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Power, Packaging and Preferences: How Children Interpret Marketing on Packaged Food and Its Implications for Communication Scholarship

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Power, Packaging and Preferences: How Children Interpret Marketing on Packaged Food and Its
Implications for Communication Scholarship

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how children interpret the marketing of child-targeted packaged food and negotiate these interpretations among peers with a specific emphasis on infused character licensing. Infused character licensing food describes instances where the processed food hinges on entertainment content via the use of shape(s). By asking children their opinions on packaged food, this thesis also examines what makes value and meaning for children. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 27 participants between 8 to 12 years old, and focus group data was approached using paratextual theory. Study results indicate that using promotional characters on packaged food, especially through infused character licensing, is a polarizing marketing approach for children because its effectiveness tends to rest on their assigned value of the specific cartoon under discussion. In conclusion, the outcomes of this thesis divulge that child-targeted packaged food promotes food to children through both the text itself and the paratexts that surround it.

Keywords: food packaging, food marketing, children, licensed media character, brand equity character, generic character, power, exposure, paratextual theory, childhood obesity

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the World Health Organization¹ [WHO] (2016), the childhood obesity epidemic has reached alarming rates and has been a pressing concern worldwide for decades. In particular, obesity rates among Canadian children and youth have almost tripled in the last thirty years (Health Canada & Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). Food marketing aimed at children has been recognized as a major determinant of children's attitudes and behaviours towards food (see Hastings et al., 2003; Cairns et al., 2009; Bollars et al., 2013; Folkvord et al., 2016; Sadeghirad et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2019). Thus, the WHO suggests that it is necessary to “reduce both the exposure of children to, and power of, marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt” (WHO, 2010, p. 8).

The WHO (2012) defines marketing as a combination of choosing communication channels and developing communication messages. Marketing, it suggests, functions by exposure (the frequency and reach of messages), and power, “the creative content, design and execution of the marketing message” (WHO, 2012, p. 11).

Public health scholars focused on children's food marketing sometimes seek to understand marketing power. However, they frequently approach marketing power by asking questions about what specific types or kinds of creative content, design and execution are most influential over children's health and nutrition. For example, a variety of public health scholars argue that promotional characters, which tend to include licensed media characters, brand equity characters and/or generic characters, increase children's preferences for and/or choices of food

¹ The World Health Organization is an agency within the United Nations system that cares for public health on a global scale.

(see Roberto et al., 2010 (licensed media characters); McGale et al., 2016 (brand equity characters); Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016 (generic characters)).

Yet, public health scholars neglect to ask *why* such marketing is effective, and *what exactly makes meaning for children when it comes to food*. Providing answers to these questions, specifically when it comes to child-targeted packaged food, is the foundation for this thesis.

As a communication scholar focused on children's food marketing, I offer an alternative avenue for exploring the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food and its potential impact on children's health and wellbeing. Specifically, this thesis examines children's interpretations of infused character licensing—a marketing strategy of child-targeted packaged food. Drawing from focus groups with children, it applies paratextual theory to packaged food and food marketing, offering up a new framework for research focused on child-targeted packaged food, and communication scholarship at large. The importance of this thesis lies in comprehending children's navigations of the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food, exploring how these navigations are negotiated among peers, and probing how meaning is created as a result. The purpose of this thesis is to address the following research gaps: 1. the influence of infused character licensing food² on children's food preferences; and 2. the power of marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food. Often public health research in this area overlooks what food marketing *means* to children and lacks theoretical underpinnings. This thesis fills these gaps. It conducts focus groups with children between 8 to 12 years old and applies a paratextual theory lens.

² Infused character licensing food describes instances where the processed food hinges on entertainment content via the use of shape(s).

Media Character Licensing and Child-Targeted Packaged Food

Media character licensing is a marketing strategy where licensed characters from entertainment content are used by third-party companies on their products to appeal to children (Kraak & Story, 2015). Although a variety of different character applications in marketing aimed at children fall into media character licensing³, I exclusively refer to the placement of character visuals from entertainment content (i.e., television programs, films and video games) *onto* packaged products (pack design) as media character licensing (Lawrence, 2003).

Another character application is a “licensed product” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 45). A licensed product is when “a character acts as the brand itself” often in the brand’s absence, but usually under a manufacturing brand (Lawrence, 2003, p. 45). Licensed products provide an important framework for understanding a more extensive media character licensing strategy on child-targeted packaged food in the supermarket. This strategy, what might be understood as *infused character licensing*, is becoming increasingly prevalent over time (Elliott, 2019). Infused character licensing food describes instances when a brand or a manufacturing brand thoroughly injects licensed media characters *into* processed food and packaging to appeal to children. In a similar way to Lawrence’s (2003) notion of licensed products, licensed media characters play a more prominent role over any brand when it comes to infused character licensing food. Yet beyond licensed products, infused character licensing food is distinct because the processed food hinges on entertainment content. Elliott (2019) describes these packaged products as items that exist “solely because of character licensing” (p. 11). In other words, the placement of character visuals from entertainment content (media character licensing) adds value to already available

³ Lawrence (2003) lists licensed products, brand spokespeople, advertising characters, borrowed equity and pack designs as potential uses of promotional characters (see p. 45).

child-targeted packaged food, while the injection of character elements from entertainment content (infused character licensing) instills value into new child-targeted packaged food.

Despite efforts to explore media character licensing on child-targeted packaged food (Roberto et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2012; Letona et al., 2014a; Nelson et al., 2015; Ogle et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2019), no study has investigated the power of infused character licensing on child-targeted packaged food.

Paratextual Theory and Child-Targeted Packaged Food

Public health scholars avoid asking *why* marketing is powerful, and *what exactly makes meaning for children when it comes to food*, especially in terms of child-targeted packaged food. It is unclear if previous interactions or experiences with entertainment content, discussions with peers or adults about entertainment content, and/or interpretations of other products using licensed media characters contribute to the power of infused character licensing food for children. As a communication scholar who hopes to combat Big Food⁴ and its dominant role in establishing children's food marketing, I find it necessary to explore these questions, especially when obesity rates are on the rise for Canadian children. To do so, I introduce paratextual theory to public health, business and communication knowledge systems.

Conceived by Gérard Genette, a literary theorist, paratextual theory is based on the idea that value and importance originate from a combination of sites and resources, rather than just the primary site of meaning making (or the text) (i.e., book or film) (Genette, 1987/1997; Gray, 2010). Paratexts are the accompanying productions “that surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to present it” (Genette, 1987/1997, p. 1). Some examples of paratexts are the font type of a publication or an advertisement for an upcoming novel. Genette (1987/1997) and

⁴ A term used by the media to describe large industry scale food producers.

Gray (2010) assert that paratexts should not be overlooked because they contribute to the representation and significance of the text.

Although paratextual theory has been used to understand literature, film and television, this theory can also be applied to child-targeted packaged food (Elliott, 2019; In Press), especially infused character licensing food. I assert that the text, as Genette defines it, can be linked to the processed food of infused character licensing food, while its packaging, the related entertainment content and the associated productions (i.e., books and toys) add or extend the value of the processed food. Opening up paratextual theory and applying it to another medium not only fortifies the theory itself, but also provides an applicable framework for research focused on child-targeted packaged food, which is an area that is typically untheoretical (see Kraak & Story, 2015; Nelson et al., 2015), and communication scholarship at large. It also extends parasocial interaction and relationship theory in research focused on children's food marketing. Applying paratextual theory to child-targeted packaged food works to uncover why marketing is effective and helps pinpoint what makes meaning for children regarding packaged food, especially when exploring infused character licensing.

Personal Connection

In the first semester of my undergraduate degree in Communication, Media and Film at the University of Windsor, our Introduction to Media and Society class was given three topic areas to write our final papers on. This is where I began exploring the thorny relationship between children, commerce and communication. Investigating the related literature, I learned more about the food industry, and the perspectives on risks and responsibility that encircle research with a focus on this business. In my curiosity, I also turned to the approaches of business scholars and marketing practitioners to understand their attitudes towards child

consumers and food marketing. Yet the more I examined the current research and considered the perspectives of children I knew personally, I realized that questions related to children's consumer behaviour, promotional influence, and the power of various marketing tactics and strategies were unanswered. These questions are what set my trajectory towards graduate school and urged me to focus on children's food marketing.

By the time I was applying to graduate schools, the thought of continuing my education in Alberta, while situated in Ontario, seemed out of reach. It was not until one of my undergraduate professors and mentors shared with me the opportunity to work with Canada Research Chair, Dr. Elliott, did I consider it a possibility. The quintessential supervisor to embark with on my exploration of children's food marketing, I was ecstatic. Once my graduate courses commenced, I began discussing my interests with individuals in my personal network who were interested in how their children were influenced by food marketing. Many of the parents I spoke with, voiced their concerns with child-targeted packaged food products that featured entertainment content (i.e., promotional characters, logos or fonts related to programs, or other media graphics). These concerns inspired the direction for this study.

Having explored research focused on children's food marketing for many years, I believe that understanding the power marketing has on children's food preferences is incredibly important. Parents in my personal network often discuss how their children care more about the label of a food package than the product inside. Given these discussions with parents and my recognition of the power of marketing, I think it is essential to understand what makes the difference for children when it comes to packaged food in the hope that as adults, they will become informed, responsible and active consumers. I have learned in my studies of children's food marketing that what influences children now, often directs future attitudes. By

comprehending what marketing tactics and strategies are effective and what creates meaning for children in regard to child-targeted packaged food, I believe society can potentially promote healthy lifelong attitudes and encourage children to have an appropriate relationship with the food industry.

This Study

Marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food often include direct references to children, cartoon graphics or characters from entertainment content aimed at children, interactive activities, endorsements from those popular with children, abstract or transgressive colours, fonts, shapes or messages, and/or the use of popular themes for children. Public health scholars have explored the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food but avoid asking questions about why such marketing is effective and what makes meaning for children when it comes to child-targeted packaged food. Infused character licensing in the supermarket has received no scholarly consideration, despite the increasing appearance of infused character licensing food (Elliott, 2019). It is unclear how children interpret the marketing tactics of infused character licensing food in comparison to those of other child-targeted packaged food. Understanding these research gaps, this study seeks to explore the following research question:

How do children navigate and negotiate infused character licensing food?

This exploratory study aims to fill research gaps at the intersection of power, packaged food and children's food preferences. Investigating why marketing is effective and what makes meaning for children when they interpret the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food will fortify educational interventions and Canadian policy focused on children's food marketing.

Thesis Structure

This thesis begins by exploring research focused on child-targeted packaged food, especially those studies addressing the power of using promotional characters on packaged food (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 investigates paratextual theory and children's food marketing and discusses the application of the notion of paratexts to child-targeted packaged food products. This chapter also describes the justification for choosing paratextual theory as the theoretical framework to approach focus group data and the research method used in the study. Study results are discussed in Chapter 4, along with the salient themes and nuanced perspectives that emerged during focus groups. Chapter 5 offers an analysis of study results, salient themes and nuanced perspectives that emerged during focus groups with respect to conversations about child-targeted food packaging and children's food marketing. Conclusions and implications are also presented in this chapter, which includes the benefits of paratextual theory to research focused on child-targeted packaged food and communication scholarship at large. Chapter 6 summarizes the thesis and provides closing remarks.

Chapter 2: Child-Targeted Packaged Food: Importance, Indicators, and the Power of Using Promotional Characters

Overview

This chapter reviews the importance of packaging and the complexity of child-targeted packaged food with a specific investigation on those studies focused on the power of using promotional characters to appeal to children. A survey of research predominantly based on children's perspectives of child-targeted packaged food follows⁵. An exploration is carried out about the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food, which highlights gaps in the research area. There is an emphasis on addressing research gaps involving children's interpretations of the marketing of child-targeted packaged food, especially infused character licensing food⁶. I advocate for the need to understand how children navigate and negotiate the marketing tactics of infused character licensing food compared to those of other child-targeted packaged food. Children's attitudes towards packaged food aimed at them, as well as the potential differences of interpretation based on their demographics (i.e., gender preference and age), have not been explored as of yet. It is critical to comprehend the power of marketing of infused character licensing food and other child-targeted packaged food for children to better understand how meaning is made and uncover the roles of media and popular culture in children's food marketing. Addressing these overlooked topics in research focused on child-targeted packaged food will strengthen educational interventions and Canadian policy focused on children's food marketing.

⁵ A variety of scholars also address adults' perspectives of child-targeted packaged food (see Ogba & Johnson, 2010; Dixon et al., 2011; Den Hoed & Elliott, 2013; Abrams et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2017).

⁶ Infused character licensing food describes instances where the processed food hinges on entertainment content via the use of shape(s).

Importance of Food Packaging

Children are an attractive market segment to the food industry, which explains why an increasing number of packaged food products are aimed at and advertised to them (see Nestle, 2006; Harris et al., 2010). Compared to the other channels marketing practitioners use in the attempt to appeal to children (in particular television), packaging often receives little attention in research focused on children's food marketing. Yet, as the role of packaging has shifted from one of purely product protection to now more of promotion, it has become increasingly important to consumers and influential on their attitudes and behaviours.

Food packaging is a marketing tool that uses visual communication (McNeal & Ji, 2003) and labels (Brierley & Elliott, 2017) (or marketing tactics and strategies) to educate, persuade and remind children of a product's attributes and benefits. Strategically crafted to sell children a particular set of emotions and experiences, as well as a theme of exclusivity, Piditch (1973) argues that a package is a silent salesman. Packages offer justification for product preference during a child's information search and communicate value and meaning as they consider alternatives. Akbari (2014) also suggests that a package has a set of different identities for consumers. A physical identity that relates to the marketing tactics and strategies of the package, and a mental identity that derives from the consumer's perception of the package. The separation of these identities demonstrates the need to understand how the marketing of child-targeted packaged food (or the physical identity) creates meaning for children (or mental identities).

Scholars from the disciplines of communication, business and public health claim that packaging plays a prominent role for children in the marketplace. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) argue that children (8 to 11 years old) favour packaged food compared to unwrapped food. Others suggest that packaging can change children's perceptions of food categories (de la

Ville et al., 2010) and the ‘healthiness’ of food types with the use of marketing tactics and strategies (Elliott, 2018). Baldassarre and Campo (2015) illustrate the importance of packaging by claiming that children (5 to 6 years old) prefer fruits and vegetables that use minimal packaging (stickers with promotional characters), and see these products as more appetizing, despite already being familiar with items like kiwis and tomatoes. Scholars also argue that packaging can assist with brand recall (Hota & Charry, 2014), and that visual communication on these wrappings transcends culture and language barriers in the global economy (McNeal & Ji, 2003). Of all these arguments, Hawkes (2010) aptly summarizes the importance of packaging by stating that the package combines the four Ps of marketing (price, product, promotion and place). As such, it is clear that research focused on child-targeted packaged food is essential. This argument is especially true since the marketing of packaged food adds value to the food itself so much so that these wrappings are potentially becoming more important than the products inside.

Key Concepts of Research Focused on Children’s Food Marketing

Research focused on children’s food marketing captures studies on a range of channels including, but not limited to, television, social media, website, and physical location. Two prominent concepts that speak to the importance of food packaging emerge in research in this area: 1. the categorization of food through embodiment (human characteristics), and 2. the use of food marketing to signal the target market. Discussing these key concepts in conversations about kids’ food versus adult food, and how children build relationships and trust in the supermarket, illustrates the need to explore children’s interpretations of the marketing of child-targeted packaged food because children often struggle with identity and social status, and manage their relationships with the product and its brand in private settings.

Kids' Food versus Adult Food.

Mechling (2000) defines food as a vehicle with a multiplicity of meaning, which adults attempt to restrict so that they can socialize children within culture and consumerism. As adults try to control children's attitudes and behaviours towards food, these young people begin to realize that food practices permit a re-establishment of power relations (James, 1998; Mechling, 2000; Zelizer, 2002). For example, "[p]arents can give and withhold food treats, but [they] can't make a child eat" (Mechling, 2000, p. 19). Beyond the control children can gain during food practices, food itself is also a resistant commodity since it is relatively inexpensive and must be bought regardless of socio-economic status (Zelizer, 2002). As such, children typically have more purchasing power when it comes to food compared to other goods and services. Marketing practitioners understand the power struggles between children and adults surrounding food and food practices, and as a result, attempt to capitalize on these struggles with the creation of kids' food (see Zelizer, 2002). Food packaging is an essential part of kids' food because these packages, or more specifically the marketing on them, signal childhood to both children and adults (see Elliott, 2011; 2015; Kraak & Story, 2015).

Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food suggest that children use packages as an extension of identity and as a means to communicate their social status to others (see Elliott, 2008; 2009; 2010). For example, Elliott (2008) asserts that 'fun' food and food packaging tell children that these products are made especially for them (and not for adults). As such, children will likely prefer 'fun food' over other products because they know that these items and their packaging will communicate a desirable identity to peers (Elliott, 2009) and not be socially risky for them (Elliott, 2015). Children believe that because the kids' food category is made with them in mind, they can have more control and dominance with packaged products in

this category. Children's understanding and recognition of kids' food versus adult food illustrates the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food to construct and then normalize particular food benefits (i.e., fun). It also demonstrates the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food to manufacture beliefs for children about food and the food industry (i.e., adult food is healthy food).

Building Relationships and Trust.

Marketing practitioners attempt to target children using 'cradle-to-grave' tactics and strategies in an effort to gain their loyalty (Armstrong et al., 2016). Kang and Ladjahasan (2019) argue that visual communication on food packaging works to establish an aura of importance and trust around packaged food products. For example, the use of branding on packaged food can help children develop lifetime loyalty. Branding is the increased effort of marketing practitioners to heighten the meanings and experiences of the brand and its products (Clifton, 2009). Branding is valuable to children because it reduces anxiety and communicates product quality and peer acceptance of products. A variety of scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food argue that the use of branding on packaged food significantly impacts children's behaviours towards food (Robinson et al., 2007; Keller et al., 2012; Tim et al., 2014) even more so than the use of promotional characters (Levin & Levin, 2010). With marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food, like branding, marketing practitioners can facilitate intimate bonds between children and packaged food, which, as a result, can elevate specific food products in the minds of children. In conclusion, by highlighting how children build relationships and trust in the supermarket, it is clear that food packaging is important and offers more to children than product protection.

Indicators of Child-Targeted Packaged Food and Approaches to Populations

Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food often define packages as any wrapping that fully encloses a product (see Soo et al., 2016) or sticker/tag directly attached to a product (see Baldassarre & Campo, 2015). Studies focused on child-targeted packaged food are concentrated on varying food categories (i.e., ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’) (see Levin & Levin, 2010; Lorestani & Khalili, 2019), and food types including produce, dry goods, dairy items, frozen fare and beverages (see Chacon et al., 2013; Giménez et al., 2017). Scholars also investigate the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food in both developed (see Mehta et al., 2012 (Australia); Mediano Stoltze et al., 2019 (Chile); Elliott, 2019 (Canada)) and emerging economies (see Chacon et al., 2013 (Guatemala); Pavleen, 2013 (India)). Yet, despite the breadth of research approaches, inconsistencies exist among scholars’ definitions of children in the area. Some characterize children as individuals between 2 to 12 years old (Bragg et al., 2013), others suggest that children are 0 to 18 years old (Ogba & Johnson, 2010; Giménez et al., 2017), while at the same time, some do not specify an age range at all (Harris et al., 2010; Aerts & Smits, 2019). These varying perspectives on the definition of children create a challenge when attempting to define indicators of child-targeted packaged food because they increase generalizations and lead to the conflation of research findings of babies, toddlers, children and teenagers.

Without a solidified idea of who fits into the market segment of children, discrepancies between scholars’ interpretations of child-targeted packaged food are apparent. Scholars generally acknowledge that child-targeted packaged food can be indicated by one or more of the following marketing tactics and strategies: direct references to children, cartoon graphics or characters from entertainment content aimed at children, interactive activities, endorsements

from those popular with children, abstract or transgressive colours, fonts, shapes or messages and/or the use of popular themes for children. Yet, not all agree. A variety of scholars also assert that the presence of gifts or premiums on packaged food is also an indicator (Chapman et al., 2006; Mehta et al., 2012; Chacon et al., 2013; Den Hoed & Elliott, 2013; Soo et al., 2016; Giménez et al., 2017; García et al., 2019). Other scholars suggest that certain health or nutrition claims can also signal that a packaged product is designed to appeal to children (Russell et al., 2017; Letona et al., 2014b). Some scholars also see brands and the use of branding on packaged food as an indication (Levin & Levin, 2010; Keller et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2007). Even more complex are the instances where scholars offer vague indicators of child-targeted packaged food. For example, Bragg et al. (2013) assert that the use of “a cartoon character or word synonymous with ‘child’” on packaged food means that the product is child-targeted (p. 739). McNeal and Ji (2003) also consider the following to be indicators of child-targeted packaged food: “1. showed children on the package; 2. mentioned children on the package and; 3. implied that the cereal is for children by including promotions to them” (p. 407). A concerning number of other scholars also did not attempt to define child-targeted packaged food (see Ülger, 2009; Roberto et al., 2010; Dixon et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2013; Tim et al., 2014) in their research. By outlining these conflicting indicators of child-targeted packaged food, it is clear that these products need to be more precisely defined.

The Power of Using Promotional Characters on Child-Targeted Packaged Food

Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food often associate children’s attitudes and behaviours towards food to their exposure to the marketing tactics and strategies of these products. Marketing strategies can be thought of as the indicators of child-targeted packaged food, as noted above, while marketing tactics are defined as the specific methods that

produce these strategies. Of all the marketing tactics and strategies in the area of child-targeted packaged food, I highlight key explorations about the use of promotional characters on packaged food created by communication, business and public health scholars. Part of the complexity of child-targeted packaged food can be attributed to the inability of consumers to interpret packages separate from products along with the ambiguity of child-targeted packaged food indicators presented by scholars. As such, I explore research focused on child-targeted packaged food with an emphasis on children's interpretations of the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food.

Scholars argue that the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food effectively promotes food products to young people (see Roberto et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2015 (licensed media characters); Ülger, 2009; McGale et al., 2016 (brand equity characters); Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016 (generic characters)). The use of promotional characters on packaged food is the most common marketing approach (Harris et al., 2009b; Giménez et al., 2017; García et al., 2019). The term 'promotional characters' accounts for three separate types of characters: licensed media characters (or entertainment characters), brand equity characters (or brand mascots), and generic characters (or unfamiliar characters) (see Chen et al., 2019).

Licensed Media Characters.

Media character licensing—specifically pack design (see Lawrence, 2003)—is where positive borrowed equities of independent characters or personalities from entertainment content add value to pre-existing packaged food through related marketing tactics and strategies (Blass, 1995). Some scholars offer narrower definitions of media character licensing, such as Raugust (1996), who describes the strategy as the use of television or film related properties, classic characters, and comic book characters to sell products. However, these narrower definitions of

media character licensing create conceptual gaps for contemporary mediums of entertainment content like video games and mobile apps, which some scholars argue are licensed media characters that influence children's attitudes towards food (i.e., Nintendo's Mario) (see Nelson et al., 2015). For instance, Abrams et al. (2015) describe Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer as a licensed media character, while Rovio Entertainment's Angry Birds are recognized as familiar characters, which follows Raugust's (1996) definition of media character licensing. Yet, at the same time, Kraak and Story (2015) argue that characters from all print and digital mediums of DreamWorks and Disney are licensed media characters (including characters from mobile apps).

Characters from entertainment content designed for children are an integral part of children's social structures (Bond & Calvert, 2014), especially since children are increasingly saturated by these objects of popular culture (Calvert & Richards, 2014). Licensed media characters live in children's everyday environments alongside other real-life inhabitants. As Calvert and Richards (2014) describe, "[licensed] media characters are accessible virtually everywhere children are" (p. 188). This sentiment is true considering the increasing presence of licensed media characters in new, previously untouched domains, like the supermarket (see Elliott, 2019). Yet, it is perhaps too conservative since infused character licensing food is becoming increasingly prevalent over time (see Elliott, 2019). Licensed media characters do not just populate children's worlds as suggested by Calvert and Richards (2014), but actually, work to create them via infused character licensing food.

Disney's Anna and Elsa from Disney's Frozen films along with Scooby-Doo from Scooby-Doo television shows and films are current examples of licensed media characters used on packaged food to target children (see Figure 5 & 6). Licensed media characters represent a broad range of real-life personas or fictional illustrations or animations, which are strategically

crafted to help children develop emotional, one-sided relationships (Bond & Calvert, 2014). It is licensed media characters' humanistic traits and their potential to be perceived in reality (Giles, 2002) along with children's ability to cling to characters that warrant these 'social' relationships (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Calvert & Richards, 2014). As a result, licensed media characters act as a proxy for children to help evoke brand recognition and preference to establish their trust (Bond & Calvert, 2014; McGinnis et al., 2006). Research has shown that parent scaffolding of licensed media characters as friends, licensed media character engagement through toys and repeated exposure to licensed media characters through entertainment content all help with the development of parasocial relationships⁷ (Calvert & Richards, 2014). Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food nod to the ideas of parasocial interaction and relationship theory when discussing licensed media characters (see Nelson et al., 2015). Nelson et al. (2015) argue that more than half of children's (4 years old) rationale for choosing Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer Fruit Flavoured Snacks was their appreciation of Dora herself and/or the Dora the Explorer entertainment content, which the authors argue is a character-familiarity bias agreeing with parasocial interaction and relationship theory.

The Power of Using Licensed Media Characters on Packaged Food.

A variety of scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food suggest that the use of licensed media characters positively impacts children's behaviours towards food (Roberto et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2012; Letona et al., 2014a; Leonard et al., 2019). Scholars argue that children (4 to 6 years old (Roberto et al., 2010) and 7 to 9 years old (Letona et al., 2014a) or 4 to 10 years old (Leonard et al., 2019)) prefer the taste and choose snacks with

⁷ A parasocial relationship builds off of parasocial interactions, where a child thinks that they have developed a connection with a media character, but the connection is one-sided.

licensed media characters on their packaging more than the same products without these cartoons. However, Roberto et al. (2010) and Leonard et al. (2019) found that the use of licensed media characters on the packaging of unprocessed food does not promote food to children. Thus, Roberto et al. (2010) and Leonard et al. (2019) assert that media character licensing is not an appropriate strategy for marketing ‘healthy’ foods to children, while Letona et al. (2014a) claim that the strategy may be appropriate. With a small group (N=16) of children (4 to 6 years old), Keller et al. (2012) also found that the use of licensed media characters on fruit and vegetable packaging effectively promotes the consumption of fruits and vegetables to children. Ogle et al. (2017) are the only scholars to argue that the use of licensed media characters on packaged food may deter children from purchasing and consuming these products since some children may dislike certain licensed media characters and/or the entertainment content where these cartoons come from.

Continuing the exploration into the power of using licensed media characters on child-targeted packaged food, some scholars argue that this strategy influences children’s attitudes towards food (Elliott, 2009; Nelson et al., 2015) and increases their attention on these products (Ogle et al., 2017). During interviews with children (4 years old), Nelson et al. (2015) found that all participants (N=13) believed that the use of licensed media characters on packaged food indicated that these products were ‘for them’ compared to other products (i.e., candy). This finding not only speaks to the ability of licensed media characters to signal that certain packaged food is aimed at children but also highlights the ability of licensed media characters to influence children’s preferences for fruit snacks compared to candy options, which, in other studies, children deem as kids’ food (see James, 1998; Elliott, 2011). Ogle et al. (2017) also argue that the use of licensed media characters on packaged food is influential over children’s (6 to 9 years

old) attention (participants viewing packaged food more often and longer with licensed media characters than without these cartoons). Elliott (2009) found that the use of licensed media characters on packaged food influenced younger children's food preferences (6 to 7 years old), but not older children's food preferences (8 to 12 years old). As such, Elliott (2009)—offering a similar argument to Ogle et al. (2017)—suggests that children's interpretations of licensed media characters along with their demographic (i.e., peer attitudes towards characters and wanting to be viewed as mature) alter the influence that using these characters on packaged food has on their food preferences.

Blass (1995) details that media character licensing leads to a lower risk of marketing launch failure because of the consumer's prior exposure to characters via entertainment content, the benefits from investments made by licenses in unrelated categories (i.e., books and toys), the immediate positioning and short-term gain for brands, and the ability of products to transcend language and cultural barriers. Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food also recognize the marketing benefits of using licensed media characters on packaged food, especially since these characters can build rapport with children long before encountering a product (Roberto et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2015). Roberto et al. (2010) argue that children's (4 to 6 years old) exposure to entertainment content with characters may foster a sense of familiarity with packaged food featuring these same characters. Nelson et al. (2015) echo this claim by asserting that children (4 years old) showed appreciation and likening for both licensed media characters and entertainment content when evaluating packaged food (i.e., Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer and Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer television show and films).

Brand Equity Characters.

Brand equity characters are characters developed by marketing practitioners from the food company itself. As such, brand equity characters have no identity and no additional associations beyond a food brand and its products (McGale et al., 2016), which is why brand equity characters require a substantial investment by the food company and will never reach the saliency of licensed media characters (Blass, 1995). Yet, the advantage of brand equity characters is their ability to communicate brand values and to promote packaged products to children with the privileges of flexibility and control (Blass, 1995). Alike licensed media characters, brand equity characters represent a broad range of real-life personas or fictional illustrations or animations that aim to create relationships with children to foster brand loyalty and product preference that persists into adulthood (McNeal & Ji, 2003; Kraak & Story, 2015; McGale et al., 2016). However, unlike licensed media characters that may be placed disjointedly onto packaged food, brand equity characters tend to be visual, logical cues for children (Aaker, 1991) that aim to symbolize and represent the brand and its products. For example, Hémar-Nicolas and Gollety (2012) point out that, “a cow stands for the brand named ‘The Laughing Cow’” (p. 21). In consequence, brand equity characters may fit both the brand and its packaged food more closely (i.e., Finn the Goldfish from Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers). Despite the clear definition of brand equity characters, some scholars wrongly fused brand equity characters and generic characters (see Smits & Vandebosh, 2012; Mediano Stoltze et al., 2017).

In a near identical way to licensed media characters, children can also develop parasocial relationships with brand equity characters like Tony the Tiger and Ronald McDonald. McGale et al. (2016) describe that children’s previous relationships with brand equity characters may explain their preferences for packaged food that feature these same characters. Kraak and Story

(2015) also suggest that children develop parasocial relationships with brand equity characters as they do with licensed media characters. However, McGale et al. (2016) argue that the numerous instances where children can be exposed to licensed media characters (i.e., films, books and toys) in the market allow children to develop stronger parasocial relationships with these characters than brand equity characters. Despite this disadvantage, McGale et al. (2016) found that both brand equity characters and licensed media characters are similarly impactful on children's (4 to 8 years old) food preferences and choices.

The Power of Using Brand Equity Characters on Packaged Food.

Scholars with research focused on child-targeted packaged food contend that the use of brand equity characters on packaged food is impactful on children's behaviours (Ülger, 2009) and influential on children's attitudes towards food (McGale et al., 2016). McGale et al. (2016) found that children (4 to 8 years old) significantly preferred packaged food products and chose these items when a brand equity character was featured on the packaging. Ülger (2009) also found that the use of brand equity characters on packaged food impacts children's (6 years old) food choices more than other marketing approaches (television commercials). Interestingly, McGale et al. (2016) found that packaged food with brand equity characters also promotes food to children (4 to 8 years old) even when these cartoons are with food that they do not normally promote. As a result, the fit between brand equity characters, their brand, and its products may not be as meaningful for children, but further investigation is required.

Adding to the discussion on the power of using brand equity characters on child-targeted packaged food, scholars also argue that the extent of which brand equity characters gaze at children helps these consumers connect and trust food and its brand (Tal et al., 2014). Additionally, McNeal and Ji (2003) argue that brand equity characters tend to be memorable for

children (6, 8 and 10 years old) (and hence important) because they play on elements of fun and entertainment. Much like licensed media characters, brand equity characters allow marketing practitioners to move away from promoting food attributes and redirect marketing efforts onto food benefits of fun, fantasy, and entertainment for children.

Generic Characters.

Generic characters are characters, figures or shapes that are not licensed media characters nor brand equity characters but work to elevate the aesthetic or design of packaged food products. A variety of scholars also refer to generic characters as unfamiliar (Pires & Agante, 2011; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017; Lagomarsino & Suggs, 2018) or unknown characters (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Enax et al., 2015). Most scholars indicate that characters without ties to entertainment content or those who do not represent or symbolize a brand or its products (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Lagomarsino & Suggs, 2018), such as animals (Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2019) or animated food (Pires & Agante, 2011; Lagomarsino & Suggs, 2018), are generic characters. Although generic characters are also produced by marketing practitioners from the food company itself, these are more neutral than brand equity characters, which enables them to represent a range of qualities to children. Yet, at the same time, the use of generic characters on packaged food cannot foster the same degree of brand loyalty or product preference as the use of brand equity characters or licensed media characters.

Although terms, like unfamiliar or unknown, are sometimes the labels of generic characters given by scholars, children can develop parasocial relationships with these cartoons (see Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016), especially when generic characters are continually part of the package design. However, children themselves must rely more heavily on their

imagination since the purpose of using generic characters on packaged food tends to be for aesthetics rather than communication.

Of the studies that discuss child-targeted packaged food with generic characters (Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2019), the power of using generic characters on child-targeted packaged food is never the main focus. There is little research focused on the power of using generic characters on child-targeted packaged food compare to research focused on using licensed media characters and brand equity characters.

The Power of Using Generic Characters on Packaged Food.

A variety of scholars discuss the power of using generic characters on food packaging to appeal to children. Smits et al.'s (2015) systematic review (that examines studies focused on child-targeted packaged food and food more generally) demonstrates that the use of generic characters on food packaging is influential and impactful over children's attitudes and behaviours towards food, but not as much as the use of licensed media characters or brand equity characters. Nonetheless, Smits et al. (2015) also acknowledge that there is little research focused on the power of using generic characters on food packaging, so more exploration into this area needs to be done. Lagomarsino and Suggs (2018) later argue that children (6 to 8 years old) were also influenced by the use of generic characters on food packaging. However, when it came to children's food choices, licensed media characters, brand equity characters and/or other marketing tactics and strategies were more effective (Lagomarsino & Suggs, 2018).

Research focused on the power of using generic characters on child-targeted packaged food suggest that these characters, figures or shapes influence and impact children's attitudes (Pires & Agante, 2011; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017) and behaviours towards food (Enax et al., 2015). Some scholars argue that children (6 to 12 years old (Ares et al., 2016), 8 to 10

years old (Enax et al. 2015), and 9 to 13 years old (Arrúa et al., 2017)) prefer packaged food with generic animals since they consider these products to be more attractive and fun compared to packaged food with no characters at all. Enax et al. (2015) also suggest that the inclusion of generic animals on packaged food heightens product motivation for children. Arrúa et al. (2017) found that the use of generic animals on packaged food was most influential on children's food preferences from those of middle/high-income families. Yet, Ares et al. (2016) also claim that younger children are more likely to be influenced by the use of generic animals than their older counterparts, however more research is needed. Pires and Agante (2011) explore the power of using generic characters on unprocessed packaged food and indicate that the use of generic animated food on food packaging influences children's (10 to 14 years old) food preferences since these cartoons make products appear funnier, tastier and more beautiful (Pires & Agante, 2011).

Most scholars with research in this area investigate the power of using generic animals on child-targeted packaged food (except for Pires & Agante (2011)). All generic characters explored in these studies are the primary or only character on the food packaging. No study deals with the power of using other generic characters, shapes or figures on child-targeted packaged food outside of generic animals and animated food, especially those characters placed in the background of food packages or secondary characters to other more prominent generic characters.

Gaps in Research Focused on the Power of Using Promotional Characters

Packages are no longer just vehicles of distribution or mechanisms of product protection but are marketing tools that attempt to inform and persuade consumers (McNeal & Ji, 2003). With the opportunity that packaged food provides, marketing practitioners use a variety of

marketing tactics and strategies to appeal to children. Of these tactics and strategies, the use of promotional characters on packaged food (licensed media characters, brand equity characters, and generic characters) is the most common (Harris et al., 2009b; Giménez et al., 2017; García et al., 2019). In exploring research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food, it is clear that research gaps exist.

Despite few exceptions (Nelson et al., 2015; Elliott, 2019), research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food fails to explore power as it is defined by the WHO (2012) (see Elliott & Truman, 2020). In particular, there is a gap in research surrounding how the various marketing strategies of child-targeted packaged food may influence children's attitudes and behaviours towards food (Enax et al., 2015; Smits et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019). This gap becomes more important to fill given the lack of research addressing the use of generic characters on packaged food (Letona et al., 2014b) and the prevalence of infused character licensing food in the supermarket (see Elliott, 2019). Moreover, scholars argue that future research should attempt to separate marketing tactics normally joined on packaged food through strategy to better understand the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food (Keller et al., 2012; Enax et al., 2015). Exploring what makes meaning for children when it comes to food will help scholars better understand the power of marketing of child-targeted packaged food.

A variety of scholars call for further investigation into the power of using promotional characters on packaged food to influence and impact children's attitudes and behaviours (Nelson et al., 2015; Kraak & Story, 2015; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2019). There is a need to develop research that addresses the impact of children's demographics or moderating factors (i.e., age, gender, nationality and weight status) on their interpretations of

packaged food with promotional characters (Ülger, 2009; Pires & Agante, 2011; Keller et al., 2012; Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Tal et al., 2014; Kraak & Story, 2015; Ares et al., 2016; Arrúa et al., 2017). In particular, Leonard et al. (2019) argue that future research should examine the influence and impact of using licensed media characters with strong gendered associations on packaged food on boys' and girls' attitudes and behaviours towards these products. Arguably, the same needs to be done for child-targeted packaged food using brand equity characters and generic characters.

Scholars suggest that future research should explore how the varying aesthetics of promotional characters on packaged food may influence children's food preferences (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Tal et al., 2014; Kraak & Story, 2015). Additionally, future research should also continue to explore how children's interpretations of promotional characters in terms of popularity and acceptance by others impacts the power of using these characters on packaged food for children (see Ogle et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2019). While some scholars question the long-term impact and influence of using licensed media characters on packaged food for children (Ogle et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2019), a better understanding of the long-term impact and influence of using brand equity characters and generic characters on packaged food for children is also needed. Comprehending how children interpret the use of promotional characters on both processed and unprocessed packaged food simultaneously is also a research gap that needs to be addressed (Roberto et al., 2010; Kraak & Story, 2015).

It is clear that an exploration of the collective power of all uses of promotional characters (integrated marketing strategy) (i.e., child-targeted packaged food, films, and toys) on children's attitudes and behaviours towards packaged food with these same characters is missing from the field (see Batada & Wootan, 2007). Aligned with this research gap, the varying exposures

children may have to promotional characters (i.e., a direct experience or the discussion of a parent's experience) must be explored to better understand the power of using promotional characters on packaged food to appeal to children.

Only two studies focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food, asked children directly their opinions of packaged food (Elliott, 2009), and what about these characters was meaningful for them (Nelson et al., 2015). As such, future research should continue to explore the power of using promotional characters on packaged food by asking children directly for their opinions.

Infused Character Licensing Food

Infused character licensing is a more extensive form of media character licensing⁸. Instead of just placing character visuals from the world of entertainment (i.e., television, film and video games) *onto* packaged products (pack design) (Lawrence, 2003), infused character licensing is the injection of character elements *into* the product and its packaging. Within the supermarket, Elliott (2019) documents the increasing presence of “an entirely new limited-edition foodstuff based on the media character” (p. 11) aimed at children. These packaged products, what I call infused character licensing food, are unique because the processed food (or product) is based on entertainment content. In other words, the processed food itself is *manufactured* through the use of shape(s) (2D shape(s) placed on food and 3D shape of the food itself) to *fit* the licensed media characters on its packaging and the entertainment content associated with these characters to target children.

⁸ Media character licensing is a marketing strategy where licensed characters from entertainment content are used by third party companies to build loyalty to sell products (Kraak & Story, 2015).

Instances of infused character licensing food in the supermarket are not new (i.e., Kellogg's C-3PO's cereal (1984); Kellogg's Chocolate Mud & Bugs cereal (2003)), and are continually available today (i.e., General Mills Star Wars cereal (2019); General Mills Paw Patrol cereal (currently available)) (see Elliott, 2019). Some scholars go so far as to discuss infused character licensing food but then fail to identify and address its novelty (see Blass, 1995; Nelson et al., 2015; Abrams et al., 2015). Despite clear evidence of infused character licensing food in the supermarket, no study has investigated the power behind this marketing strategy of child-targeted packaged food for children.

This Study

Instead of focusing on *what* marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food are effective, this study explores *why* such marketing is effective, and *what exactly makes meaning for children when it comes to food*. In other words, this study investigates the factors that drive or enhance the power of marketing of packaged food, which can persuade children to develop particular food attitudes. This study attempts to address some gaps in research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. In particular, this study considers children's interpretations of the varying uses of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food (i.e., infused character licensing food), while it simultaneously asks children for their opinions about the marketing of packaged food more generally.

This study lies at the intersection of power, packaging, and children's food preferences. It serves as an application of paratextual theory, which makes it an innovative framework for the area. I will address the tenants of this theoretical approach and its relevance to child-targeted packaged food in the next chapter. This study seeks to explore the following research question:

How do children navigate and negotiate infused character licensing food? The specific aims of this study are:

1. to explore how children interpret the marketing tactics on packaged food through infused character licensing compared to other marketing strategies—both on a peritextual and epitextual level;
2. to reveal how this interpretation varies by age and/or gender preference; and
3. to apply paratextual theory to packaged food and food marketing to offer an innovative framework for research focused on children's food marketing.

Research focused on child-targeted packaged food is limited, especially with a concentration on the power of using promotional characters on packaged food. No study addresses children's interpretations of infused character licensing food, along with the marketing tactics that constitute this strategy, compared to other strategies of child-targeted packaged food. As a result, this study is exploratory. Children have autonomy when it comes to their food preferences and can be influenced by an array of factors. Thus, it is important to understand what makes meaning for children when it comes to packaged food. It is also critical to account for the overlooked topics of power and infused character licensing to fortify educational interventions and Canadian marketing policy focused on children's food marketing.

Chapter 3: Building a Framework for Infused Character Licensing Food

Overview

Research focused on children's food marketing tends to be untheoretical. In this chapter, I suggest that paratextual theory is an appropriate perspective to examine infused character licensing food⁹ (see Elliott, 2019; In Press). In doing so, I explore paratextual theory in three ways: 1. the processed food of some child-targeted packaged products can be understood as the text; 2. the packaging of these products can be understood as peritexts; and 3. the entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) related to these products can be understood as epitexts. Using paratextual theory to theorize infused character licensing food strengthens the theory itself and offers other scholars with research focused on children's food marketing ideas on how paratextual theory may be applied to their objects of study. Moreover, I argue that paratextual theory extends parasocial interaction and relationship theory in instances that are detailed below.

This chapter details the justification of the study framework. To investigate how children navigate and negotiate the marketing of child-targeted packaged food, especially infused character licensing food, I conducted six semi-structured focus groups with children (N=27) between 8 to 12 years old living in Southwestern Ontario. I also detail research methods, which involved participant recruitment, focus group procedures, and information management and data analysis.

⁹ Infused character licensing food describes instances where the processed food hinges on entertainment content via the use of shape(s).

Theory in Research Focused on Children's Food Marketing

Theory is often missing from research focused on children's food marketing. The vast amount of studies in this area come from public health scholars due to the childhood obesity epidemic. Research focused on children's food marketing captures studies on a range of channels including, but not limited to, television, social media, website, and physical location. Scholars have argued that research focused on children's food marketing should attempt to offer justification through theory (Kraak & Story, 2015; Nelson et al., 2015). Harris et al. (2009a) argue that the common approach of research focused on children's food marketing comes from an information processing (a focus on one's attention, perception and interpretation of marketing communication) or a social cognitive development standpoint (a focus on the stages to mental maturity). Studies in this area guided by theory also focus on theories of embodiment¹⁰ (see James, 1998; Roos, 2002; Brembeck, 2005; Backett-Milburn et al., 2010), consumer behaviour¹¹ (see Zelizer, 2002; Cook, 2009; Asquith, 2014) and framing¹² (see Halkier, 2013; Mechling, 2000). Grounded theory is also often used to code the findings of qualitative research focused on children's food marketing (see Elliott, 2011; 2014). Additionally, some scholars with research focused on the use of promotional characters on food packaging apply a parasocial interaction and relationship theory lens to their discussions (see Kraak & Story, 2015; Lagomarsino & Suggs, 2018). I will later explain the importance of this theory in greater detail. Despite these exceptions, research focused on children's food marketing, especially by public health scholars, is usually not theorized.

¹⁰ Roos (2002) describes that theories of embodiment derive from meaning (consciousness and direct experience) or practice theory (how people shape the world).

¹¹ These are theories involving how consumers make decisions in the marketplace.

¹² Entman (1993) suggests that framing involves selection and salience. Frames work to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies.

Theory in Research Focused on the Power of Using Promotional Characters

Research focused on child-targeted packaged food is also typically untheoretical (see Batada & Wootan, 2007; Page et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2010; Letona et al., 2014b; Soo et al., 2016). Although a gap exists, some scholars have worked to bring theories from psychology, business, communication and languages to research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. Within this section, I discuss how these scholars use theory to guide them.

A variety of scholars use theoretical perspectives from the discipline of psychology to ground their research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food (McNeal & Ji, 2003; Ülger, 2009; Nelson et al., 2015; Ogle et al., 2017). These theories view learning, knowledge and behaviour in varying dimensions that help deepen our understandings of children's interpretations of the marketing of packaged food.

Following Harris et al. (2009a), Ülger (2009) approaches the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food from a social cognitive development standpoint. Specifically, Ülger (2009) applies stage theory¹³ to children's discussions of their food behaviours when it comes to packaged food with characters to argue that younger children (6 years old) have a lower ability to retrieve information. As such, salient elements, like brand equity characters, are recalled by these children during product evaluation, whereas other product attributes or benefits such as nutrition and taste are overlooked. Ülger (2009) also argues that illiterate children more heavily rely on the use of promotional characters or other visual cues on packaged food during product evaluation since these elements can be understood.

¹³ Ülger (2009) describes stage theory as the belief that children's cognitive performances match their current cognitive development stage.

Nelson et al. (2015) ground their research in theory of mind, which builds from a social cognitive development standpoint, to justify the differences in children's packaged food preferences for themselves and their parents. Nelson et al. (2015) argue that children (4 years old) begin to empathize with others and understand that the actions of others come from their values and beliefs. Nelson et al. (2015) also suggest that future research should use theory, specifically referring to consumer culture theory, to uncover how child-targeted packaged food may make meaning for children. This study responds to the call-to-action but works more specifically to reveal how the use of promotional characters on packaged food may make meaning for children.

McNeal and Ji (2003) use motivation theory¹⁴ to understand children's memory of child-targeted packaged food. McNeal and Ji (2003) argue that children's drawings of cereal boxes from memory were not designed from their knowledge of a specific box, but rather stem from children's basic needs, which motivate them to render particular packaged food elements. Thus, from a motivation theory lens, McNeal and Ji (2003) suggest that children's drawings of cereal boxes from memory help to identify what is most important about packaged food for children. In a similar sense to Ülger (2009), McNeal and Ji (2003) also suggest that children's evoke sets are not simply brand names, but other visual (i.e., promotional characters) and sometimes informational elements. One reason for this result, McNeal and Ji (2003) suggest, is today's global economy, where the value of visual cues on child-targeted packaged food is heightened because these elements require no translation to be understood by most children.

¹⁴ McNeal and Ji (2003) describe that motivation theory is the idea that what is valued stems from a desire to meet basic needs. For children, basic needs include: a play need (fun without purpose), a sentience need (sensuous impressions), and an autonomy need (independence).

Ogle et al. (2017) use planned behaviour to understand children's attention and behaviours towards the use of licensed media characters on child-targeted packaged food. Ogle et al. (2017) claim that attitude, subject norms, and perceived behavioural control (i.e., children's liking of licensed media characters and peer influence regarding these characters), shape children's behaviours towards packaged food.

Beyond the discipline of psychology, scholars with research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food also rely on theories from the discipline of business. In particular, theoretical perspectives from consumer behaviour guide some research in this area (Nelson et al., 2015; Leonard et al., 2019).

A few scholars use a consumer socialization framework to guide their research discussions (Nelson et al., 2015; Leonard et al., 2019). All of these scholars refer to John's (1999) definition of consumer socialization. John (1999) suggests that consumer socialization is a development process (cognitive and social) that occurs in stages (perceptual stage, analytical stage, and reflective stage) (see table 1, p. 186). As children become more socialized as a consumer in the marketplace, "important changes [occur] in how children think, what they know, and how they express themselves as consumers" (John, 1999, p. 187). Nelson et al. (2015) use a consumer socialization framework to advocate for the intellect of children (3 to 4 years old) when navigating the marketplace. Leonard et al. (2019) apply the framework to children's interpretations of the use of licensed media characters on packaged food to argue that children likely transfer their attitudes towards promotional characters onto the packaged food with these same cartoons.

Leonard et al. (2019) also question the potential of self-congruency theory¹⁵ for guiding research related to children's interpretations of the use of promotional characters on packaged food. Leonard et al.'s (2019) inquiry may be particularly applicable for infused character licensing food.

A variety of scholars also use theories from the disciplines of communication (Elliott, 2009; Nelson et al., 2015; McGale et al., 2016) and languages (Elliott, 2019) to ground their research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. A parasocial interaction and relationship perspective frequently guides research in this area.

Parasocial interaction and relationship theory aims to understand how audiences interact and develop relationships with real-life personas or fictional illustrations or animations. Rubin and McHugh (1987) affirm that individuals form social bonds with characters in a similar way to interpersonal relationships, and thus, can be an alternative to them. Calvert and Richards (2014) also argue that children can develop emotional, one-sided relationships with characters through parent scaffolding and character engagement both within and beyond the world of entertainment.

Parasocial interaction and relationship theory is from the discipline of communication and grounds research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food (see Nelson et al., 2015; McGale et al., 2016). Nelson et al. (2015) argue that children's preferences for packaged snacks using licensed media characters can be explained by a character-familiarity bias, which stems from children's parasocial interactions and the development of parasocial relationships for children with these characters. McGale et al. (2016) also apply parasocial interaction and relationship theory to children's interpretations of child-

¹⁵ Consumers compare the brand image to their self-concepts, rather actual or imagined (Johar & Sirgy, 1989).

targeted packaged food. McGale et al. (2016) claim that children favour packaged food with brand equity characters due to an established relationship with these characters, which leads to elicit responses towards them and products featuring them.

Elliott (2019) applies paratextual theory from the discipline of languages to a new kind of child-targeted packaged food based on licensed media characters. The scholar suggests that this new child-targeted packaged food can be understood as a paratext for related entertainment content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys). Elliott (2019) argues, through a paratextual theory lens, that the injection of these characters into packaged food creates problems related to the commercialization of childhood and the mediatization of food for children.

As an exception, Elliott (2009) uses grounded theory to guide her research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. Elliott (2009) relies on the approach to uncover salient themes (i.e., interactivity versus aesthetics) of children's interpretations of packaged food designed to appeal to them. Elliott (2009) describes that the goal of using grounded theory methodology is to provide a nuanced discussion of children's navigations and negotiations of packaged food rather than to quantify focus group findings.

Despite these instances, research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food is usually not theorized. As such, future research in this area should be theoretically grounded (see Kraak & Story, 2015; Nelson et al., 2015).

What is Paratextual Theory?

Paratextual theory aims to locate where meaning is made for audiences. Conceived by Gérard Genette, a literary theorist, paratextual theory is based on the idea that value and importance originate from a combination of organic sites and resources (Genette, 1987/1997; Gray, 2010). Rather than solely examining the primary site of meaning making, or as later

referred to, the text, it is the peripheral sites in which paratextual theory brings to the forefront. Examples of these peripheral sites are the font choice of a book or a trailer to promote a film. As such, paratexts are the accompany productions “that surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to present it” (Genette, 1987/1997, p. 1). Echoing Gérard Genette, Gray (2010) explains that paratexts are textual elements beyond the text, audiences and the industry. Paratexts educate the audience (both intentionally and unintentionally) about the potential meanings and uses of a particular text. In other words, paratexts are the substance at the ‘boundaries’ of the text, which contribute to its representation and significance.

Scholars like Genette (1987/1997) and Gray (2010) contend that paratexts are important additives to the text that should not be overlooked. Paratexts correlate with the adoption of frames about the text before or after the audience’s consumption, which later influences how the audience perceives the text (Genette, 1987/1997). Paratexts can be encountered before (i.e., film trailers or reviews) or after consuming the text (i.e., websites or fan forums). As Gray (2010) aptly describes, encountering a paratext before the text reinforces “hope” by offering perceived expectations about the potential value or meaning of the text (p. 24). For example, film trailers present particular tones or styles that help indicate to audiences what kind of plot will likely follow. Encountering a paratext after consuming the text can also offer frames but work to deepen the meaning and value of the text or re-orient how the audience may interpret the text going forward (Gray, 2010). For example, fan forums offer film enthusiasts a space to discuss their interpretation of a film’s plot, settings and characters in depth. Regardless of when audiences encounter paratexts, these additives may reinforce and extend textual meaning and value.

Genette (1987/1997) explains that paratexts comprise of peritexts and epitexts—two kinds of paratexts that differ by their distance from the text. Peritexts are the associated productions that adhere to the text (Genette, 1987/1997). Gray (2010) suggests that a book's cover, its title pages, and the name of the book's author are examples of peritexts. Opposite to peritexts are epitexts. Epitexts are the accompanying productions materially detached from the text. Epitexts exist outside of the text and move freely in limitless capacities through physical and social spaces (Genette, 1987/1997). Book reviews, public responses to the book, and advertisements for the book are examples of epitexts (Gray, 2010). By understanding the roles of peritexts and epitexts, scholars can better pinpoint where the meaning and value of the text develop from for audiences.

Paratextual Theory and Its Relevance for Children's Food Marketing

Despite its roots in literary studies (Genette, 1987/1997) and later film, television, and off-screen (i.e., books, games, songs, blogs) studies (Gray, 2010), paratextual theory is a suitable perspective for research focused on children's food marketing (Asquith, 2014; Jacobs, 2015). Jacobs (2015) asserts that paratextual theory is an appropriate framework to better understand consumers' interpretations of branded convenience food. Jacobs (2015) claims that beyond packaging and other marketing, the design, look, feel, and sound of food (i.e., flavours or condiments) are also additives to the basic food itself, which Jacobs (2015) calls parafood. For Jacobs (2015), branded convenience food is unique because some peritexts are physically incorporated in and make up the food itself (i.e., the design or shape of the food), while others, although attached, surround the food and can be removed (i.e., the package). Asquith (2014) also grounds his arguments for 1930s child brand socialization through paratextual theory. Asquith (2014) suggests that the marketing tactics and strategies used to promote packaged food to 1930s

children (child-targeted clubs and related premiums) were early examples of paratexts. Asquith (2014) asserts that these tactics and strategies allowed marketing practitioners to embed themselves into children's popular culture in an effort to increase brand equity.

Beyond these instances of paratextual theory in research focused on children's food marketing, paratextual theory is also a suitable framework for research specifically focused on child-targeted packaged food (see Elliott, 2019; In Press). Elliott (2019) explains that using promotional characters on packaged food may be influential and impactful on children's attitudes and behaviours towards food, especially when packaged food hinges on entertainment content (infused character licensing food). Elliott (2019) applies paratextual theory to her research by suggesting that the use of licensed media characters on both pre-existing products (media character licensing) and emerging products (infused character licensing) are paratexts for the larger entertainment content where these cartoons come from. Elliott (In Press) also applies paratextual theory to produce with licensed media characters stickers and argues that these stickers are paratexts for the related entertainment content rather than the food product.

By mapping the outlined studies, it is clear that paratextual theory is a suitable perspective to ground research focused on children's food marketing, and more specifically, child-targeted packaged food. Nevertheless, it is possible, under certain conditions, that a new, and perhaps more precise, link can be probed between paratextual theory and child-targeted packaged food. Below I describe instances where processed food could be conceptualized as the text. I also detail instances where food packaging could be thought of as peritexts, while related entertainment content and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) could be conceptualized as epitexts. In doing so, I illuminate the uniqueness of infused character

licensing food. Applying paratextual theory to the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food also allows me to extend parasocial interaction and relationship theory.

The Text and Its Link to Processed Food

As evident by its name, processed food is manufactured fare. Processed food is constructed by the manipulation of various food qualities to produce products that offer distinct attributes and benefits to consumers (i.e., convenience, portability, and taste). In Genette's (1987/1997) writings on the text, the scholar generally defines the text as "a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance" (p. 1). In other words, books, films, and television programs are texts since they have been strategically produced so that when audiences read or watch them, they offer value and meaning. I suggest that processed food designed to appeal to children works similarly.

There are three instances where processed food designed to appeal to children can be understood as the text. For all of these instances, the processed food itself is manufactured using shape(s) to *fit* the promotional characters on its packaging along with the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys). Shape(s) includes both 2D shape(s) placed onto processed food (i.e., an image placed onto a cookie) and the 3D shape of processed food itself (i.e., a superhero shaped cookie). Fit applies to both the construction of identical replicas from entertainment content using the shape(s) of processed food (i.e., a licensed media character shaped fruit snack) and the construction of a theme related to entertainment content using the shape(s) of processed food (see Figure 1 for an example of the construction of a theme).



Figure 1. General Mills Paw Patrol Special Edition Cereal- Vanilla Crunch Flavour, Front Side of the 350g Package

Infused Character Licensing Food.

Infused character licensing food is the first instance where processed food designed to appeal to children can be conceptualized as the text. Infused character licensing food is where the injection of character elements from entertainment content instills value into new child-targeted packaged food products. It is the injection of character elements into the processed food itself that allows the food to be understood as the text. Like books, films, and television programs, processed food under these conditions can be conceptualized as the text since processed food has been strategically manufactured so that when children navigate and negotiate it, the processed food itself offers value and meaning.

Infused character licensing food is distinct because the processed food hinges on entertainment content. In other words, the processed food is manufactured using shape(s) dependent on entertainment content, which includes licensed media characters. As such, the construction of identical replicas from entertainment content using processed food and a theme related to the entertainment content using processed food are both conditions where the processed food can be conceptualized as the text. Christie Justice League Snack Packs is an

example of the latter where 2D shape(s) emblems of DC's Justice League members are placed onto honey cookies (Figure 2).

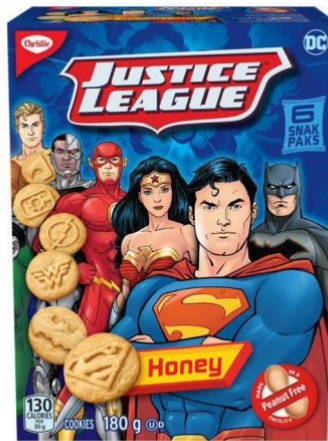


Figure 2. Christie Justice League Snack Packs- Honey Cookies, Front Side of the 180g Package

Likely, some children may not be able to associate a theme related to entertainment content made with processed food with the entertainment content itself (see Figure 2). As such, I propose that a textual scale is appropriate for processed food under these conditions. A textual scale relates to the degree that processed food under infused character licensing can be conceptualized as the text following Genette's (1987/1997) definition. For example, the 2D shape(s) emblems of DC's Justice League members on honey cookies may be less valuable and meaningful to some children because they are unable to comprehend what the 2D shape(s) represents. It is also possible that children can connect the 2D shape(s) emblems of DC's Justice League members on honey cookies to the Justice League members the emblems represent, but the abstract pictorial shape(s) is less significant compared to the actual DC's Justice League members. The 2D shape(s) emblems of DC's Justice League members on honey cookies can be read and engaged with beyond nutrition or taste by audiences, which allows the processed food of Christie Justice League Snack Packs to be conceptualized as the text. However, in cases such

as these, some children may not be able to read or engage with the processed food to the same degree as other processed food under infused character licensing strategy.

The Use of Brand Equity Characters on Some Packaged Food.

The use of brand equity characters on some packaged food is the second instance where processed food designed to appeal to children can be conceptualized as the text. In a near identical way to infused character licensing food, some child-targeted packaged food hinge on branded content. In these instances, the injection of character elements from branded content instills value into child-targeted packaged food. For example, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers are goldfish shaped to fit Finn, a Pepperidge Farm Goldfish character, who is placed on the packaging, along with the related branded content and associated productions (see Pepperidge Farm, 2017 for example) (Figure 3). As such, children cannot unwrap Finn since this brand equity character remains a constant part of the packaged product. Although Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers do not fall under infused character licensing food as I have suggested, the packaged product has many of the same characteristics. Despite this contrast, child-targeted packaged food under these conditions can be conceptualized as the text.



Figure 3. Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Crackers- Cheddar Flavour, Front Side of the 200g Package

Hybrid Infused Character Licensing Food.

Previously, marketing practitioners from Pepperidge Farm used media character licensing to dress up Goldfish crackers. For example, Disney Pixar's Dory and Nemo from Disney Pixar's Finding Dory were placed on Goldfish packaging for a limited time (Pepperidge Farm, 2016). However, media character licensing is a marketing strategy where licensed characters from entertainment content are used by third party companies on their products to appeal to children (specifically pack design see Lawrence, 2003) (Kraak & Story, 2015). As such, licensed media characters under this marketing strategy can be removed from the processed food not permitting audiences to read or engage with it beyond nutrition or taste (i.e., Disney Pixar's Finding Dory characters are only placed on food packaging, which can be unwrapped by children from Goldfish crackers). In these instances, the processed food itself cannot be the text since it has not been instilled with significance (through the injection of character elements) compared to other texts. Unprocessed food falls under the same conditions as packaged food using media character licensing since stickers with licensed media characters placed on produce can be removed by children from the product itself (see Elliott, In Press).

Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers do something different (Figure 4). Disney's Mickey Mouse is also placed on Goldfish packaging for a limited time, but the distinction is that the crackers themselves are also shaped into the Disney's Mickey Mouse icon. Beyond dressing up Goldfish crackers with licensed media characters, in instances like this, the licensed media characters are injected into the processed food. Children cannot unwrap Disney's Mickey Mouse from Goldfish crackers as the character remains a constant part of the packaged product. Additionally, like infused character licensing food, processed food under these conditions has been strategically manufactured (through the selection of the 3D

shaped Disney's Mickey Mouse icon cracker) so that when children navigate and negotiate it, the processed food itself offers meaning and value. As such, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers can be conceptualized as the text.



Figure 4. Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Disney Mickey Mouse Crackers- Cheddar Flavour, Front Side of Each 187g Package Featuring a New Design

Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers serve as a quintessential example for instances where processed food can be thought of as the text. The injection of character elements from both entertainment content and branded content instill value into Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers. As such, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers can be defined as a hybrid infused character licensing food. Hybrid infused character licensing food is in part new packaged food designed to appeal to children that hinges equally on entertainment and branded content. The Mickey Mouse icon and Finn shaped crackers can be read and engaged with beyond nutrition or taste by audiences, which allows the processed food of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers to be conceptualized as the text. Additionally, processed food under these conditions fit the promotional characters featured on its packaging along with the related entertainment and branded content and associated productions.

Paratexts and Their Links to Packaged Food

The peritext and epitext are types of paratexts defined and governed by space (Genette, 1987/1997). Peritexts are the accompanying productions of the text that are physically connected to the text itself (Genette, 1987/1997) or entangled with it (Gray, 2010; Hackley & Hackley, 2018). Opposite to these types of paratexts, epitexts are the accompanying productions of the text that are physically distant from the text itself (Genette, 1987/1997) or located outside of it (Gray, 2010). Hackley and Hackley (2018) also describe epitexts as “texts about the text but exterior to it” and, following Genette (1987/1997), suggest that epitexts can be created by the authors of the text and by others (p. 6). I argue that the packaging of processed food targeted at children under certain conditions can be thought of as a peritext, while the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) can be conceptualized as epitexts.

Attributes of packaged food are physically attached to (i.e., the packaging) or entangled within the processed food (i.e., its name). If the processed food can be thought of as the text, then these attributes can also be conceptualized as peritexts. As such, the packaging of processed food under certain conditions can be thought of as a peritext.

In instances where processed food can be conceptualized as the text, the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions can be thought of as epitexts. Productions about Goldfish produced by Pepperidge Farm (such as Goldfish Go-Karts) can be conceptualized as an epitext to Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers, while productions about Mickey Mouse produced by others like fan forums can also be conceptualized as an epitext to Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Special Edition Mickey Mouse crackers. The related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions can be thought of as epitexts because these productions are physically distant from the processed food itself but are also connected to it.

Epitexts, Parasocial Interactions and Relationships, and Packaged Food

A connection can be made between parasocial interaction and relationship theory and epitexts from paratextual theory in instances where processed food designed to appeal to children can be understood as the text. Both peritexts and epitexts are tools of meaning making that serve to “deepen the ambiguity of paratextuality” (Hackley & Hackley, 2018, p. 6). Nonetheless, as Gray (2010) claims, epitexts are located outside of the text itself. As such, some epitexts of processed food under certain conditions are the related entertainment and/or branded content where children first interact and form relationships with promotional characters (see Bond & Calvert, 2014; Calvert & Richards, 2014). For example, in Nelson et al.’s (2015) study, some children (4 years old) spoke about their knowledge and appreciation of Nickelodeon’s Dora the Explorer based on their exposure to entertainment content when discussing their preference for the related processed food. While paratexts educate the audience (both intentionally and unintentionally) about the potential meanings and uses of a particular text, parasocial interactions and relationships help to create the curriculum that educates the audience about these potential meanings and uses of a particular text. Thus, an appreciation of Nickelodeon’s Dora the Explorer creates frames about Nickelodeon’s Dora the Explorer content, which in turn work to educate children about the significance of processed food under certain conditions. In this way, paratextual theory extends parasocial interaction and relationship theory in instances where processed food designed to appeal to children can be understood as the text.

Paratexts help create value and meaning for the text, and therefore, should not be overlooked (Genette, 1987/1997; Gray, 2010). By applying paratextual theory to child-targeted packaged food under certain conditions, it is also apparent that food packaging and related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions also create value and meaning

for processed food. As such, these productions should be approached in research with the same gravity as the text. Doing so will help to illuminate the power of using licensed media characters on child-targeted packaged food, especially when considering infused character licensing food.

Methods

The qualitative research focus group is a useful method as it offers insight into the intersection and negotiation of individuals' varying perceptions surrounding the topic of discussion (Morgan, 1997; Barbour, 2007). A focus group is defined as data collection through group discussion based on a scholar's active role in determining the group's focus (Morgan, 1997). The value of this method is its ability to reveal an individual's attitude formation along with how meaning is negotiated among other individuals and the mechanisms involved in the modification or adaption of the individual's attitude (Barbour, 2007). As such, the qualitative research focus group is a quintessential method for a study exploring how children navigate and negotiate infused character licensing food. It is a particularly apt method since this study is exploratory (see Elliott, 2009), and seeks to understand why children themselves believe that the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food are influential for them.

A series of semi-structured focus groups were conducted with children between the ages of 8 to 12 living in Southwestern Ontario to investigate children's navigations and negotiations of infused character licensing food when compared to other strategies of child-targeted packaged food. Semi-structured interviewing offers flexibility to participants and versatility to data collection since participants can introduce new points of discussion important to them relative to the topic, which makes it suitable for an exploratory study (Fylan, 2005).

Recruitment.

Excluding my review of research focused on children's food marketing, research was conducted after ethics approval by the University of Calgary CFREB (CFREB ID: REB 19-0786). Participant recruitment also commenced once this approval was granted. Initially, local community groups in Southwestern Ontario and Calgary, Alberta were contacted, with one participating after-school youth program (Southwestern Ontario) that resulted in two focus groups. The Program Manager of the after-school youth program was approached to request approval to invite members with parental consent to participate in the study (Appendix A). After the Executive Director agreed to promote the study, a recruitment poster (Appendix B) and parent recruitment letter were sent via e-mail (Appendix C), and the Program Manager was asked to distribute the documents to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of children between 8 to 12 years old. Interested parent(s)/guardian(s) contacted me directly and received a consent form (Appendix D) and demographic information sheet for completion (Appendix E). One benefit of enlisting the after-school youth program was its ability to reach out and recruit children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) outside of my personal network.

An additional four focus groups were recruited from my personal network in Southwestern Ontario. These connections were the parent(s)/guardian(s) of children between 8 to 12 years old. When I shared my research with individuals within my personal network, some of these connections asked if their child could participate in the study. Parent(s)/guardian(s) received a parent recruitment letter and a consent form via email, with the invitation to pass on the information to other adults who might be interested in having their child participate (i.e., snowball sampling). Interested parent(s)/guardian(s) contacted me directly and received a consent form and a demographic information sheet for completion.

Participants.

Children were assigned to groups based on gender preference (boys, girls or mixed) and age (8 to 10 years old or 11 to 12 years old) with an aim of 4 to 6 children per group. Children indicated their gender preference and age before being assigned to a focus group (Appendix E). This separation accommodated any gender non-conforming children. Assigning children to focus groups based on gender preference and age was intended to make children more comfortable sharing their interpretations. Additionally, this separation allowed me to note attitudinal differences between gender preference and age. The age range (8 to 12 years old) was selected for several reasons. First, most countries that have restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy food and beverage products to children define children as 12 years old and under (see WHO, 2012). Second, at an older age, children are more able to articulate their reasoning behind their food preferences, which is helpful for a study focused on children's navigations and negotiations of infused character licensing food.

A total of 27 children from Southwestern Ontario were recruited for six separate focus groups held in February and March 2020. Participants identified as either boys (N=15) or girls (N=12), which made up two older age groups (11 to 12 years old) and one younger age group (8 to 10 years old) per gender preference. No child identified as gender non-conforming.

Focus Group Procedures.

Focus groups were scheduled at a time and location most convenient for participants, and each session lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Children were given an assent form, which was also read to them before the scheduled focus group (Appendix F). Children were encouraged to ask for any clarification about the assent form before they completed it and agreed to

participate. Both the parent(s)/guardian(s) and child were informed that participation is voluntary and that children could terminate their participation at any point during the focus group.

Focus groups were led using a moderator's guide (Appendix G), which asked participants to choose packaged food products (for themselves and others) and discuss the marketing tactics and strategies used on these food packages. Questions explored children's food preferences, their attitudes towards the marketing of child-targeted packaged food, and their prior interactions with promotional characters used on the packaged food along with the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. Three child-targeted packaged products were the objects of discussion: 1. an infused character licensing food (Figure 5); 2. a packaged food with licensed media characters on its packaging (Figure 6); and 3. a generic child-targeted packaged food (Figure 7). The specific packaged food products were selected because they were available in the Canadian supermarket around the same time focus groups were held (February and March 2020). Additionally, the products are all in the same product category (i.e., fruit snacks, granola bars, cereals, frozen desserts, and juice), which eliminates any biases children may have surrounding the food itself (i.e., children's like or dislike of a product category equally impacts each packaged product). I recognize that selecting other products from a different food category may lead to varying results. Participants were allowed to hold the packages, but the processed food itself and its individual wrappings were removed before scheduled focus groups.



Figure 5. Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks, Front Side and Back Side of the 226g Package



Figure 6. Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen- Variety Pack (Strawberry, Colour By The Foot, and Berry Tie-Dye Flavours), Front Side and Back Side of the 128g Package

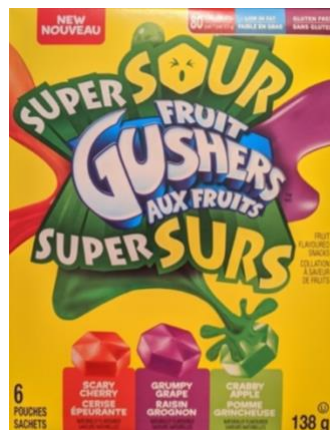


Figure 7. New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks- Crabby Apple, Grumpy Grape, and Scary Cherry Flavours, Front Side and Back Side of the 136g Package

Information Management and Data Analysis.

Focus groups were video recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim using the qualitative research software NVivo for the analysis. Field notes were also documented during and after the completion of each session. Participant numbers were used to ensure anonymity. Video recordings, transcriptions and field notes were digitally saved in a password-protected file on my private computer's encrypted system drive (FileVault). The consent forms, assent forms and demographic information sheets were also scanned and digitally saved on a password-protected file on my private computer's encrypted system drive. Original copies of these documents were then destroyed.

Analysis of transcriptions, recordings, and field notes occurred as focus group data was collected. Paratextual theory guided the direction of this study. Grounded theorizing is an empirically grounded, inductive qualitative approach (Holton, 2018). While grounded theory is reserved for scholars who “abstrac[t] concepts that lie within the data” without preconceived notions, grounded theorizing is equally concerned with concepts of data and existing theory (Holton, 2018, p. 234). As such, a grounded theorizing approach was used for data coding of individual responses and demographic group data (i.e., boys versus girls) to uncover concepts related to paratextual theory.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview

In focus groups with children between 8 to 12 years old, results indicate that the use of promotional characters on packaged food influenced children's food preferences, providing that these characters, the related entertainment or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) were personally meaningful. Participants' discussions of child-targeted packaged food coalesced under four salient themes: promotional characters 'for them,' interactivity, fit, and content. This chapter examines focus group discussions via these four themes, through demographic group data (i.e., boys versus girls) and individual responses. Study results highlight the complexity of using promotional characters on packaged food by presenting unique insights into the roles of value and meaning.

Takeaways from Children's Interpretations of Packaged Food

This section is intended to be a broad overview before presenting specific results from focus groups with children between 8 to 12 years old. Participants were asked to choose the one child-targeted packaged food they most wanted for themselves among three options. These options were: an infused character licensing food¹⁶ (i.e., Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks); a packaged food with licensed media characters on its packaging (i.e., Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen); and a generic child-targeted packaged food (i.e., New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks) (Figure 8). When asked to explain their reason for choosing the one child-targeted packaged food over the other options, on average, younger children (8 to 10 years old) suggested that the use of promotional characters on the packaged

¹⁶ Infused character licensing food describes instances where the processed food hinges on entertainment content via the use of shape(s).

product was a factor behind their food preferences more often than older children (11 to 12 years old) (66% of younger children versus 33% of older children). Additionally, girls also cited the use of promotional characters on packaged food as part of their explanation of food preferences more than their boy counterparts (50% of girls versus 40% of boys).



Figure 8. Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks, Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen, and New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks, Front Side of Packages

Below is a breakdown of participants who stated that the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food drove their packaging selections. Of all younger girls, one preferred Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen, while another favoured Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks because of the use of licensed media characters on the packaged food. More older girls preferred the use of Scooby-Doo on Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks (38% of older girls) compared to the use of Disney's Anna and Elsa on Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen (13% of older girls). 80% of younger boys favoured Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks because of the use of Scooby-Doo on the packaged food. No younger boy preferred Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen by reason of the use of Disney's Frozen characters on the packaged food. Of all older boys, only one favoured Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks because of the

use of Scooby-Doo on the packaged food. One other older boy favoured Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen as a result of the use of Disney's Frozen characters on the packaged food but also argued that he did not like Disney's Frozen films much. No participants said that the generic sour face icon on the New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks was a reason for selecting the package over the other two options. All participants needed to be prompted to discuss the value and meaning (or lack thereof) of using this generic character on the packaged food.

When asked the question: when you look at these packages, what is the most important part to you and why, younger boys argued for the value of using promotional characters on packaged food more than any other demographic. Older boys asserted that the overall aesthetic of the packaged food (outside of promotional characters) and the interactivity of packaged food was more important than other marketing tactics and strategies for them. The value of using promotional characters on packaged food was a dominant perspective among girls. Yet, the overall aesthetic of the packaged food (outside of promotional characters), defined as the additional graphics, brand logos, colours, and font of the package, was nearly as important for these participants.

Participants were asked a variety of questions about the effectiveness of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. All participants reported enjoying at least one promotional character at some point throughout their lives. Children spoke about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food in relation to themselves, other children their age (8 to 12 years old), younger children, teenagers, and adults/parents.

As noted, in analysing children's navigations and negotiations of child-targeted packaged food, four themes became salient: promotional characters 'for them,' interactivity, fit, and content. Each of these themes speak to the creation of value and meaning for children when interpreting packaged food, yet they also help to highlight children's attitudes towards infused character licensing food, packaged food with media character licensing, and generic child-targeted packaged food. I now turn to the influence of the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food for participants in relation to each theme.

Theme 1: Promotional Characters 'For Them'

Participants were asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) found on or related to child-targeted packaged food. In all focus groups, children made a distinction between promotional characters 'for them' and 'for others.' Analogous to the tension between kids' food versus adult food (see Elliott, 2011; 2015; James, 1998; Kraak & Story, 2015), in this study, participants described how the aesthetics, popularity and acceptance of promotional characters indicate what packaged food designed to appeal to children is 'for them.' Children of all ages carefully considered the target audience of promotional characters, entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (see Elliott, 2009). Children of all ages also cared about who promotional characters are in terms of their personality and actions along with their perceived gender preference and age in their navigations and negotiations of child-targeted packaged food (see Ogle et al., 2017).

Aesthetics of Promotional Characters.

Participants consistently recognized believable characters, defined as characters with more detail, as promotional characters 'for them' (children between 8 to 12 years old) and

sometimes older demographics (teenagers or adults/parents) when asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food. Older children (especially those 12 years old) explicitly argued that promotional characters ‘for them’ are real or realistic. Participants often connected the aesthetics of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food to their knowledge of the aesthetics of entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions.

[Disney’s] Frozen just looks more realistic to me...it looks 3D...it just looks better to me
(Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

I am kind of a guy who likes more action...Scooby-Doo is kind of like that...compared to [Disney’s] Frozen where everything is nice and cartoony, and nothing looks real
(Participant 2, Focus Group 2).

[Scooby-Doo] has a lot more detail (Participant 1, Focus Group 3).

Children of all ages valued promotional characters who fit a particular type of fantasy—one more elaborate and sophisticated than simplistic and silly. Participants acknowledged the tension involved in preferring child-targeted packaged food products using promotional characters since they believed that this approach helps to accurately define them as children, but also understanding the social riskiness of favouring child-targeted packaged food products using promotional characters where the characters are too juvenile for their age.

Participants consistently acknowledged that unrealistic characters, defined as plain characters through basic shape and colour, were promotional characters for younger children (described as young as 2 years old and as old as 9 years old). Children of all ages argued that younger children valued the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food for other reasons distinct from character licensing.

[Younger children] might not know Scooby-Doo, but he is an animal and looks friendly
(Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

‘Plainness’ as an indicator of food ‘not for children’ (between 8 to 12 years old) follows Elliott’s (2011) narrative of the kids’ food, adult food divide. Elliott (2011) argues that for children (4 to 6 years old) plainness of food is in contrast to ideas of fun when it comes to food preferences. She details that “the plainness of adult food stems from its *lack* of colour/sugar/shape” (Elliott, 2011, p. 137). A comparable argument can be made with participants’ interpretations of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food since many argued that promotional characters were ‘not for them’ because they lacked realness or detail. Participants (especially girls) demonstrated a mature sense of aesthetics when navigating and negotiating the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food.

Popularity of Promotional Characters.

When asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food, children argued that some promotional characters were ‘not popular for them.’ Participants’ interpretations of the popularity of promotional characters often related to their own demographics (gender preference and age). The popularity of promotional characters derived from two factors for the majority of children: direct or indirect interactions with promotional characters, and the time of entrance into the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. This discussion focused on the popularity of licensed media characters relative to packaged food designed to appeal to children. Only when prompted, did a few children speak about the lack of popularity of the generic sour face icon. Nearly all participants framed their unfamiliarity with promotional characters as the unpopularity of promotional characters. Only one younger girl (10 years old) argued that unfamiliar promotional characters could still be ‘for some children.’

[The generic sour face icon] is just a ball...if you have never seen the character before, you do not know what it is, so you might not want to buy the food or eat it (Participant 3, Focus Group 5).

[The generic sour face icon] would probably make me buy it because, like, say Anna and Elsa were bad characters, and you hated the way they acted and stuff. Well, you don't know how this character would act or something, well if it did act bad, I don't know so it's kind of okay (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

Most participants suggested that promotional characters ‘for them’ (children between 8 to 12 years old) and sometimes ‘for teenagers and adults/parents’ are well-liked, familiar characters through a mixture of the character’s personality and actions along with their perceived gender preference and age. Children often included the plot, setting, characterization and theme of related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions as additional indicators of the popularity of promotional characters.

[Disney's Frozen] would be mainly for girls because...the two main characters...are girls, and in the new movie, they kind of base it more on the castle and the castle's land and [Disney's Anna and Elsa] (Participant 3, Focus Group 3).

[Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] has the big dog on there, but he is a boy, so for girls they may feel like they are reaching this out to boys more than they are to girls (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

Scooby-Doo was just like a bit funnier...[Disney's] Frozen is just...kind of, stays steady for a while...until [Disney's] Elsa goes off (Participant 2, Focus Group 3).

Confirming previous findings of Ogle et al. (2017), most participants agreed that promotional characters of a different gender preference to them are less attractive compared to those of the same gender preference. Nonetheless, older boys (especially those 12 years old) and girls tended to be savvy by suggesting that a character’s personality and their actions sometimes outweigh the perceived gender preference and age of the cartoon or the gendered tone of the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. For example, participants agreed that primary characters, Disney’s Anna and Elsa, were a lot less popular than

(secondary character) Disney's Olaf, despite all being a part of the Disney's Frozen films—which were considered too childlike and/or girly for these children. Disney's Olaf was meaningful for these participants regardless of his connection to Disney's Frozen films and associated productions (i.e., books and toys).

I love [Disney's] Olaf...if it had [Disney's] Olaf, I would definitely pick it up...[Disney's] Olaf is the best (Participant 3, Focus Group 6).

However, younger boys who tended to value the use of promotional characters on packaged food more than any other demographic, also cared more about a character's gender preference than other participants.

Children of all ages argued that their entrance into entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions influenced the popularity of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. New and continued interactions with promotional characters indicate that these characters are relevant and thus popular for children between 8 to 12 years old compared to past interactions with promotional characters through entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. For example, many children asserted that Scooby-Doo is an established licensed media character aimed at younger children—and they argued this because of their interactions with Scooby-Doo from a young age. As such, these participants claimed that Scooby-Doo is less popular for them and therefore Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks were for younger children. Yet, some children argued that Scooby-Doo is a licensed media character popular for them since they can continue to interact with Scooby-Doo through upcoming and future entertainment. These participants claimed that Scooby-Doo remains popular for them, which makes Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks 'for them'.

When something new comes out it is more popular than something before. I think some people watch [Scooby-Doo], but [Disney's Frozen] is more popular because it just came out (Participant 2, Focus Group 4).

Scooby-Doo has been a part of my life since I can remember and it's fun, it's for girls and boys, there is almost nothing wrong with Scooby-Doo...they are still making Scooby-Doo, so you can go see one in the theaters when a new one comes out (Participant 3, Focus Group 3).

Acceptance of Promotional Characters.

Children of all ages often discussed the popularity of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food in terms of the acceptance of characters by others. Girls (especially older girls) explicitly spoke about their desire for food safety, and their need to minimize risk when asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food.

I would pick the [Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen] one as well because I know a lot of people are like, [Disney's] Frozen that is fun...and I think it is just the safest (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

Elliott and Ellison (2018) reveals that teenagers' construction of food as 'risk objects' disclosed different links to harm. Participants in this study also understood child-targeted packaged food as 'risk objects.' Children located riskiness in the association of promotional characters, entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions to packaged food in their discussions. Similar to teenagers' interpretations of healthy food (Elliott, 2014), participants in this study suggested that those who prefer packaged food with unpopular promotional characters based on children's knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions may harm their social position among others. Children were resistant to the use of certain promotional characters on packaged food since they felt that these characters were popular among younger children, and they desired to be perceived by others as mature, which confirms Elliott's (2009) findings. As such, participants indicated that food safety was located in the individual (see Elliott & Ellison, 2018). Girls (especially older girls) explicitly

acknowledged their individual responsibilities surrounding the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food, which included learning about promotional characters through entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions and negotiating the importance of these promotional characters on packaged food with others.

Exceptions of Promotional Characters for Adults or Parents.

When asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food, children of all ages also acknowledged that promotional characters not normally ‘for adults/parents’ could occasionally be popular and accepted among them. These exceptions for adults/parents developed out of a place of nostalgia or through a guided introduction to entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions by their children, according to participants. When discussing the exceptions of promotional characters for adults/parents, children focused on licensed media characters.

My mom...would probably want Scooby-Doo because it is an old, like 80's, not 80's, but like, an old 90's show that my mom used to watch when she was maybe a lot younger (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

I think my parents would also pick the Scooby-Doo one because Scooby-Doo is more of an older show, and I know that my parents actually know of that. Instead of the new and improved content, they would rather pick like the old shows (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

I think my parents would get the [Disney's] Frozen one too because I have three younger sisters and they have watched it a lot...when [my parents] did see it they really liked it (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

The effectiveness of using promotional characters on packaged food cannot be generalized for all children, despite some arguments (see Blass, 1995), since meaning comes from children’s varying interpretations of the aesthetics, popularity and acceptance of promotional characters and related entertainment and/or branded content and associated

productions (i.e., books and toys) (see Elliott, 2009; Ogle et al., 2017). Participants were highly considerate of who promotional characters are in terms of their personality and actions along with their perceived gender preference and age when asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food. These participants not only argued that promotional characters of a different gender preference to them are less attractive like Ogle et al. (2017) suggests, but also how a character's demeanour (their personality and actions) helps to determine their popularity and acceptance.

Theme 2: Interactivity

Participants were asked to select which child-targeted package they would choose for themselves, for their friends and for their parents among three options and explain the reasoning as it relates to the marketing on the package. A prominent theme that emerged in all focus groups during this discussion was the notion of 'interactivity' with promotional characters. Three layers of 'interactivity' related to the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food were identified: looking at promotional characters, watching promotional characters, and playing with promotional characters. Although children also spoke about their interactivity with promotional characters via entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) (see Nelson et al., 2015; McGale et al., 2016), I focus exclusively on 'interactivity' as it relates to child-targeted packaged food.

Looking at Promotional Characters.

According to participants, the primary layer of 'interactivity' occurs simply via the placement of promotional characters on food packages. Older children (especially older boys) argued that 'interactivity' at its most basic level is the ability to look at familiar promotional

characters on food packaging and connect them to their experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. According to participants, in these instances, promotional characters are stuck onto food packages in restrictive ways, which do not allow them to interpret the characters in action or interact with characters solely via food packaging.

[Disney's Elsa] is always throwing snow out of her hand, and you can unwrap [Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen] out of your hand by throwing it, sort of. So, it is kind of like snow, but it is food (Participant 1, Focus Group 2).

The ability to look at familiar promotional characters on food packages was the most nuanced layer of 'interactivity' since only a few participants spoke about it during focus group discussions. These participants were only older children (especially older boys), perhaps because this layer of 'interactivity' requires more critical thinking.

Watching Promotional Characters.

According to participants, the secondary layer of 'interactivity' occurs via the strategic placement of promotional characters on food packages (characters in action). Children of all ages asserted that 'interactivity' at an advanced level is the ability to watch promotional characters 'acting' on food packages. This 'interactivity' included promotional characters engaging with one another on the package, and promotional characters engaging with audiences (through placement or expression). According to participants, in these instances, promotional characters are designed into food packages in imaginative ways, which allow them to interpret the characters in action.

[Scooby-Doo] has more emotion...[Disney's Anna and Elsa] are just looking at you (Participant 6, Focus Group 4).

When people see [the generic sour face icon] they hope they will make the same face (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

[Disney's Anna and Elsa] are not interacting in anyway...we suggested that Shaggy could be feeding Scooby a Scooby Snack, but these characters [Disney's Anna and Elsa] are just standing beside each other (Participant 5, Focus Group 4).

Children of all ages suggested that relationships with promotional characters can be formed via the use of these promotional characters on food packaging when characters are 'acting'. As such, participants acknowledged that they could interact with unfamiliar promotional characters at the secondary layer of 'interactivity'.

Playing with Promotional Characters.

According to participants, the final layer of 'interactivity' occurs via the injection of promotional characters into packaged food. Children of all ages agreed that being able to play with promotional characters via processed food is interactivity at its finest. These participants asserted that both the 2D shape(s) placed onto processed food (i.e., an image placed onto a cookie) and the 3D shape of processed food itself (i.e., a superhero shaped cookie) are conditions in which children can play with characters. As such, the injection of promotional characters into packaged food offers children similar benefits to toys.

I think if [Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] had bodies it would be more fun because then you could decapitate them, and stick Scooby's head on someone else (Participant 5, Focus Group 1).

Participants also argued that the use of elaborate shape(s) to form the processed food (i.e., a character's whole body versus a character's face) offers them more believable play, especially when other promotional characters (i.e., Scooby-Doo and Shaggy) and/or props (i.e., Mystery Machine) are also included as part of the fruit snack shapes to form a 'playset' to appeal to children. Participants often interpreted food manipulation as play. These participants also tended to associate playing with promotional characters to fun in their discussions of 'interactivity', which aligns with Elliott's (2009) definition of fun food.

The notion of ‘interactivity’ works to distract children, so that they do not focus on food production (i.e., nutrition and health) when they are navigating and negotiating child-targeted packaged food (see Elliott, 2009). From their discussions surrounding child-targeted packaged food for themselves, for their friends and for their parents, ‘interactivity’ was an important marketing approach for children between 8 to 12 years old (especially older children). Some participants argued that ‘interactivity’ offers them a means to be transgressive (i.e., decapitating Scooby-Doo), which follows the idea that food practices permit the affirmation of power relations for children (see James, 1998; Mechling, 2000; Zelizer, 2002). Yet, other participants asserted that ‘interactivity’ related to the use of promotional characters on packaged food is too structured and rigid because their imaginations are bound by these characters and the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. As a result, ‘interactivity’ as it relates to child-targeted packaged food sometimes negatively impacted participants’ food preferences.

Theme 3: Fit

Participants were asked whether they thought that the use of certain promotional characters on related child-targeted packaged food seem appropriate (i.e., Disney’s Anna and Elsa on Betty Crocker’s Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen). A dominant theme that emerged in all focus groups during this discussion was fit. Children of all ages argued that fit required the combination of more than one marketing tactic and/or strategy to create a theme. The themes of childhood and entertainment surfaced in the majority of focus group discussions. The theme of childhood is tied to notions of fun (see Elliott, 2009; Enax et al., 2015) and fantasy (see Chapman et al., 2006; Page et al., 2008), whereas the theme of entertainment is tied to

promotional characters and related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) for participants.

It makes sense when they have the sour face...because it is, like, the shape of the Gushers and the sour (Participant 1, Focus Group 2).

They are called Scooby snacks...the gummies literally have [licensed media characters'] faces on them (Participant 2, Focus Group 5).

You don't really see any of the [Disney's] Frozen characters stamped on it...if the characters were stamped on it, [Disney's Frozen] would probably belong more with [Betty Crocker's Fruit by the Foot] (Participant 3, Focus Group 2).

Fit was most influential on children's food preferences when participants believed that both food packaging and the processed food itself belonged to a theme. 2D shape(s) placed onto food and the 3D shape of the food itself elevated the themes of childhood and entertainment on child-targeted packaged food according to children of all ages (see Elliott, 2009; Nelson et al., 2015).

When asked if they thought the use of promotional characters belonged with the related child-targeted packaged food, children of all ages argued that film artifact food was fit at the most advanced level. Film artifact food is packaged food based on identical replicas of fictional food items from entertainment or branded content (i.e., Scooby Snacks).

I feel the Scooby-Doo should be on like dog treats...Scooby Snacks, yeah. Or like animal crackers too (Participant 4, Focus Group 1).

Film artifact food is perhaps fit at the most advanced level because of children's experiences with these packaged products in a 2D entertainment world (i.e., Scooby-Doo eating Scooby Snacks). As a result, film artifact food breaks down digital barriers and allows children to connect a 2D entertainment world to their world.

In their discussions, participants also spoke about the normalization of using some promotional characters on certain kinds of child-targeted packaged food (often speaking in terms

of food categories, types and labels). Normalization in this study focused on participants' ability (or lack thereof) to imagine the child-targeted packaged food in the 2D entertainment world related to the use of promotional characters on this product. For example, several participants claimed that Disney's Anna and Elsa did not seem appropriate for Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen since fruit is associated with warm weather and not the cold climate of Disney's Frozen films and associated productions.

If [Disney's Frozen] is on anything, I feel like it should be on snow gummies or something...just not like [Betty Crocker's] Fruit by the Foot (Participant 4, Focus Group 1).

In [Disney's Frozen] they didn't really have fruit and gummies (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

Fit is important for children between 8 to 12 years old. However, there is a caveat. Fit only had meaning for participants in this study when they already valued the specific character under discussion. As such, fit is not effective enough to influence children's package preferences alone. For example, many participants quickly argued that Scooby-Doo is 'not a licensed media character for them,' and thus, suggested that fit between Scooby-Doo and Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks is irrelevant to them.

Well, I mean, if you didn't like [Disney's] Frozen, I feel like you would block [the marketing tactics and strategies related to Disney's Frozen] away because you would be, like, I don't really care (Participant 3, Focus Group 6).

When you eat something sour, you, like, make a sour face [like the character] ...[but] if you have never seen the character before, you do not know what it is, so you might not want to buy the food or eat it (Participant 4, Focus Group 5).

Put simply, the influence of fit on children's food preferences depends on their attitudes towards the theme of the packaged food designed to appeal to children.

Theme 4: Content

Participants were asked about their knowledge of and experience with entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) related to child-targeted packaged food. A significant perspective that emerged from this discussion in all focus groups was the content of child-targeted packaged food. Children of all ages argued that food desirability stems from the varying uses of promotional characters on packaged food along with their attitudes towards related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions. Participants spoke about three different layers of content. These layers of content included content at large, the details of content, and the specific details of content.

Content At Large.

Children of all ages approached the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food at large, discussing these characters in general (i.e., Disney's Anna and Elsa are princesses). As such, this primary layer of content represents participants' discussions of promotional characters broadly (i.e., participants' love or hate of dogs compared to their love or hate of Scooby-Doo) and the style of the related entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., participants' love or hate of a film's genre or tone). For example, several participants argued that the use of Scooby-Doo on Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks was valuable to them because Scooby-Doo is a dog.

It is an all-around better movie. It doesn't leave you sad in the end. It leaves you happy, and ready for more (Participant 3, Focus Group 3).

I think that the Gushers are not as cool because it is scary cherry, grumpy grape and crabby apple...I think that sometimes it could pull away kids (Participant 3, Focus Group 6).

My favourite is the [Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] because [Scooby-Doo] is a dog and the box is blue (Participant 2, Focus Group 5).

Because maybe you are a person that doesn't like dogs or something, then [Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] might not be as appealing to you (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

Children of all ages seem to be more empathetic when approaching the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food at large, perhaps since they focused on what characters are (i.e., princesses) rather than who characters are (i.e., Disney's Anna and Elsa from Disney's Frozen films), thus framing these cartoons in a neutral light. Children also concentrated on the style (i.e., genre or tone) rather than the specificities of entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions related to child-targeted packaged food. As a result, at this primary layer of content children of all ages were less divided about using promotional characters on packaged food.

The Details of Content.

Children of all ages approached the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food in detail, discussing these characters and their connections to entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions (i.e., participants' love or hate of Scooby-Doo on packaged food). As a result, the secondary layer of content encompasses participants' discussions of promotional characters 'for them' and touches on the themes of interactivity and fit. For example, participants argued that the use of multiple, full-body promotional characters 'for them' is meaningful.

To make [Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] better...even just show his paw...or if his full body was on there...that would be cool (Participant 2, Focus Group 4).

The Specific Details of Content.

Children of all ages approached the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food in great detail, discussing these characters and their connections to entertainment and/or branded content and associated productions meticulously. As such, the final layer of

content encompasses participants' discussions of the elaborate uses of promotional characters on packaged products (i.e., participants' love or hate of Scooby-Doo, the Gang and the Mystery Machine on packaged food). Participants argued that child-targeted packaged food is most meaningful when it is an extension of content or vice versa through the use of promotional characters.

Because there are all different colours and there are all kinds of moments in Scooby-Doo. Scary moments, happy, sad and mad and stuff like that (Participant 4, Focus Group 2).

If they changed [Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] to blue it would be better because that is the colour of their van (Participant 5, Focus Group 4).

Children of all ages argued for the value of creating entertainment worlds through the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food. Participants claimed that adding entertainment props (i.e., the Mystery Machine from Scooby-Doo television shows and films) and/or backdrops (i.e., the Arendelle Castle from Disney's Frozen films) to packaged food heightens its value to children when they already valued the specific character under discussion. Some participants also argued that generic staging elements (such as snow or trees) could also add value to child-targeted packaged food for them.

[Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks] is mainly related to Scooby-Doo, but it doesn't have one of the villains or one of the other characters from one of the episodes on one of the sides of the box. There is no scene of them (Participant 5, Focus Group 3).

They could change the wrapping on it or the characters on it...maybe change the colour from green and showed the castle of Arendelle behind it (Participant 2, Focus Group 6).

In conclusion, content (achieved through the varying uses of promotional characters on packaged food) was important to children of all ages. As a result, food desirability comes from the creation of packaged food content for children, where value arises from a spectacle of

promotional characters designed to entertain, rather than other product attributes or benefits (i.e., nutrition and health).

Conclusion

In combination, participants in this study preferred the New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks (N=13) compared to Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks (N=10) and Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen (N=4). Yet, remarkably no participant argued that the generic sour face icon on the New Super Sour Gushers Fruit Flavoured Snacks was a reason for selecting the package over the other two options. The package preferences of children between 8 to 12 years old tended to be different than the wrappings these participants picked for younger children and for adults/parents. Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks followed by Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen are preferred among younger children and adults/parents according to participants. As such, the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food can be an effective marketing approach when children between 8 to 12 years old already valued the specific character under discussion. However, these findings reveal that other marketing tactics and/or strategies may be more influential over children's food preferences than the use of promotional characters.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

This chapter draws study results into conversations about child-targeted food packaging and children's food marketing. It argues that using promotional characters on packaged food does not guarantee marketing effectiveness among children since these cartoons deterred some participants from desiring products, while other marketing strategies seemed to be more influential. I suggest that infused character licensing may be a more polarizing marketing strategy than media character licensing for children since characters cannot be separated from products, and discussion about the strategy in focus groups resulted in intense negotiations between participants. In this chapter, I also urge scholars to consider that different characters influence children differently, and children have varying 'friendships' with characters of equal familiarity in light of study results. I underscore the important role media and popular culture play in children's interpretations of packaged food and discuss what paratextual theory contributes to these interpretations, especially about infused character licensing food. In doing so, I argued that paratextual theory can offer great value to research not only focused on child-targeted packaged food but communication scholarship at large.

A Polarizing Marketing Approach for Children

This study sought to explore children's interpretations of the marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food, and in particular, how children navigate and negotiate infused character licensing food. For the 27 children who participated in focus group sessions, child-targeted packaged food promotes food to children through different materials, which

includes the text and its paratexts¹⁷, under paratextual theory. In the case of infused character licensing food (i.e., Betty Crocker's Scooby-Doo Fruit Flavour Snacks), I build on other work to suggest that the processed food itself can be conceptualized as the text, resulting in materials like the food packaging, related entertainment content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys) to be paratexts of it (see Elliott, 2019; In Press).

In focus groups with children between 8 to 12 years old, four themes emerged: promotional characters 'for them,' interactivity, fit, and content. Participants argued that they liked promotional characters that were believable (characters with more detail), popular (through a mixture of the character's personality and actions along with their perceived gender preference and age) and accepted by others. In particular, girls seem to value the aesthetics of characters and the acceptance of them by others, whereas boys tended to put more emphasis on the popularity of characters. As such, promotional characters who were not these things, according to participants, were believed to be for others (i.e., younger children, teenagers or adults/parents) and, in succession, often devalued packaged food with these cartoons for participants, affecting their food preferences. As a whole, 'interactivity' with promotional characters¹⁸ was important for participants, especially older children, so long as children appreciated these cartoons. Children of all ages also argued that fit (the combination of more than one marketing tactic and/or strategy to create a theme) and content (the varying uses of promotional characters) of packaged food had meaning for them providing, again, that these participants valued the specific character under discussion.

¹⁷ Paratexts are additives beyond the text, audiences and the industry that contribute to the representation and significance of the text (Gray, 2010).

¹⁸ The ability to look at, watch and play with promotional characters via the packaged food.

In light of research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food (see Roberto et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2015 (licensed media characters); Ülger, 2009; McGale et al., 2016 (brand equity characters); Enax et al., 2015; Ares et al., 2016 (generic characters)), it is intriguing to find that—for the children interviewed—using promotional characters on packaged food is a polarizing marketing approach, producing both strong desires for and aversions of food for participants. Most age and gender differences among focus groups came from children’s distinct opinions about liking cartoons (i.e., the majority of boys liked Scooby-Doo more than Disney’s Anna or Elsa). Specifically, the use of different characters on packaged food often translated into different food outcomes for these participants (see Elliott, 2009; Ogle et al., 2017), which seems to be the reason why the marketing approach is polarizing for children. Additionally, for participants, infused character licensing food offered both the thorniest and easiest navigations, which resulted in intense negotiations between children during focus groups. For example, some participants argued that the use of licensed media characters ‘not for children between 8 to 12 years old’ on packaged food with media character licensing could be okay since they could hide the characters on the packaging, but could not do so with infused character licensing food, which makes the marketing strategy and the packaged food products featuring it more complicated. Because of this result, I suggest that infused character licensing may be more polarizing than simply using cartoons or media character licensing *on* the packaging. Promotional characters have significant weight in children’s interpretations of packaged food, and infused character licensing food is perhaps more dividing because licensed media characters are thoroughly injected *into* processed food and packaging, and therefore, cannot be separated from the product.

The fact that different characters influenced children differently reveals a problem in research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food as the presence of a promotional character—any character—tends to be treated the same by scholars (Elliott & Truman, 2020). For example, some scholars frame food packaging with promotional characters in contrast to ‘plain’ packaging (see Roberto et al., 2010; Enax et al., 2015; McGale et al., 2016), thus almost assuming that all cartoons are entertaining for children. Yet, as noted, participants in this study did not consider all promotional characters to be the same. Despite exceptions (Elliott, 2009; Ogle et al., 2017), scholars fail to acknowledge the uniqueness of characters and the separate ways they can influence children.

The effectiveness or powerfulness of other marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food compared to the use of promotional characters is also an interesting finding. Despite the scholars who argue that using promotional characters on packaged food effectively promotes food to children (see Nelson et al., 2015 (licensed media characters); McGale et al., 2016 (brand equity characters); Ares et al., 2016 (generic characters)), it is clear, based on focus group discussions, that the approach—depending on the participant—can also deter children from these products (see Elliott, 2009; Ogle et al., 2017). For the majority of participants in this study, the use of promotional characters on packaged food did not effectively promote food to children. Instead, other marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food were more likely to generate food desirability for children (i.e., the overall aesthetic of the package, defined as the additional graphics, brand logos, colours, and font of the package). Nonetheless, the use of promotional characters is the most common approach that food marketing practitioners employ to target children (Harris et al., 2009b; Giménez et al., 2017; García et al., 2019; Elliott & Truman, 2020), and is even endorsed by health organizations (see

McGinnis et al., 2006) and scholars for companies selling ‘healthy’ food products (see Kraak & Story, 2015; Putnam et al., 2018). These study results further my argument that infused character licensing may be a more polarizing strategy for children, and also highlight that, on average, this strategy presumably produces more food aversions than desires for children compared to other marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food, despite becoming increasingly prevalent over time (see Elliott, 2019).

It is problematic that the use of promotional characters tends to be framed as an effective or powerful marketing approach of packaged food for children by health organizations and scholars since, as detailed above, these cartoons do not always promote food to children. The WHO (2012) states that marketing functions by exposure and power. Power is defined as “the creative content, design and execution of the marketing message” (WHO, 2012, p. 11). Yet, as defined, the word power is ambiguous, and the choice of this term almost implies a sense of control or dominance rather than a function of it. A problem further arises because scholars with research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food tend to use power for multiple reasons, which leads to the conflation of its meanings of ability or capacity and control or dominance (Elliott & Truman, 2019). For example, Nelson et al. (2015) argue that “characters are powerful” (p. 400). Yet, Nelson et al. (2015) do not define power nor present the WHO’s (2012) definition of it. As such, it is uncertain whether Nelson et al. (2015) are speaking about the capacity of characters to influence children’s package preferences or if they are suggesting that the use of characters positively impacts children’s package preferences. Adding to the confusion of the WHO’s (2012) use of power, child-targeted packaged food was not the only site of meaning-making for participants in this study. For example, the entertainment content in which licensed media characters came from also played a part in children’s

interpretations of the related child-targeted packaged food for the majority of participants. As such, effectiveness or powerfulness arise from a network of interactions and experiences surrounding marketing messages (see Elliott & Truman, 2019; 2020). These interactions and experiences can be both strategically manufactured by marketing practitioners (i.e., the use of characters on packaged food) or more naturally present (i.e., discussions with peers about characters). In conclusion, it is problematic to assume that the use of promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food promotes food to children and that the functions of marketing can only influence marketing effectiveness for children (like the WHO (2012) suggests (see p. 10-11)).

Children's Parasocial Relationships with Promotional Characters

Considering the light in which the ideas of parasocial interaction and relationship theory are discussed in research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food, it is remarkable to find that—for the children interviewed—children have varying ‘friendships’ with characters. Rubin and McHugh (1987) suggest that children interact and build relationships with characters in near-identical ways as they do with people. People have close friends, acquaintances and enemies. With this in mind, it makes sense that, in this study, participants also had close ‘friendships’ with some characters, and not as close of ‘friendships’ with others, despite characters being of equal familiarity to children. For example, in a focus group with older girls, one participant seemed to be closer to Scooby-Doo than the others by continuously expressing her love for the cartoon. Interestingly, scholars argue that the ‘social’ relationships children have with the characters featured on packaged food help motivate their desire for and consumption of the food (Nelson et al., 2015; McGale et al., 2016). However, the fact that participants liked certain characters more than others illustrates that these ‘social’

relationships are sophisticated and that experiences with characters do not promise to make packaged food with them desirable for children. Alternatively, it can be said, especially taking into consideration the fact that different characters influenced children differently, that children's 'social' relationships (or lack thereof) with characters affect their attitudes towards packaged food featuring these same cartoons.

Applying parasocial interaction and relationship theory to children's interpretations of child-targeted packaged food urged me to consider children's experiences with characters, if any, and to focus my attention on where these experiences took place. In the context of infused character licensing food, participants argued that they could play with characters through processed food (i.e., decapitating Scooby-Doo and sticking his head on someone else or having Scooby-Doo and Shaggy team up against villains, who appeared in the television shows or films). At the same time, these children also spoke about their understandings of licensed media characters from entertainment content. The fact that these experiences took place in several digital and physical spaces, which blended together to create 'social' relationships with cartoons for children further illustrates that these 'social' relationships are sophisticated. Parasocial interaction and relationship theory can push scholars with research focused on the power of using promotional characters on child-targeted packaged food to consider the importance of these relationships in the decision making process for children, and how characters occupy a near-constant presence in children's lives.

The Role Media and Popular Culture Play in Children's Interpretations

Given that the child-targeted packaged food presented to participants was just that—food—it is fascinating to see a consensus among children surrounding the strong role media and popular culture play in their interpretations of these products. Although attitudinal differences

between focus groups surfaced (especially about the characters children liked), media and popular culture remained a prominent factor in children's food preferences (whether positive or negative). Even entertainment content and associated productions from other periods (i.e., late 1960s original Scooby-Doo content) were discussed by participants in this study, further highlighting the important role of media and popular culture. Nelson et al. (2015) also argue that media and popular culture are important for children's interpretations of packaged food, while Elliott (In Press) acknowledges the role that media and popular culture play in children's food preferences and argues that the approach of using licensed media characters to promote 'healthy' food and produce is wrong headed. The fact that the majority of participants focused on characters in their discussions of marketing effectiveness and almost failed to discuss the healthfulness of food in focus groups underscores the intensity at which children focus on media and popular culture when navigating and negotiating packaged food. For example, instead of concentrating on things like nutrition, health or taste when explaining why they selected the product they did, participants often sidestepped these product attributes and benefits and negotiated characters. Ultimately, such study results, nod to problems related to the commercialization of kids' food and the insignificance of issues of nutrition in the decision making process. Significant health consequences are related to the fact that characters are primarily what matters during children's information search and evaluation of alternatives.

Paratextual Theory and Children's Interpretations of Packaged Food

Elliott (In Press) contends that the notion of paratexts reveals fundamental problems surrounding the belief that character stickers can work to effectively promote produce to children. She argues that placing a Disney's Mickey Mouse sticker or other cartoon character on a banana does not add to the value or meaning of the banana for children, but instead works to

promote the films, television programs and other entertainment content featuring Disney characters (Elliott, In Press). In an earlier study, Elliott (2019) also uses paratextual theory to highlight these exact problems, but in regard to child-targeted packaged food, specifically claiming that processed food products, like Disney's Beauty and the Beast Goldfish crackers, are also "paratexts that feed into children's popular culture" (p. 11). Given the focus on paratextual theory in this study, study results not only support these claims (Elliott 2019; In Press) but also illuminate the distinct capabilities of infused character licensing food.

For the participants in this study, ideas of fit stemmed from the extent of the marketing consistency of child-targeted packaged food. This meant that—depending on the participant—children believed that characters were appropriate for fruit snacks when these characters were presented through both the food and the food packaging. For example, most children argued that Disney's Anna and Elsa did not belong with Fruit By The Foot because these characters had nothing to do with the food itself. Yet, participants also concluded that a connection between Disney's Anna and Elsa and Fruit By The Foot could be made by adding these characters to the food in some capacity. This finding backs previous research (Elliott 2019; In Press) since it confirms that presenting characters on food packaging alone does not transform the food for children. Instead, food products, like Betty Crocker's Fruit By The Foot Disney Frozen, are extensions of the larger entertainment and/or branded content for children under paratextual theory (Elliott, 2019; In Press). At the same time, the fact that participants argued that characters can belong with fruit snacks permitting that they are presented through both the food and the food packaging aptly exposes the unique capabilities of infused character licensing since this marketing strategy rests on the notion that the product and the packaging are injected with licensed media characters. For example, when participants were asked whether or not they

believed that Scooby-Doo belonged with Betty Crocker's Fruit Flavour Snacks, many stated that the shapes of the fruit snacks made it obvious that the character was an appropriate choice. Pairing this result with the notion of paratexts, it is clear that for infused character licensing food, the food is transformed for children by the injection of licensed media characters since—as some participants argued—children can now play and create new stories with these products, thus adding and extending the value and meaning of the food (see Genette, 1987/1997). Instead of being a mechanism of delivery for larger entertainment content, as Elliott (2019; In Press) argues for food with characters on its packaging, children can be primed by the plethora of productions featuring the characters involved in infused character licensing food for the consumption of the product itself. In other words, television shows and films featuring Scooby-Doo can be paratexts to the world of character and prop shaped fruit snacks for children, extending the value and meaning of the food (see Genette, 1987/1997).

Elliott (In Press) argues that exploring the material culture of food through paratextual theory encourages scholars to consider “the centrality of media culture and how promotional culture intervenes in even the most “unprocessed” areas of our lives” (p. 19). In applying paratextual theory to children's navigations and negotiations of infused character licensing food, this ‘push’ became obvious since, with the framework, infused character licensing food could be understood as the text rooted in media with the ability to promote itself to children. The application of paratextual theory in this study also allowed me to move the discussion beyond packaged food, and instead focus my attention on the roles that other materials play in the creation of value and meaning for children (see Elliott, 2019; In Press). By approaching the materials related to infused character licensing food equally, I could see that the producers of media and popular culture play a comparable, if not more important, role to marketing

practitioners and food companies in the promotion of these products since entertainment content and associated productions could extend and add value and meaning for children. As such, this finding, afforded by paratextual theory, urged me to consider that food production might disappear behind the promotion of media, rather than the promotion of food, for children (see Elliott, In Press).

Paratextual theory is an innovative framework for research focused on child-targeted packaged food because it helps bring other key actors involved in the production of food and food marketing—who are often not acknowledged (see WHO, 2012, p. 11)—in discussions about marketing effectiveness (Elliott, 2019; In Press). The involvement of media producers licensing their characters, other third-party companies using these character licenses and people sharing their opinions about characters in the production of child-targeted packaged food was examined in this study because of paratextual theory. It can be said that, similar to this study, the majority of communication scholarship aims to explore the power of media. However, as I have argued throughout this study, it is important to question why such media is effective, and what makes meaning for audiences when it comes to content. Exploring media culture with paratextual theory may more accurately provide answers to these questions for communication scholars because one is able to identify and approach the paratexts that surround and extend content. Because of these strengths, paratextual theory can offer great value to research not only focused on child-targeted packaged food (Elliott, 2019; In Press) but communication scholarship at large.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is exploratory, limited by a small sample size, and the number of packaged food products and promotional characters discussed. Conducting additional focus groups,

especially with younger children (8 to 10 years old) would provide more and richer insight. Despite my efforts for recruitment, there was also a lack of study interest among parent(s)/guardian(s) and their children, especially those in Calgary, Alberta. As a result, focus groups were conducted with children between 8 to 12 years old living in Southwestern Ontario—the majority of which were from my personal network. Although other demographical factors, outside of gender preference and age, were not assessed in this study, separating participants into focus groups based on these other factors may have provided additional insights to the attitudinal differences among Canadian children when they interpret the marketing of child-targeted packaged food, especially about which characters children like (i.e., the differences between children from various regions within Canada or families of different socio-economic status or educational backgrounds).

Participation in this study was voluntary, which presumably led to the involvement of children between 8 to 12 years old in focus groups who themselves and/or their parent(s)/guardian(s) already had an inherent interest in the research topic more than the general population. As such, study results represent the opinions of a population of children who may have biases surrounding marketing, health and nutrition stemming from their own knowledge and experiences or the knowledge and experiences of their parent(s)/guardian(s).

This study is exploratory, so additional questions specifically focused on infused character licensing food should be explored in future research. One additional question that would be interesting to ask is how children navigate and negotiate different kinds of infused character licensing food. Specifically, scholars could investigate whether or not differences exist for children between the construction of identical replicas from entertainment content using the shape(s) of processed food and the construction of a theme related to entertainment content using

the shape(s) of processed food. There is also room to conduct longitudinal studies surrounding children's interpretations of the marketing of child-targeted packaged food. Specifically, I think it would be fascinating to explore if children's attitudes towards packaged food change over time.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis is the first to ask children to navigate and negotiate the marketing tactics of infused character licensing food in comparison to those of other child-targeted packaged food. This thesis captured that value and meaning come from a network of interactions and experiences surrounding the marketing messages of packaged food for 27 participants (children between 8 to 12 years old). Overall, focus group discussions illustrate that the use of promotional characters on packaged food is a polarizing marketing approach for children because different characters influenced participants differently. Infused character licensing may also be a more polarizing marketing strategy than media character licensing for children since characters cannot be separated from products, and participants intensely negotiated the strategy during focus groups. Participants also suggested that other marketing tactics and strategies of child-targeted packaged food can be more effective in promoting food to them than the use of characters. Study results speak to the importance of food packaging for children and illuminate the significant role media and popular culture play in children's interpretations of packaged food. Ultimately, this thesis divulges that paratextual theory is an innovative framework for research focused on child-targeted packaged food and communication scholarship at large.

Children are an attractive market segment to the food industry. As such, child-targeted packaged food populates the supermarket making characters a constant part of food evaluation and purchasing for children. Study results suggest that future research should continue to explore how children navigate and negotiate child-targeted packaged food, especially the varying uses of cartoons on these products. Having children make sense of packaged food with different characters could also provide further insight into why some characters are more or less valuable to different child populations. Future research should also continue to offer justification through

theory, especially paratextual theory (see Elliott 2019; In Press), since research focused on child-targeted packaged food is typically untheoretical (see Kraak & Story, 2015; Nelson et al., 2015).

Participants emphasized that not all characters offer value and meaning for them with most age and gender differences among focus groups coming from children's distinct opinions about liking cartoons. Instead, children obtain different 'friendships' with these characters in similar ways as they do with people. According to participants, when children appreciate the characters involved in infused character licensing food, the marketing strategy can produce strong food desires for them. As such, it is imperative that educational interventions and Canadian marketing policy focused on children's food marketing can better account for infused character licensing.

For the 27 participants, other materials, beyond child-targeted packaged food, played an important part in the creation of value and meaning for them. With this in mind, it is imperative that these materials (or paratexts), which can include food packages, related content and associated productions (i.e., books and toys), are not overlooked. In the fight to reduce childhood obesity in Canada, policymakers, scholars, educators and parents need to acknowledge the other materials surrounding child-targeted packaged food to better help children understand food marketing so that they can make informed decisions as consumers.

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Appendix A: Local Community Group Email or Phone Script

Good morning/afternoon,

My name is Courtney McAlorum, and I am a Master's Candidate in the Department of Communication, Media and Film at the University of Calgary. As a component of my degree, I am currently working on a thesis project involving the power of marketing tactics on packaged food. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), power refers to the ability of techniques to reach their marketing objectives. I am specifically interested in the potential influence of these tactics on children's food preferences. I hope that this thesis project will a) contribute to current literature that focuses on child-targeted food packaging by exploring how meaning is made for children when it comes to marketing tactics on packaging; b) determine the power of more contemporary and traditional marketing strategies of packaging for children; and c) provide an innovative theoretical framework for analyzing packaged food and food marketing.

I am writing/calling you to establish public contacts whose child members, with additional parental consent, may be interested in participating in this study. To participate, children must be between the ages of 8 to 12 years old. I will be conducting focus groups within the coming months. Should you be interested, I am hoping that I might be able to provide you with a poster to display, and a parent recruitment letter outlining the details of this thesis project for the parents of your child members. If parents are willing to give consent, and their child is interested in partaking in a focus group, they will be instructed to notify me directly via the parent recruitment letter. Please let me know if this is something you are open to.

I am excited about this topic and am hoping to learn from children as they think more carefully about how food packaging tactics and strategies may influence their attitudes towards food products.

Thank you again for your consideration.

Ms. Courtney McAlorum,
Department of Communication, Media and Film
University of Calgary
courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca
Supervisor: Dr. Charlene Elliott
charlene.elliott@ucalgary.ca

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

Parent of a child between the ages of 8 to 12 years old?

By participating in this research study, children will be given the opportunity to think more carefully about how food packaging tactics and strategies may influence their attitudes towards food products.

In Canada, there has been concern regarding the potential influence of food marketing on the health and wellbeing of children. Recognizing that the supermarket environment has become more complex, given a wider variety of marketing tactics and strategies surrounding packaged food, it is necessary to understand how children interpret these approaches.

As a component of my research study, I am seeking child participants (aged 8 to 12 years old) to partake in a focus group that will likely take 45 minutes to complete. Focus groups will take place at a time and location most convenient for the participants. Approximately 36 children will be recruited for 6 separate focus groups.

Should you be willing to give consent and your child be interested in partaking in a focus group, please feel free to contact me:

Ms. Courtney McAlorum,
Department of Communication, Media and Film
courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca
Supervisor: Dr. Charlene Elliott

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research
Ethics Board has approved this research study.
REB19-0786



Appendix C: Parent Recruitment Letter



Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

In Canada, there has been concern regarding the potential influence of food marketing on the health and wellbeing of children. Recognizing that the supermarket environment has become more complex, given a wider variety of marketing tactics and strategies surrounding packaged food, it is necessary to understand how children interpret these approaches.

As a component of my master's thesis project, I am seeking child participants (aged 8 to 12 years old) to partake in a focus group that will likely take 45 minutes to complete. Focus groups will take place at a location most convenient for the participants. Focus group times will be scheduled in advance should you and your child give consent/assent. Approximately 36 children will be recruited for 6 separate focus groups. Children will be assigned to groups based on their age (8 to 10 or 11 and 12 years old) and their choice of gender (boys, girls or mixed). The aims of my thesis project are 1. to explore how children interpret the marketing tactics on packaging via infused character licensing strategy (food promotion born from entertainment content) compared to other marketing strategies—both on a peritextual and epitextual level (see description below); 2. to reveal how this interpretation varies by age and/or gender preference; and 3. to apply paratextual theory to packaged food and food marketing to offer an innovative framework for communication scholarship.

Paratextual theory will be the framework of this thesis project. Paratextual theory aims to locate where meaning is made for audiences. Paratexts are the productions beyond a text, its audiences, and the industry that educate the reader (both intentionally and unintentionally) about the text's potential meanings and uses. There are two kinds of paratexts a) peritexts: paratexts attached to the text; and b) epitexts: paratexts detached from the text. While scholars have examined literature and films using paratextual theory, the framework is also relevant for research focused on child-targeted packaged food given marketers' heavy reliance on media characters.

Discussing children's interpretations of marketing tactics on packaged food will help the researcher understand the power of these approaches over children's food preferences. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), power refers to the ability of techniques to reach their marketing objectives. By participating in this thesis project, children will be given the opportunity to think more carefully about how food packaging tactics and strategies may influence their attitudes towards food products. Beyond this benefit for children themselves, there are significant scientific, scholarly and societal benefits by children participating in this project.

Participation is completely voluntary, and your child may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty up until the conclusion of the focus group. Once the focus group is completed, participant data cannot be withdrawn.

Should you be willing to give consent and your child be interested in partaking in a focus group, please notify Courtney McAlorum at courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca with your availability as well as your child's age and gender identity.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Ms. Courtney McAlorum
Master of Arts Candidate
Department of Communication, Media and Film, University of Calgary
courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Appendix D: Parental Consent Form



Primary Researcher:

Courtney McAlorum

Faculty of Arts, Department of Communication, Media & Film

courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Charlene Elliott

Canada Research Chair, Food Marketing, Policy & Children's Health

Faculty of Arts, Department of Communication, Media and Film

charlene.elliott@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project:

Power, packaging and preferences: How children interpret marketing on packaged food and its implications for communication scholarship

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

According to food marketing research, marketing tactics on child-targeted food packages tend to include direct references to children, cartoon graphics or entertainment characters from children's programming, interactive activities, endorsements from those popular with children, abstract or transgressive colours, fonts, shapes or messages, and/or the use of popular themes for children. Often a combination of these tactics creates a marketing strategy for packaged products. Media character licensing is a traditional marketing strategy, which is centred on the use of entertainment characters to promote a product. Infused character licensing is a more modern strategy that, within this project, is defined as food promotion coming from entertainment content. Although considered a more modern strategy, infused character licensing food products have long appeared in the supermarket. Despite these occurrences, it is unclear how children interpret the marketing tactics on infused character licensing food compared to more traditionally marketed child-targeted packaging.

There is a gap in food marketing research at the crossing of power, packaging and children's food preferences. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines power as the ability of techniques to reach their marketing objectives. This thesis project asks how children navigate and negotiate infused character licensing food.

A paratextual theory framework will be used to explore this question. Paratextual theory aims to locate where meaning is made for audiences. Paratexts are the productions beyond a text, its audiences, and the industry that educate the reader (both intentionally and unintentionally) about the text's potential meanings and uses. While scholars have examined literature and films using paratextual theory, the framework is also relevant for research focused on child-targeted packaged food given marketers' heavy reliance on media characters. Within this thesis project, I will consider the following:

- The text is processed food itself.
- The peritexts (paratexts attached to the text) are the marketing tactics on and marketing strategy of the package.
- The epitexts (paratexts detached from the text) are the content, advertisements, branded products, peer/parent communication, etc. related to the processed food.

Specifically, the aims of this thesis are 1. to explore how children interpret the marketing tactics on packaging via infused character licensing strategy (food promotion born from entertainment content) compared to other marketing strategies—both on a peritextual and epitextual level (see description above); 2. to reveal how this interpretation varies by age and/or gender preference; and 3. to apply paratextual theory to packaged food and food marketing to offer an innovative framework for communication scholarship.

What Will Your Child be Asked to Do?

Your child is being invited to participate in a focus group where they will think about the marketing tactics on food packaging. Specifically, this thesis project focuses on children's understanding of the marketing tactics on infused character licensing food compared to the tactics on more traditional strategies of child-targeted packaged food. The focus group will be video recorded for data collection purposes, but your child's name will not be used. The focus group will take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

In a group, participants will be asked a series of questions about the marketing tactics on three packaged products: 1. infused character licensing food; 2. packaged food using media character licensing; and 3. generic child-targeted packaged food. Participants will then be asked a series of questions about the food itself. During this part of the discussion, participants will be instructed that they may touch each package but are not allowed to open the items as children's thoughts and understanding of marketing tactics based on the food itself are not a part of this thesis project. To keep participants engaged in the focus group, they will be given a small cup of Pepperidge Farm's Goldfish crackers. Once the second series of questions are answered, participants will be asked about their knowledge and/or experiences with the entertainment content that surrounds the three packaged products.

Participation is completely voluntary, and your child may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty up until the conclusion of the focus group. Once the focus group is completed, participant data cannot be withdrawn.

What Type of Personal Information will be Collected?

Should you give your child permission to participate, your child will be asked to provide their name, age at the time of data collection, and gender identity. Your child will also be invited to participate in a focus group that includes the collection of data pertaining to their interpretation of marketing tactics and strategies surrounding packaged food in the supermarket. At no point will recordings become available to the public, and only the primary researcher and her supervisor will have access to the recordings.

There are some options for you (along with your child) to consider if you decide to grant your child permission to participate in this study. Please review these options and select Yes or No:

I grant permission for my child to be video recorded:

Yes: ____ No: ____

Are There Risks or Benefits If My Child Participate?

There are no risks associated with your child's participation. By participating in this thesis project, children will be given the opportunity to think more carefully about how food packaging tactics and strategies may influence their attitudes towards food products. Beyond the benefit for children themselves, there are significant scientific, scholarly and societal benefits by children participating in this project.

What Happens to the Information My Child and I Provide?

Data collected will only be accessed by the primary researcher and her supervisor. Participant numbers will be used to ensure anonymity for public discussion and publications surrounding the data. All identifiable information will be password-protected and encrypted using FileVault. No identifiable information will ever be released to the public. Given that the focus group will include the primary researcher and other children, your child's participation will not be confidential since others involved in the study will know that they participated.

Your child is free to discontinue participation, and you may withdraw your child from the project at any time during the focus group. Should either of these instances occur, all data that you and your child have contributed will be destroyed. Since meaning is created among participants discussing together in a focus group methodology, I will be unable to withdraw your child's contributions should you or child wish to end their involvement after the focus group is completed.

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The consent/assent forms and demographic information will be scanned and digitally saved on a password-protected file on my private computer's encrypted system drive (FileVault). Original copies of these documents will then be destroyed. The focus group notes, recordings and transcriptions will also be digitally saved in a password-protected file on my private computer's encrypted system drive

(FileVault). Participant numbers will be used to replace the child's name, ensuring that no one will be able to identify them in future reports or published documents.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your child's participation in this thesis project, and 2) you agree to allow your child to participate in this thesis project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw your child from this thesis project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your child's participation, and your child should feel the same during this project.

Child's Name: (please print) _____

Parent's Name: (please print) _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your child's participation, please contact:

Ms. Courtney McAlorum,
Department of Communication, Media and Film
Faculty of Arts
courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca
Supervisor: Dr. Charlene Elliott
charlene.elliott@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way your child been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/ (403) 220-8640; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The primary researcher has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix E: Demographic Information Sheet



Primary Researcher: Courtney McAlorum

Supervisor: Dr. Charlene Elliott

Title of Project:

Power, packaging and preferences: How children interpret marketing on packaged food and its implications for communication scholarship

Surname and first name of child:

Age at the time of data collection:

Gender identity:

Appendix F: Assent Form



Primary Researcher: Courtney McAlorum

Supervisor: Dr. Charlene Elliott

Title of Project:

Power, packaging and preferences: How children interpret marketing on packaged food and its implications for communication scholarship

What is a research study?

- A research study is a way to find out new information about something. Kids do not need to be in a research study if they do not want to.

Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?

- You are being asked to take part in this research study because I am interested in seeing how you understand and think about food packaging in the supermarket. I am interested in learning how food packages and food marketing make meaning for you.

If you join this study, what is going to happen?

- You will be in this study for about 45 minutes. You will be asked questions in a group with about five other kids about your thoughts on food packaging and food marketing in the supermarket. This study will be recorded.

Will this study help you and others?

- This study may help you and other kids know more about marketing on food packaging.
- It may help you and other kids to choose better food choices.
- It may also help other people, research studies and your community.

Do your parents know about this study?

- Your parents will know about you taking part in this study.

Who will see the information collected about you?

- The information collected about you will be kept safely locked up. Nobody will know it except the people doing the research.
- The information about you will not be given to your parents. Nobody will tell your friends or anyone else.

Do you have to be in this study?

- You do not have to be in this study. If you do not want to be in this study, you just have to tell me.
- You can also take more time to think about being in this study.

What if you have any questions?

- You can ask any questions that you may have about this study. If you have a question later that you did not think of now, either you or your parents can email Courtney McAlorum at courtney.mcalorum@ucalgary.ca.

Other information about the study.

- If you decide to be in the study, please write your name below.
- You can change your mind and stop being part of it at any time.
- You will be given a copy of this paper to keep.

Would you like to take part in this study?

_____ Yes, I will be in this research study.

_____ No, I do not want to do this.

Your name

Today's date

Appendix G: Moderator's Guide

Thank you all for taking the time to meet with me today. In this study, I am interested in seeing how you understand and think about food packaging in the supermarket. I want to know how food packages and food marketing make meaning for you. I would like this to be an open discussion, so please feel free to introduce topics that make sense for you. You can ask any questions that you may have during the study. Our discussion will likely last around 45 minutes.

Packaging Questions

To begin, I have set three packaged food products on the table. In a moment, I will be asking you questions about the packaging of these products. There is no right or wrong way to answer these questions. What I am interested to understand during this discussion is how you negotiated between multiple kinds of food packages, and which packages are the most meaningful for you and why.

Questions:

- If you could only choose one package for yourself, which package would you pick? Why would you choose this package over the others?
- What is it about the other packages that keeps you from choosing them? Please explain.
- Which package do you think your friend would pick? Why do you think they would make this choice?
- If your parents could only choose one package for themselves, which package do you think they would pick? Please explain.
- When you look at these packages, what is the most important part to you? Why?

Product Questions

Since we have discussed the packaging of these food products, I am now interested in turning your attention to the items themselves. I will be asking you questions about the food of these packaged products. Again, there is no right or wrong way to answer these questions. I am interested in understanding how powerful the marketing tactics and strategy surrounding food packaging is on your food preferences.

Questions:

- When you look at these food items, which one do you think you would like the best? What is it about the food that makes you think this way compared to the other choices?
- Which food do you think would taste the best? Please explain.
- What food item do you think your friends would choose? Please explain why you think they would pick this choice.
- Out of all the food items, which one do you think your parents would pick? What is it about this product that makes you think this way?

Package-Product Paratext Questions

Given that we have discussed both the packages and products, I want to talk about your knowledge and/or experiences with the entertainment content that surrounds the packaged products. In other words, I want to understand your relationship with the entertainment content and how this relationship may add to or extend the meanings of the packaged products.

Questions:

- How much do you know about the entertainment content on the packaged products?
- Have you or someone you know ever seen one of the film or show in theatres or on television that surrounds these products? Please explain.
- Do you have toys or games from one of the movies or TV shows that surrounds these products? Please explain.
- Do you think that the characters from these movies or TV shows belong with these packaged products? Please explain why or why not.
- Can you think of a different packaged product, that the characters from these movies or TV shows would belong with? Why?

Thank you all for your thoughtful answers and discussion. It is beneficial for me to understand your interpretation of packaged food products.