

The Consumer Voice in Europe

CARTOON CHARACTERS AND FOOD: JUST FOR FUN?

Position Paper on the use of brand mascots and licensed media characters in marketing to children



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Why it matters to consumers

Levels of childhood obesity have skyrocketed in recent decades across Europe with one in three children now currently overweight or obese.

As the World Health Organisation has stated, there is now “unequivocal evidence” that the marketing to children of foods which are high in fat, salt or sugar is strongly linked to childhood obesity. Cartoon characters such as brand mascots and licensed media characters are key marketing tools used by food companies to attract children to their products which are often high in fat, salt and sugar. Urgent action is therefore required to protect consumers, in particular, children who are amongst the most vulnerable.

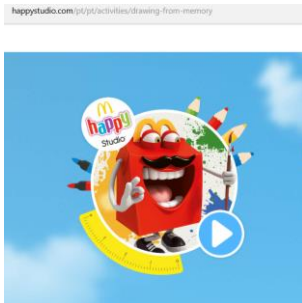
BEUC’s Recommendations in a Nutshell

- We are calling on food and retail companies to end their use of brand mascots and licensed media characters in advertising and marketing (including packaging) of foods high in fat, salt and sugar.
- At the same time, we call on entertainment companies to adopt a strict policy of only licensing their characters to foods which are not high in fat, salt and sugar.
- We encourage these stakeholders to use the widely-recognised World Health Organisation nutrient profiles to determine which foods should not be advertised to children.
- European governments should recognise the pervasive and persuasive influence of cartoon characters used to attract children to foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar. In the absence of adequate action from industry, they should therefore consider introducing regulatory measures to properly tackle this issue.
- Restrictions on advertising such foods should apply to children up to the age of 16 as is already the case in some European countries. Governments should take this into account when developing advertising codes of conduct and industry voluntary pledges should be immediately improved in this regard.

Summary

Brand mascots such as Tony the Tiger or the Nesquik bunny are promotional characters used by many food companies to market their products. Unlike licensed media characters leased out from entertainment companies such as the Minions or Batman, brand mascots belong to the food companies themselves. Both are usually cartoon-like animated people, objects, or anthropomorphic animals.

Examples of Brand Mascots



Example 1 McDonald's 'Happy'



Example 1 Lu Biscuits' 'Prince'



Example 3 Kellogg's Frosties' 'Tony the Tiger'

Examples of Licensed Media Characters



The Minions



Disney's Elsa (Frozen)



Smurfs

Brand mascots and licensed media characters often evoke a sense of fun, humour or adventure copying common themes in popular children's programmes. They offer valuable opportunities for food companies to engage with young people to promote their products.

However, popular brand mascots and licensed media characters are overwhelmingly used to promote foods high in added sugars, salt and fat which contribute to childhood obesity¹. Our members found that in supermarket and online surveys² of products on sale which used brand mascots and licensed media characters were most commonly used on; confectionary, crisps, sugary breakfast cereals, biscuits and salty dairy snacks, amongst other unhealthy products. Indeed, only one example was discovered of such a character being used to promote a fruit or vegetable. Our UK member, Which?, found an example of 'The Minions' being used to promote Jolly Green Giant tinned sweetcorn.

This is very concerning because these cartoon characters are a persuasive and powerful way for food companies to increase the appeal of their products to children and are very prevalent in Europe. Our French member CLCV for example, found almost 50 examples of brand mascots or licensed media characters being used in French supermarkets on products targeted at children.

Given that the levels of childhood obesity remain worryingly high across Europe, public health experts, such as the World Health Organization (WHO)³, have called on governments to improve the restrictions on marketing to children.

BEUC calls on all food companies to end the use of brand mascots and licensed media characters for the marketing and advertising of foods to children which are high in fat, salt and sugar according to the World Health Organisation's nutrient profile model^{4,5}.

¹ The Cartoon Villains are Getting Away With It, Which?, 2008.

² These supermarket surveys were not exhaustive but were intended to give a general overview of the use of brand mascots and licensed media characters in European supermarkets.

³ http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/80148/1/9789241503242_eng.pdf?ua=1

⁴ World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe Nutrient Profile Model, 2015.

⁵ In line with the WHO European Network Code 2009, products which are clearly produced for consumption on special treats (eg. birthday cakes, confectionary for cultural or religious festivals) may be exempted.

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1. Why do food companies use cartoons?

Children love them...

Cartoon characters are powerful 'hooks' which are especially popular with young children who process visual images more easily than verbal messages. **Even before a child has learnt how to read, they can readily recognise brands**⁶. This is important as some studies have shown that a child's knowledge of food brands can be a significant predictor of their Body Mass Index (BMI)⁷.

Brand mascots in particular are used to increase brand awareness amongst young consumers because **children develop emotional bonds with these personified characters as if they were their personal friends**. These parasocial relationships with the mascots do not only engender positive feelings towards the characters themselves but can also influence children's food preferences and purchase requests towards their parents⁸.

A systematic review of eleven studies on brand mascots and children found that familiar media character branding appeared to be a more powerful influence on children's preferences and intake of less healthy foods compared to fruit or vegetables⁹.

Licensing the use of their movie or TV characters to other businesses is extremely profitable for entertainment companies. Profits made from cinema tickets or DVD sales can now be multiplied many times over by selling the use of the licensed characters to other businesses such as food companies to promote their products. Disney, for example, is said to have made \$40.9 billion in 2013 alone from its licensed merchandise operations¹⁰. It is to be noted that Disney has introduced nutritional guidelines to determine which foods can use their characters¹¹. This should be welcomed. However, we would encourage any entertainment company licensing their characters to food companies to ensure their nutritional criteria are in line with the WHO model.

Studies have demonstrated that children even think a product actually tasted better when a licensed media character appeared on it¹². Given the prevalence of licensed media characters found by our members in European supermarkets, it is clear that food companies highly value the marketing impact such cartoons can have on attracting their target audience to their products.

Indeed, our UK, Danish, German, Norwegian and Spanish members all found examples of Kellogg's breakfast cereals which were created by the company specifically for the licensed media character and not just to promote a regular brand product.

⁶ McAlister, A. R. and Cornwell, T. B. (2010), Children's brand symbolism understanding: Links to theory of mind and executive functioning. *Psychol. Mark.*, 27: 203–228. doi:10.1002/mar.20328.

⁷ Children's Knowledge of Packaged and Fast Food Brands and their BMI: Why the Relationship Matters for Policy Makers, T Cornwell, A McAlister, *Appetite*, June 2014.

⁸ Kraak VI, Story M. *The Use of Brand Mascots and Media Characters: Opportunities for Responsible Food Marketing to Children*. Durham, NC: Healthy Eating Research; 2016.

⁹ V Kraak, M Story: Influence of food companies' brand mascots and entertainment companies' cartoon media characters on children's diet and health: a systematic review and research needs, *Obesity Etiology/Pediatric Obesity*, October 2014.

¹⁰ <http://variety.com/2014/biz/news/disney-brands-generate-record-40-9-billion-from-licensed-merchandise-in-2013-1201221813/>

¹¹ http://a.dilcdn.com/bl/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2015/12/NutritionGuidelines_EMEA_January-2017_No-URL.pdf

¹² Influence of Licensed Characters on Children's Taste and Snack Preferences, Christina A. Roberto, Jenny Baik, Jennifer L. Harris, Kelly D. Brownell, *Pediatrics* Jul 2010, 126 (1) 88-93; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2009-3433.

Both brand mascots and licensed media characters are predominantly used for foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar. Of the many examples of brand mascots and licensed media characters found by our members both online and on packages, they were rarely used with foods eg. Kellogg's Rice Krispies, which would meet the standards of the WHO's nutrient profile.

Furthermore, as children, especially younger children, have a limited cognitive capacity to differentiate between advertising and entertainment programmes marketing tools such as brand mascots can strongly influence them.

... and still love them when they are adults

Research into the long-term effects of child-oriented advertising using brand mascots has shown that positive perceptions made during childhood can persist into adulthood.¹³ This phenomenon is called 'brand loyalty'. This demonstrates that even grown adults with the developed cognitive ability to critically assess the intention of advertising can still be affected by positive associations linked to brand mascots initiated in childhood. Such positive associations could make parents more receptive to a child's purchase requests for the same brand.

Marketing experts and even food companies themselves have acknowledged the strong influence brand mascots can have on consumer behaviour. For example, in the UK, a breakfast cereal recently decided to not only bring back their brand mascot, they also decided to change the cereal's name to include reference to the mascot. When announcing this news, the company [cited](#) the strong feelings of nostalgia, trust and loyalty consumers felt towards the brand mascot as reasons for these changes.

Brand Recognition

Packaging is often known as 'the silent salesman' and is a crucial instrument for marketing to children. The ability to recall key features of a branded food are significant for children when out shopping with their parents. Research has suggested that advertising of unhealthy food can lead to children 'pestering' their parents to purchase foods which they might not otherwise have chosen¹⁴. Therefore, the use of cartoon characters such as brand mascots which are explicitly tied to the brand is a key tool in increasing brand recognition.

From packaging to screens

Furthermore, the impact of such cartoon characters has been amplified over recent years as characters whose use was previously limited to print, TV and packaging have expanded their reach to children via the internet. Advergaming for example, which often use brand mascots prominently, blur the boundary between advertising and entertainment, targeting children in a subtler but nonetheless very immersive method of marketing. Many of the brand mascots found by our members were used across many different platforms. For example, our Czech member dTest found that the brand mascot for Bobik dairy products was used not only on packaging but also in a specially created app, Youtube videos as well as having its own social media profile.

¹³ P Connell, M Bucks, J Nielsen: *How Childhood Advertising Exposure Can Create Biased Product Evaluations That Persist Into Adulthood*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol 41, Issue 1, June 2014, p 119-134.

¹⁴ C Aznar, A McGregor, G Rosenburg, L Porter, H Lepps, *Ad Brake: Primary School Children's Perceptions of Unhealthy Food Advertising on Television*, National Centre for Social Research and Cancer Research UK.

Online advertising can be even more powerful than traditional advertising – children are subconsciously targeted for longer periods of time and are actively engaging with the brand rather than just passively watching a TV advert. The line between commercial and non-commercial messaging is significantly blurred and research has shown that **children as old as 15 do not recognise that advergames are adverts¹⁵. EU Pledge rules currently only consider a child to be under 12 years old which fails to reflect the vulnerability of both adolescents and younger children. BEUC believes that, as recommended by the World Health Organisation¹⁶, any restrictions on advertising should be extended to the age of 16.**

A brand's own character features heavily in companies' advergames and videos as well as their social media platforms. These integrated marketing strategies where the mascot is used across various media helps to consolidate brand recognition among their target audience, **having strong influences on children's purchase requests to their parents.**

Examples of cartoon characters used online:



Switzerland: Kinder and The Smurfs (FRC)



Italy: McDonald's 'Happy' and The Smurfs (Altroconsumo)



France: Monster Munch (UFC Que Choisir)

Research has shown that characters can influence diet-related behaviours of children, especially with regard to energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods¹⁷. Their use should be restricted to healthy produce to encourage young children to increase their consumption of fruit and vegetables for example.

¹⁵ Nairn, A. and Hang, H. (2012), Advergames: It's not child's play. A review of research. London: Family and Parenting Institute.

¹⁶ Tackling Food Marketing to Children in a Digital World: trans-disciplinary perspectives, World Health Organisation's European Regional Office, 2016.

¹⁷ V Kraak, M Story: Influence of food companies' brand mascots and entertainment companies' cartoon media characters on children's diet and health: a systematic review and research needs, Obesity Etiology/Pediatric Obesity, October 2014.

2. International Action

In spite of the wide use of persuasive and powerful brand mascots and licensed media characters to advertise products which are high in fat, salt and sugar, regulatory action to date has been limited. Nevertheless, as mounting evidence increasingly points to a consensus regarding their power on children and food preferences, some countries have taken the initiative to restrict their use with energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods.

Strong in Chile

Chile, a country where 50 years ago the biggest nutrition issues were related to undernutrition¹⁸, now has one of the highest levels of childhood obesity in the world. In June 2016, the government brought in a sweeping new food labelling law called 'Ley de Etiquetado' to tackle this problem. Measures included warning labels on food products with high salt, sugar or fat levels, a ban on the use of toys with these products and **the removal of licensed and brand characters to promote such foods**¹⁹.

The Chilean government took a strong stance and announced fines for non-compliance in November 2016²⁰. It was a swift response to the three food companies (Nestlé, Kellogg's and Masterfoods, the distributor of Mars' M+Ms in the country) who refused to remove their brand mascots on products which failed to meet the requisite nutritional criteria.



Figure 2 Before and After Implementation of the Law. Source: Bloomberg

¹⁸ <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/10/07-048785/en/>

¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.org/blog/world-will-learn-chiles-bold-policy-curb-obesity/>

²⁰ <https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2016/1122/833685-chile-sues-nestle-kelloggs-in-anti-obesity-drive/>

Ambitious in Canada

The federal Canadian government are currently considering improving their regulation on advertising to children. If adopted, [Bill S-228](#), introduced in September 2016 would ban unhealthy food marketing to children on TV, online and print as well as on labels and packaging. It would also outlaw the use of testimonials and endorsements towards kids by any 'person, character or animal'. Canadian Senator Nancy Green Raine, who introduced the bill has indicated that she is also receptive to using the World Health Organization's nutrient profiling model to determine what is classed as an 'unhealthy' food²¹.

Examples from across the Atlantic show that strong action is key to tackle the use of cartoon characters to attract children to foods high in fat, salt and sugar.

Voluntary in Europe

The EU Pledge is the food industry's voluntary initiative in Europe to restrict marketing to children of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Its most recent commitments which came into force in January 2017 included a pledge to end the use of licensed media characters for advertising for such foods²². Although the criteria used by the Pledge to determine which products are healthy enough to be advertised are too weak, this new commitment shows that the food industry has at least now acknowledged the impact such visual stimuli can have on children.

Whilst the EU Pledge itself might not have gone as far as to extend their new commitment to packaging there are now moves by the Netherlands Food and Drink Association to do so²³. Many companies in this Dutch trade association are also members of the EU Pledge at a European level. Other European companies should follow this example for a start and move further by using the WHO nutritional profile.

As restrictions on licensed media characters increase however, there is a risk that a loophole could be created whereby the food industry increasingly rely on their own brand mascots instead to advertise and market their products to children. **Both licensed characters and brand mascots must therefore be restricted** to ensure that neither's powerful effect can be used with foods which are high in fat, salt or sugar.

Finally, as mentioned above, EU Pledge members use very weak nutritional criteria to decide which foods they see as acceptable to advertise to children. They should swiftly move to the much stricter WHO nutrient profile to truly protect children.

Other 'Hooks'

Cartoon characters are not the only means by which the food industry attempts to use 'fun' to attract children to their products. Toys and competitions are very commonly used with products targeted at kids and can be a persuasive influence on them.

Our French member, UFC Que Choisir found several examples of food products aimed at children which had codes printed on the packaging which could then be entered on their websites with the chance of winning toys and gifts. Not only are these competitions very attractive to children but by ensuring that the child has to go to the company's website and enter the codes online, the amount of brand exposure is increased.

²¹ <http://www.rosslandnews.com/news/413318893.html>

²² <http://www.eu-pledge.eu/content/enhanced-2014-commitments>

²³ <http://www.fnli.nl/nieuws/fnli-zet-stappen-om-reclame-gericht-op-kinderen-verder-te-beperken/>



A study of preschoolers' exposure to foods with toys to collect found that the toys influenced the children's preferences for both healthy and unhealthy foods²⁴. We therefore call on companies to ensure that promoting competitions or offering toys in addition to the product are only permitted for foods and beverages which meet the WHO's nutrient profile, unless the toy is inherent to the product.

Conclusion

Both brand and licensed mascots are a persuasive and powerful tool for marketing to children. They are used on packaging of food products and various forms of both traditional media such as TV and non-traditional media such as advergames.

As the recognition of the persuasive influence these cartoon characters can have on children increases, governments across the Atlantic have begun cracking down on their use with unhealthy foods. As obesity levels remain worryingly high, authorities in Europe must take action to limit the influence such marketing techniques can have on children.

Entertainment companies whose media characters have considerable influence should move away from licensing these characters for foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar as defined by the WHO nutritional criteria. Instead, they must ensure that their potential is harnessed to promote healthier foods to children.

We call on food companies operating in Europe, both inside and outside of the EU Pledge, to already commit to ending their use of both licensed media characters and brand mascots in all advertising platforms as well as on packaging of unhealthy foods as determined by the WHO nutrient profile.

Nevertheless, progress with industry self-regulatory pledges is very slow-moving and lacking in serious ambition. In the absence of any action from food companies or retailers to curtail advertising HFSS foods with cartoon characters, it is important that European governments already consider introducing measures to limit their use.

Governments across the Atlantic have already begun to recognise the strong influence cartoon characters can have when used to advertise foods high in fat, salt and sugar to children and have introduced measures to reduce the impact of such advertising methods. Governments in Europe should take heed and consider updating their own rules on restricting advertising these foods to children are comprehensive and include limits on the use of cartoon characters with HFSS foods.

²⁴ McAlister AR, Cornwell TB. Collectible toys as marketing tools: understanding preschool children's responses to foods paired with premiums. *J Public Policy Market*. 2012, 31:195-205.



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