

Media character use on food packaging appears to influence children's taste assessment

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The use of media characters on cereal packaging may influence children's opinions about taste, according to a report in the March issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

"The use of trade (e.g. Ronald McDonald) and licensed (e.g. Shrek) spokescharacters is a popular marketing practice in child-directed products because the presence of these figures helps children identify and remember the associated product," the authors write as background information in the article. Because children remember nonverbal representations more easily than verbal descriptions, a visual cue such as a character or logo, may help them remember information presented in an advertisement.

Matthew A. Lapierre, M.A., and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, evaluated 80 children between the ages of 4 and 6 years (average age 5.6 years), to determine if using a licensed spokescharacter on [food packaging](#) affected children's taste assessment of the cereal. Children were shown boxes of cereal labeled either Healthy Bits or Sugar Bits, with some boxes featuring media characters and some without. Having seen only the box, participants were asked to rate the taste of the cereal on a scale of one to five.

Almost all the children reported liking the cereal, however those who saw a popular media character on the box reported liking the cereal more

than those who viewed a box without a character on it. Additionally, those who sampled the cereal named Healthy Bits reported enjoying the cereal more than children who were given the same cereal under the name Sugar Bits. Children receiving the cereal with the name Sugar Bits in a box with no characters on it reported being significantly less satisfied with the taste than those in the other three groups. No significant differences were found among children in the Healthy Bits group based on the presence or absence of characters on the box.

"The results of this experiment provide evidence that the use of popular characters on food products affects children's assessment of taste," the authors conclude. "Messages encouraging healthy eating may resonate with young [children](#), but the presence of licensed characters on packaging potentially overrides children's assessments of nutritional merit."

More information: *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2011;165[3]:229-234

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