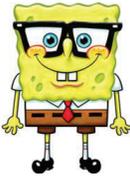
This issue brief is based on two published papers that analyzed the scientific literature on these topics from 2000 to 2015.^{23,24} The two papers examine the evidence on how food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment companies have used brand mascots and cartoon media characters to influence children's diet and health. The papers also highlight how food, beverage, and restaurant industry leaders can be held accountable for their marketing practices and respond to appeals from parents, public health experts, and consumer groups to substantially strengthen voluntary commitments to ensure that brand mascots and media characters are used responsibly to promote only healthy food and beverage products to children ages 14 and younger.

The Evidence

Brand mascots and media characters are used in marketing foods and beverages to children.

- Children worldwide are targeted by companies that use mascots and media characters to promote branded food and beverage products to maximize sales and market share²⁵ even though many of these products are high in added sugars, salt, and fat that contribute to poor diet quality and unhealthy weight gain.²⁴
- Mascots and media characters are the intellectual property of companies and are used in commercial licensing, franchising, and merchandising activities to build customer brand loyalty (e.g., brand awareness, trust, association, and preference) to purchase products.^{9,11-15,26} Figure 1 shows examples of selected brand mascots and media characters used to market food and beverage products to children.

Figure 1: Examples of brand mascots and media characters used in the United States

<p>Popular brand mascots Owned by food, beverage, and restaurant companies</p>	<p>Popular media characters Owned by entertainment and media companies and licensed to food, beverage, and restaurant companies</p>
<p>Beverages and Dairy</p>  <p>Bongo the Monkey The Dannon Company</p>  <p>Kool-Aid Man Kraft Foods Group, Inc.</p>  <p>Nesquik Bunny Nestlé USA</p>	 <p>Shrek Dreamworks</p>  <p>Cookie Monster, Grover, and Elmo Sesame Workshop</p>
<p>Candy, Snacks, and Children's Meals</p>  <p>M&M characters Mars, Incorporated</p>  <p>Chester Cheetah PepsiCo, Inc.</p>  <p>Pop-Tarts Kellogg Company</p>  <p>Ronald McDonald McDonald's USA, LLC</p>  <p>Cheesasaurus Rex Kraft Foods Group, Inc.</p>	 <p>SpongeBob SquarePants Nickelodeon/Viacom</p>  <p>Dora the Explorer Nickelodeon/Viacom</p>  <p>Scooby-Doo and Flintstones Warner Brothers Entertainment, Inc.</p>
<p>Ready-to-Eat Cereals</p>  <p>Buzz Bee and Lucky the Leprechaun General Mills, Inc.</p>  <p>Tony the Tiger and Toucan Sam Kellogg Company</p>	 <p>Spider Man, Marvel Superheroes, Muppets, and Disney Princesses The Walt Disney Company</p>

- The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires that media companies separate TV programming intended for children ages 12 years and younger from commercials to protect children who have difficulty distinguishing between commercial and program material and are vulnerable to the commercial messages.²⁷
- The food and beverage categories of greatest nutritional concern that use brand mascots and media characters are confection and candy, children's meals, ready-to-eat cereals, sweet and savory snacks, desserts, dairy, and sugar-sweetened beverages.^{24,28,29}

Media characters can be used to promote healthy products, but they appear to be more powerful when used to market unhealthy foods and beverages.

A systematic review²³ of 11 experimental scientific studies that examined the influence of media characters on children's diet-related cognitive, behavioral, and health outcomes found that:

- Media characters can be used as a promising strategy to increase children's preference, choice, and intake of fruits and vegetables compared to not using characters for branding.
- Even an unfamiliar cartoon character may increase children's appetite and preference for healthy foods compared to not using a cartoon character at all.
- Familiar media characters are a more powerful influence on children's food preferences, choices, and intake for cookies, candy, or chocolate compared to their use to promote fruits or vegetables.

Between 2006 and 2015, many national health organizations, expert committees, and government agencies repeatedly urged the food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment industries to use brand mascots and media characters only to promote healthy food and beverage products to children.²⁴

- In 2006, the IOM recommended that licensed media characters should be used to promote only healthy foods and beverages to children.⁴
- In 2008, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recommended that media and entertainment companies use characters from popular TV programs and movies only to promote healthy foods and beverages to children.³⁰
- In 2010, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity urged the food and entertainment industries to use licensed media characters to promote healthy foods and beverages.³¹

- In 2013, First Lady Michelle Obama convened a summit in Washington, D.C., to persuade companies to limit their use of licensed media characters to market unhealthy foods and beverages and to use media characters only to promote healthy foods and beverages to children.³²
- In 2015, an expert panel convened by *Healthy Eating Research* (HER), a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, charged companies and industry sectors to strengthen self-regulatory programs by addressing loopholes in these programs. The panel recommended that companies revise the current definition of child-directed marketing to include any form of marketing that targets children ages 14 and younger (as opposed to the current cutoff of age 12). The HER panel also recommended voluntary expansion of industry pledges to cover all forms of brand advertising and marketing, including the use of brand mascots and media characters on products and for licensing and cross-promotions.³³

While some progress has been made by food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment companies to ensure that brand mascots and licensed media characters are used to promote healthier foods, beverages, and meals,²⁴ significant opportunities for improvement still exist.

- In 2008, the FTC's first industry-monitoring report documented that 44 food, beverage, and restaurant companies spent \$2.1 billion on child- and adolescent-targeted food marketing in 2006, which included the cost of fast-food restaurant toy giveaways.³⁰ The FTC's review of entertainment companies' licensed media-character policies documented some progress but also showed a need for more improvement to limit media-character marketing only to healthy foods and beverages.
- In 2012, the FTC's second industry-monitoring report documented a reduction from \$2.1 billion spent by 44 companies in 2006 to \$1.8 billion spent by 48 companies in 2009.³⁴ Half of all marketing dollars targeting children ages 2 to 11 (\$531 million) involved cross-promotions, including media-character merchandising and tie-ins with movies, TV programs, videogames, and social media.
- In 2011, the National Restaurant Association established the *Kids LiveWell* program³⁵ under which 19 companies voluntarily offered at least one healthy children's meal that met specific nutrition criteria for calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium. However, no best-practice guidelines have been developed or adopted for using brand mascots or licensed media characters for participating restaurants.

- Between 2006 and 2014, the CBBB strengthened the CFBAI principles and guidelines for participating companies. Effective January 2014, the 17 CFBAI member companies³⁶ agreed to adopt revised principles³⁷ to promote food and beverage products that adhered to the CFBAI's new uniform nutrition criteria.³⁸ However, the principles lacked commitments for company-owned brand mascots and licensed media characters used at point-of-sale, on packaged food products, and as toy giveaways or premiums.

Conclusions

Brand mascots and media characters represent a broad range of human or fictional beings and/or cartoon and animated objects used by food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment companies to sell products to children. Companies and marketers use brand mascots and licensed media characters to build an emotional relationship with children to cultivate brand loyalty for foods and beverages that persists into adulthood.

A systematic review of 11 experimental studies shows that media characters can be used effectively to increase children's fruit or vegetable intake if they are not concurrently used to promote cookies, candy, and chocolate products.

During the last 15 years, some progress has been made through the CFBAI and by individual food, beverage, and entertainment company policies to address licensed media character use through TV advertising and other forms of measured media. However, many of the food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment industry policies have significant loopholes because they do not cover the use of brand mascots in any media, nor do they cover the use of licensed media characters at point-of-sale, on packaged foods, and as toy giveaways or premiums.

Policy Implications

There is a need for the industry and other groups to accelerate progress to use brand mascots and media characters to promote only healthy food and beverage products rather than high-calorie and nutrient-poor products that are high in salt, sugar, fat, and calories. The evidence and the conclusions summarized in the two papers used to develop this issue brief show that policymakers, government organizations, industry leaders, researchers, and consumer groups can work together to ensure that brand mascots and media characters are used only to promote food and beverage products to American children that align with nutrition guidelines recommended by government and public health experts to support a healthy diet.

More specifically,

- The CFBAI should amend its principles and policies to cover all marketing approaches aimed at children ages 14 and younger, including the use of media characters for on-package marketing, toys and other premiums, and merchandising. Currently, CFBAI policies are focused on children ages 12 and younger. This is particularly significant since the CFBAI companies represent about 80 percent of the child-directed TV advertising in the United States.
- The CFBAI should develop a policy to apply its 2014 uniform nutrition criteria to the use of all brand mascots owned by food, beverage, and restaurant companies, to monitor the compliance of participating member companies with these criteria, and publicly share the results with all stakeholders.
- The ambiguity in the various industry, government, and expert public health guidelines used to define healthy, consumable products that can be marketed to children in the United States should be eliminated.
 - **Industry standards** include the CFBAI's uniform nutrition criteria, the National Restaurant Association's *Kids LiveWell* Program nutrition standards, or Walt Disney's nutrition standards.
 - **Government standards** include the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Smart Snacks in School and School Meals standards.
 - **Public health standards** include the *Healthy Eating Research* model healthy beverage guidelines.

This issue brief is based on the findings from two publications co-authored by Vivica Kraak, PhD, RD, Virginia Tech, and Mary Story, PhD, RD, Duke University. The two publications are:

Kraak VI, Story M. Influence of food companies' brand mascots and entertainment companies' cartoon media characters on children's diet and health: A systematic review and research needs. *Obes Rev.* 2015;16:107–126.

Kraak VI, Story M. An accountability evaluation for industry's responsible use of brand mascots and licensed characters to market a healthy diet to American children. *Obes Rev.* 2015;16:433–453.

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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health under the direction of Mary Story, PhD, RD, program director, and Laura Klein, MPH, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially in lower-income and racial and ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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