Effects of Fast Food Branding on Young Children's Taste Preferences

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This study was conducted at Stanford University School of Medicine

FROM ABSTRACT

Objective
To examine the effects of cumulative, real-world marketing and brand exposures on young children by testing the influence of branding from a heavily marketed source on taste preferences.

Design
Experimental study. Children tasted 5 pairs of identical foods and beverages in packaging from McDonald's and matched but unbranded packaging and were asked to indicate if they tasted the same or if one tasted better.

Setting
Preschools for low-income children.

Participants
Sixty-three children, 3.5-5.4 years of age.

Outcome Measures
A summary total taste preference score (ranging from −1 for the unbranded samples to 0 for no preference and +1 for McDonald's branded samples) was used to test the null hypothesis that children would express no preference.

Results
Children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald’s.

Moderator analysis found significantly greater effects of branding among children with more television sets in their homes and children who ate food from McDonald's more often.

Conclusion
Branding of foods and beverages influences young children's taste perceptions. The findings are consistent with recommendations to regulate marketing to young children and also suggest that branding may be a useful strategy for improving young children's eating behaviors.
THESE AUTHORS ALSO NOTE:

“The global childhood obesity epidemic is focusing attention on the effects of food and beverage marketing.”

“A recent report published by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations concluded that marketing of energy-dense foods and fast food outlets is a ‘probable’ cause of increasing overweight and obesity among the world's children.”

“The food and beverage industries spend more than $10 billion per year to market to children in the United States.”

Among very young children, awareness and recognition of food brands “translate into product requests, begging and nagging for specific product names and brands.”

In a prior experiment, these authors “demonstrated that even a single exposure to a television advertisement affected preschool children's brand preferences.”

The foods used in this study included a McDonald's hamburger, a Chicken McNugget, and McDonald's french fries. The McDonald’s food was made available and tasted by the children wrapped in both McDonald’s packaging and in plain packaging where the McDonald’s name and logo had been removed.

63 children performed a total of 304 individual tasting comparisons.

The “children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald’s.”

The “children were significantly more likely to prefer the taste of a food or drink if they thought it was from McDonald's.”

“Moderator analysis found that children with more television sets in their homes and children who ate food from McDonald's more often were more likely to prefer the taste of foods/drinks if they thought they were from McDonald's.”

COMMENT

“By the early age of 3 to 5 years, low-income preschool children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald’s, demonstrating that brand identity can influence young children's taste perceptions.”

“This was true even for carrots, a food that was not marketed by or available from McDonald's.” [All they had to do was put the carrot in a McDonald’s wrapper and the children thought that it tasted better than other carrots].
“Although the participating children ranged in age from only 3 through 5 years, about a third of the parents reported their children were eating food from McDonald's weekly or more, and just 2 of 63 reported never eating food from McDonald's.” [Wow!]

“McDonald's food was eaten more frequently than food from all other fast food restaurants combined, and about three-quarters of parents reported that they had a toy from McDonald's in their homes.”

“The number of television sets at home and frequency of eating food from McDonald’s were found to be statistically significant moderators of the branding effect.”

“This was a real-world study addressing a straightforward, real-world question: do children prefer the taste of food and drinks if they think they are from McDonald’s?”

This study demonstrates that “specific branding can alter young children's taste preferences.”

“These results add evidence to support recommendations to regulate or ban advertising or marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages, or all marketing, that is directed to young children. This approach has been advocated based on evidence that advertising to young children is inherently unfair because most children younger than 7 to 8 years are unable to understand the persuasive intent of advertising.”

KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY

1) “This was a real-world study addressing a straightforward, real-world question: do children prefer the taste of food and drinks if they think they are from McDonald’s?”

2) The children in this study were low-income preschoolers, aged 3–5.

3) “The global childhood obesity epidemic is focusing attention on the effects of food and beverage marketing.”

4) “A recent report published by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations concluded that marketing of energy-dense foods and fast food outlets is a ‘probable’ cause of increasing overweight and obesity among the world's children.”

5) “The food and beverage industries spend more than $10 billion per year to market to children in the United States.”
6) Among very young children, awareness and recognition of food brands “translate into product requests, begging and nagging for specific product names and brands.”

7) Even a single exposure to a television advertisement affected preschool children's brand preferences.

8) The “children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald’s.”

9) The “children were significantly more likely to prefer the taste of a food or drink if they thought it was from McDonald's.”

10) “Moderator analysis found that children with more television sets in their homes and children who ate food from McDonald's more often were more likely to prefer the taste of foods/drinks if they thought they were from McDonald's.”

11) “By the early age of 3 to 5 years, low-income preschool children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald’s, demonstrating that brand identity can influence young children's taste perceptions.” “This was true even for carrots, a food that was not marketed by or available from McDonald’s.” [All they had to do was put the carrot in a McDonald’s wrapper and the children thought that it tasted better than other carrots].

12) “Although the participating children ranged in age from only 3 through 5 years, about a third of the parents reported their children were eating food from McDonald's weekly or more, and just 2 of 63 reported never eating food from McDonald’s.” [Wow!]

13) “McDonald's food was eaten more frequently than food from all other fast food restaurants combined, and about three-quarters of parents reported that they had a toy from McDonald's in their homes.”

14) “The number of television sets at home and frequency of eating food from McDonald's were found to be statistically significant moderators of the branding effect.”

15) This study demonstrates that “specific branding can alter young children's taste preferences.”

16) “These results add evidence to support recommendations to regulate or ban advertising or marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages, or all marketing, that is directed to young children. This approach has been advocated based on evidence that advertising to young children is inherently unfair because most children younger than 7 to 8 years are unable to understand the persuasive intent of advertising.”