Packaging Fun: Analyzing Supermarket Food Messages Targeted at Children

Charlene D. Elliott
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT Childhood obesity has prompted an increased scrutiny of the foodscape, along with the call for innovative strategies to make our social environments more supportive of healthy eating. Child-targeted supermarket foods are an increasing, but typically overlooked, part of this food environment. Using content analysis, this article profiles the strategies used to market foods to children and their parents in the Canadian supermarket environment. Child-targeted food products were purchased from two major grocery store chains in Calgary, Alberta, and assessed in terms of their packaging, marketing appeals, nutritional quality, and food type. The discussion details how and why the marketing of “fun” in food creates key challenges in terms of supporting child health.

KEYWORDS Food; Children; Marketing; Childhood obesity; Supermarket; Packaging

Introduction

The childhood obesity epidemic has prompted a number of recent Canadian initiatives. In September 2010, Canada’s Ministers of Health released Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights (PHAC, 2010). The document observes that a “complex and interacting system of factors contributes to increasing rates of overweight” and that these system factors “are further complicated by a wide variety of policy decisions made in a number of dif-
different sectors that influence childhood obesity” (PHAC, 2010, p. 1). Listed among the factors affecting childhood overweight and obesity is the “marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and/or sodium” (HFSS) (p. 2); listed as part of the integrated strategies within this framework for action is to make the social environments more supportive of healthy eating, and to make the healthy choice “an available and easily recognizable option” (p. 4). Yet as the report concludes: “Not eating well or being active enough—the most visible causes of obesity—seem like easy problems to solve. But they are rooted in a complex set of social, psychological, technological, environmental and economic forces operating globally, nationally and in communities” (p. 4). As a result, “unique and innovative solutions,” along with “the implementation of effective policies and programs, will be required moving forward” (p. 4).

Seven months later, the Health Ministers followed up with Our Health, Our Future: A National Dialogue on Healthy Weights to help identify “actions to curb childhood obesity and to promote healthy weights” (PHAC, 2011a, 2011b). Part of this initiative entailed asking Canadians for specific action items to make the social environment more supportive of healthy eating. Dominant in both the Framework for Action and National Dialogue on Healthy Weights is the recognition of the role of both the social environment and policy in shaping eating practices, and the call for innovative solutions to help promote the health of Canada’s children.

A core aspect of the social environment, a key influencer in shaping eating practices, and central question for policymakers is food marketing. Yet it is often dealt with in a constrained fashion. Recent Canadian studies on the marketing of food to children concentrate almost exclusively on television advertising (Adams, Hennessy-Priest, Ingimarsdóttir, Sheeska, Østbye, & White, 2009a, 2009b; B. Cook, 2008; Potvin-Kent, Dubois, & Wanless, 2010), even though food promotion encompasses substantially more than that. Dialogues pertaining to food marketing to children, moreover, typically (and reasonably) remain preoccupied with the nutritional profile of these foods. Overlooked is food’s symbolic value, particularly the types of appeals that are used to make edibles desirable and the implications of marketing foods to children in a particular way. This study seeks to broaden the general focus on television advertising by (1) examining “regular” foods that have been packaged and designed to appeal to children and (2) probing what Tarasuk (2010, p. 229) identifies as “the most important aspect of the food environment”: the supermarket.

Specifically, this project builds on earlier work (Elliott, 2008) that draws attention to how food packaging and particular food products work to target children and to encourage consumption. Sidestepping the much-discussed categories of fast food and “junk food,” the study instead profiles the types of foods designed to appeal to children in the Canadian supermarket. Supermarkets are important because they are where “most food selection occurs” (Tarasuk, 2010, p. 229). Approximately 80% of food purchasing decisions are made in the grocery store, and often on impulse (Page, Montgomery, Ponder, & Richard, 2008; Royall, 2009). Examining child-targeted supermarket foods is significant because the purchase of these items is not only a result of parents ceding to the “nag” factor or “pester power”—a marketing strategy that encourages children to pester their parents to buy goods—but equally speaks to the fact that par-
ents buy foods for their children, because of them, and with them in mind (D. Cook, 2008, p. 223). This co-consuming model recognizes that child-targeted food is more complex than many policy initiatives suggest, focused as they are on limiting or reducing the advertising of HFSS foods directly to children. Parents are equally part of the equation. Indeed, in-depth interviews with primary household shoppers reveals that they may purchase “kids’ food” because they think their child(ren) will like it, because they know their child(ren)’s peers have kids’ food (and they do not want their child to be left out) and/or for reasons of convenience—irrespective of nutritional quality (Elliott, under review). Other scholarly reviews of the literature on food advertising and children’s food choices conclude that children “have a role to play” in family food decisions, “but it is far from the popular version of parents feeling pestered to give their children inappropriate foods” (Young, 2003, p. 451). For parents, the issue is less about pester power and “more about maintaining enough variety in the face of their children’s likes and dislikes to stop them becoming bored” (p. 451), again reinforcing the co-consuming model.

Since hundreds of child-targeted supermarket foods now exist, it is essential to recognize how these products contribute to, and impact, the Canadian foodscape. Although some insight can be gained from international research that provides a snapshot of specific product categories targeted at children, such as breakfast cereal (see Harris, Schwartz, Brownell, Sarda, Weinberg, Speers, et al., 2009; Page, et al., 2008), analyses of the entire supermarket and its full range of child-oriented products are rare. As such, this study seeks to provide an updated snapshot of child-targeted supermarket foods in Canada. Specifically, the research creates a profile of the foods marketed to children in the supermarket and then asks:

1) What types of supermarket foods are targeted at children?
2) What are the characteristics of these foods (in terms of packaging, packaging appeals, and the foods themselves)? and
3) What are the implications of promoting foods to children in this way?

Method
Content analysis was used to generate a profile of the food products targeted at children in the Canadian supermarket. Data collection and coding were completed over a 12-month period in 2009 in Calgary, Alberta. Researchers visited two major grocery store chains, purchasing child-targeted foods or “fun foods” for analysis. Duplicate products were not included in the study. Products were photographed, stored, and subsequently coded for analysis.

The Real Canadian Superstore and Safeway were selected as the supermarkets for food coding. Loblaw Companies (parent to The Real Canadian Superstore) is Canada’s largest food distributor, both in terms of revenue and number of stores. Canada Safeway is a main competitor. Selecting products from these two stores makes the study comprehensive, but also generalizable because most stores carry the same national brands. Selections of child-targeted foods were made according to very specific criteria. The study focuses on the “regular” foods within the Dry Goods, Dairy, Produce, and Frozen Refrigerated/Frozen Foods categories that have been repackaged to appeal to children.
“Regular foods” within these categories means fruits and vegetables, cheeses and yogurts, cereals and crackers, waffles and snack bars, et cetera—the everyday edibles that are not classified as “junk food” by consumers. Since the research sought to profile children’s supermarket foods outside the category of “junk foods,” confectioneries, soft drinks, potato chips/cheezies/nachos, and similar fare were excluded from the sample.

Specific indicators and criteria of children’s food include the following:

- brands that specifically reference children in the name or are marketed as designed specifically for children (e.g., EnviroKidz, Safeway’s Eating Right Kids, or President’s Choice Mini Chefs), or
- brands that feature at least one of the following aspects:
  - direct claims or allusions to “fun”/play on the package
  - cartoon iconography pointedly directed to children
  - tie-ins with children’s television programs, merchandise, or films
  - the foregrounding of strange shapes, unusual colours, or unconventional tastes
  - puzzles or games targeted at children

Products were purchased for coding, and 37 variables were recorded for each product, including the brand name, product name, food category, food type (see Table 1), and price. Variables specific to the package itself were recorded (such as the use of cartoons/cross-merchandising appeals, nutrition claims, written text, and colour). Colour in package design is a critical means of both attracting attention (Grimes & Doole, 1998) and generating sensory expectations (Ares & Deliza, 2010). Colour is the first package cue noticed by consumers (Kauppinen-raisanen & luomala, 2010) and can work to increase brand recognition by up to 80% (Color Marketing Group, n.d.). For these reasons, packages were coded for their dominant and secondary colours. Packages were also classified according to whether they appealed to children (ages 5 to 12), teenagers (13 to 17), children and teenagers, or children and parents/adults. Finally, variables pertaining to the food itself (in terms of colour and shape) were recorded, along with the product’s nutrition information. Although providing a nutritional profile of these foods is not the focus of this article, the nutrition information was used to assess the percentage of calories coming from sugar. Drawing from American Heart Association recommendations, as well as previous research, products were classified as products of poor nutritional quality if more than 20% of their calories derive from sugar.

Product coding was completed by a research assistant (queries arising during the coding process were flagged and resolved by the lead researcher), and univariate analyses in the form of frequencies were conducted to describe the nature of variables used in this study. Bivariate analyses were also conducted; these include cross-tabulations with appropriate measures of association (chi-square, phi, and Cramer’s V). Where appropriate, statistically significant relationships were flagged by an asterisk.

Results

Exactly 354 child-targeted supermarket products were assessed for their package semiotics (written text and graphic) and the foods themselves. Kellogg’s—popular for its
breakfast items, ranging from Froot Loops and Rice Krispies to Pop Tarts and Fun Pix Eggo waffles—was the dominant brand (27 products; approximately 8% of the sample). PC’s Mini Chefs and Safeway’s Eating Right Kids, brands targeted at children (rather than brands with child-targeted products), tied for the second most dominant brand, with each offering 23 products that spanned multiple categories (e.g., waffles, juice boxes, crackers, fruit snacks, entrees, ice cream treats). Betty Crocker, Kraft, Dare, and Schneider’s also had a notable presence in the arena of kids’ foods (with 15 to 19 products offered under each brand).

The category of Dry Goods contained the largest number of fun foods: 226 products or approximately 64% of the sample. Fruit snacks predominated in this category (21% of the Dry Goods were fruit snacks or applesauce), followed by cookies/biscuits (19%), and then cereal (14%), which indicates the popularity of child-targeted snacks or treats. Dairy came second (52 products or 15% of the sample), with cheese predominating (comprising 39% of all dairy products), followed by flavoured milk or milkshakes (31%) and yogurts (29%). The third most dominant category was Refrigerated/Frozen (Excluding Meat) (48 products; 14% of the sample). Populated by items like pizza pops or pogos and packaged lunches, such Frozen Foods combined to total 9% of all products analyzed. Largely absent, however, was the Produce category. Produce comprised roughly 1% of the sample and was severely limited in terms of variety. Baby carrots and small apples were the only fresh fruits and vegetables specifically targeted at children.6

As detailed in Table 1, 87% of the products coded fell outside of the cereal aisle. Fifty-seven percent of products were snacks or mixed/variable foods (i.e., a food that could span more than one category, such as lunch and snack), while 16.4% of the products coded were beverages.

### Package semiotics

#### Colour

Blue, yellow, red, and green dominate children’s food packaging (see Table 2), with blue predominating. Blue typifies products found in the Dairy, Refrigerated/Frozen Foods, and Frozen Desserts categories (these combine to comprise 34% of the total sample of blue used as a dominant colour and 38% as a secondary colour), and is the most popular primary colour in the Dry Goods category (64%). Over half (57%) of the cereal, snack, and granola bars used blue as a primary colour, as did 42% of cookies/biscuits and 35% of cereals.

Yellow ranks second as a primary colour for packaging and is the top secondary colour used. Roughly 15% of the products in the Dry Goods category featured yellow. Drink crystals/powders or syrups (36%) and cookies/biscuits (19%) were products most likely to display yellow as a dominant colour. Despite the small cell sizes, there is a sig-

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**Table 1: Types of fun food represented in supermarket**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food type</th>
<th>Frequency (no.)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverage</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/variable</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>354</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significant difference between the Dry Goods category and colour (Cramer’s V = .223; df = 50; p-value = .001), a difference also present within some other food categories (namely, Dairy and Refrigerated/Frozen Foods).

Assumed target audience
While fun foods are created for children, marketers equally have to convince parents to buy. Approximately 9% of the products were directed solely at children; 10% were directed at teenagers; and 27% might appeal to both children and teenagers. Yet over half of the products (55%) made a specific appeal to parents on the package, reflecting parents’ central role in selecting food for their children.

For example, Yoplait’s Tubes and Minigo products claim to have 25% less sugar, to be a source of calcium and vitamin D, and to contain no artificial colour. SunRype’s FunBites fruit snacks shaped like sea creatures—clearly targeted at children—also promise parents (on the back of the package) that “there’s nothing fake for you to worry about.” Products such as Dare RealFruit fruit snacks, Wagon Wheels, and Bear Paws cookies help parents to solve the weekday lunch-making routine by affirming on the front of the package: “Ideal for the lunch box.” Black Diamond’s Cheestrings, which promise fun (and direct children to www.cheestrings.ca, “where you can play games”), also inform parents on “a child’s daily needs for milk products as per Canada’s food guide.” Finally, the Earth’s Best brand—which includes hot and cold cereals, cookies, and crackers—appeals to parents on both a nutritional and a moral level. Earth’s Best products all advertise specific nutrients on the front of the pack (e.g., whole grains, excellent source of iron, zinc, and B vitamins). Products such as Earth’s Best On-the-Go O’s cereal, along with the rest of the Earth’s Best line, are framed as a means to “Help your child make healthy habits an important and FUN part of everyday life!” Accompanying the claim that these packaged goods are “a nutritious way for kids to jumpstart their active day” (a commonplace affirmation, with minor variations, on breakfast foods), Earth’s Best also provides, on the side of several boxes, “Tips for Raising Happy Healthy Children.” Some of these tips relate to child-feeding but others set out expectations for parent behaviour. They tell parents not to be discouraged over a picky eater; to “BE PATIENT” and to “present new foods to your picky child in fun, colourful, and creative ways.” Earth’s Best Letter of the Day Cookies tell parents to “Be a role model” since children imitate what parents do in terms of making food choices. They also instruct parents to

Table 2: Dominant and secondary colours of fun foods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of products</th>
<th>Dominant colour</th>
<th>Secondary colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicoloured</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Set aside some time each day to move and play with your children. Dance to music together! Do jumping jacks! Take a family walk! Move and groove like a favorite animal!

Children's food marketing thus becomes a vehicle for parental instruction (what to pack for lunch, how to raise a happy child).

**Font and graphics**

Specialized fonts and graphics work to signal fun food to children and their parents. Many packages (69%) contained a cartoonish or “crayoned” font, while most (86%) displayed a cartoon image on the front of the package—typically an anthropomorphized animal or figure (52%) or (cartoon) children. More than one in every five products (22%) relied on cross-merchandising (i.e., licensed characters) to attract attention, including Shrek, SpongeBob SquarePants, Star Trek characters, or the range of Sesame Street, Disney, or Looney Tunes characters. Notable here is the existence of product lines, rather than discrete products, that have teamed up with characters from children’s media programming to capture attention. Safeway Inc. and Warner Bros. Consumer Products have partnered to use animated Looney Tunes characters for the Eating Right Kids brand—a better-for-you line of food products for children. Disney’s Garden Line uses popular Disney characters such as Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy to promote pre-cut fruits and vegetables. And Earth’s Best has partnered with Sesame Street for its line of products, featuring the likes of Cookie Monster, Elmo, Big Bird, and Abby Caddaby.

**Appeals to fun and value systems**

The moment we label something, we start to erect frames and expectations around that object: labelling starts the process of meaning making. This certainly applies to the labelling of “fun food,” which exists not only as a conceptual category but as a literal one as well. Fun is not merely communicated through child-targeted cartoons and fun fonts, but also literally asserted. There is Black Diamond’s Fun Cheez, Kellogg’s Eggo Fun Pix waffles, and SunRype’s FunBites fruit snacks. Fun is used in connection with product characteristics, such as “alphabet shaped fun fries,” “fun animal shapes,” “assorted fun colours,” and “fun flavours.” Fun is associated with product packaging (such Kellogg’s “Fun Pac” of cereals). Edibles are also framed as a gateway to fun, as with Eggo’s imperative to “Visit Eggo.ca for more Eggo fun” or Cheestrings’ “Visit Cheesy at www.cheestrings.ca where you can play games ...” One in every five products directly referenced fun on the back or side of the packaging, while 14 products made “fun” claims a front-of-pack priority.

The expectations created around such naming suggest (and often literally affirm) a very particular outcome—the fun experience of consuming the product. Fruit snacks and cookie packages claim that they’re “fun to eat!” Kool-Aid drink crystals instruct consumers to “mix up some fun!” and squeezable yogurt tubes claim to be “a lot of fun.” Crunchin’ Crackers assert, “Enjoy snacking fun with Big Bird and Elmo in every bite” (i.e., the crackers are shaped like Big Bird and Elmo). Saputo Frigo Cheese Heads state, “Snacktime. Playtime. Anytime’s a funtime,” an affirmation that not only functions to correlate Cheese Heads with fun, but also makes the two (fun and Cheese Heads) syn-
onymous (as do the names Fun Cheez, Fun Pix, and FunBites). Similarly, Sipahh Milk Flavouring straws promise “fun—anytime, anywhere,” suggesting that the edible in itself (like a toy or portable video game) is the means of generating fun. Finally, fun is also connoted by the use of unusual product names and/or flavors (55%) and verbal claims to the product’s unique characteristics. Seven percent of the sample verbally emphasized the food’s interactive qualities (e.g., food is stackable, stretchable, peelable, shreddable) or its transformative properties (e.g., food changes colour, size, or shape).8

Signifiers of fun, existing in the food names, shapes, and promised experiences around “entertained” eating, are reinforced by the use of games or activities. Approximately 15% of products urge kids to “collect points,” “enter a contest,” use a coupon for another product (e.g., movie or zoo passes, Lego, branded T-shirts), or use a code—on or inside the package—for access to a website or a free download. Three of every 10 products offer a game or activity on the back of the package. There are find-an-object games, which generally involve “finding” the edible itself on the box (e.g., “Play spot the mini Ritz Crackers!” or “How many Froot Loops® Doubles cereal pieces can you find in this picture?”). There are mazes, word searches, and counting games.10 Some packages direct children to a website (13%), promise involvement by allowing children to choose a new flavour or colour (3%), or provide a game to play using the food itself (23%). While a small percentage of products (5%) provided educational information for children, such as information about wildlife or animals, even fewer had nutrition-related activities on the back of the package. Less than 1% of all products coded had nutrition-related activities on the back of the package.

Nutrition claims

Even though few packages contained games or activities related to nutrition, nutrition claims were prevalent. Roughly seven out of every 10 products (69%) make one or more nutrition claims on the front of the box (see Table 3). Products claim to have no artificial flavours or colours (12%), to be a source of calcium (12%) or vitamin C (10%). Thirteen percent of products emphasize that they are trans-fat free.11 Yet, echoing numerous recent critiques of front-of-pack claims, one cannot generalize the overall “healthfulness” of a product from single—or multiple—claims to nutrition.

Just under three out of every four products coded (73%) derive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>Frequency (no.)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No trans-fats</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of calcium</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No artificial flavours or colours</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of vitamin C</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole grain/fibre</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of vitamin D</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real juice</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of iron</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peanut-free</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low fat</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Check</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
over 20% of their calories from sugar. Within the Dry Goods category, the percentage of calories coming from sugar is consistently high. For fruit snacks/applesauce, the average percentage of calories coming from sugar is 67; for puddings/Jell-Os, the average is 60; and for cereal, 32. Cookies/biscuits have an average of 37% of calories coming from sugar; snack bars/cereal bars have an average of 31. In the Dairy category, child-targeted flavoured milks/milkshakes average 67% of their calories from sugar, while yogurts average 48%. Yet 72% of the products with high levels of sugar also have one or more nutrition claims on the front of the package.

Package and food observations
Fifty-five percent of products were packaged for portability, emphasizing the notion of eating outside the home or while on the go. Some packages were “kid sized” (17%) or were unusually shaped (26%). Sometimes the food itself was “kid sized” (i.e., made for small mouths, 16%) or unusually shaped. Over one-third of the edibles (34%) were formed into animals, fish, shapes, or letters, or were twisted or rolled up. Twelve percent of the products had unique qualities, the most significant of which was interactivity (5.4%). Interactivity means that children were deliberately intended to engage with the food—perhaps to peel it or stretch it—as is the case with many fruit snacks or cheese strings. Products such as Dunkaroos SLAMDunkers emphasize the interactive, and rather artificial, nature of the Dunkaroos cookie, exclaiming on the front of the package: “Now With BasketBall Cookie Shapes And Orange Frosting!” (as well as the fact that its frosting offers Rainbow Sprinkles).12

Twelve percent of products were unusually coloured for the food itself, with the most popular “hue” being multicoloured (10%). These combinations of red, yellow, purple, pink, green, et cetera are mostly found in fruit snacks, and sometimes in cereals or “striped” yogurts. This confetti approach to food works to underscore its general sense of “fun,” while also serving to distance the edible from the unprocessed foods found in nature.

Discussion
Packages are standing advertisements on store shelves. Referred to as “the silent salesman” (Pilditch, 1973) or “two-second commercials” (Cato, 1985, p. 29), packages—and food packages in particular—are powerful communicators. This is certainly the case for child-oriented supermarket products, which now pervade the supermarket. “Regular” food, especially in the categories of Dry Goods, Dairy, and Refrigerated/Frozen Foods, is now commonly marketed as “fun” to children using a range of techniques. Previous studies have observed a process of de-cerealization in the supermarket (Elliot, 2008), and this research supports the observation, given that 87% of the products coded fell outside of the cereal aisle. (That breakfast foods comprised 13% of the total sample should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in the quantity of child-targeted cereals. In fact, market research indicates that the market for breakfast foods in the United States is on the rise.) Overall, this study suggests a solidification of fun foods for eating occasions other than breakfast. It also draws attention to the fact that several product lines (rather than discrete products) aimed at children exist, which have also teamed up with characters from children’s media programming to capture
attention. Such findings illustrate that the world of children’s packaged food products is increasingly subsumed by other elements of children’s commercial culture.

Even though policy initiatives consistently target the advertising of foods high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium (PHAC, 2010; WHA, 2010; WHO, 2009), much more is at stake—in terms of both health and policy—when it comes to marketing fun foods to children. Careful attention needs to be paid to the symbolic marketing aimed at children, because it communicates critical ideas about food and children’s relationship with food. After all, children’s food is a cultural category, “not simply a reference point for distinctions in relation to what people of different generations eat” (James, Kjorholt, & Tingstad, 2009, p. 6)—and it is a category that has been taken up and shaped by the food industry with very particular consequences.

Given this, the marketing of children’s food is not simply about its nutritional profile, despite the tendency (particularly in policy circles) to focus attention solely on HFSS foods. Such nutritionism is problematic, because it fails to observe several, more significant implications of marketing food as fun (Elliott, 2008). These include three main issues, which will be addressed below.

**Standardizing taste and promoting eatertainment**

The core of child-targeted food pivots on the framing of food as fun. Fun is found in the names of the products and their flavours, in their unusual shapes and sometimes unusual colours, in their cross-merchandising appeals, in the food descriptions on the package, or in the way that the foods are designed to break normal conventions of eating (i.e., food is to be played with). Even though the current trend in marketing is toward customization or personalization (Horovitz, 2011; York & Cancino, 2011), child-oriented food packaging is not about customizing to suit an individual child’s taste and preferences. Rather, it is about standardizing taste/experience under the theme of fun. Food thus becomes a heightened example of trans-toying, in which everyday objects are converted into objects of play (Schor, 2004).

This marketing strategy has substantial implications. Valuing food for its fun factor has no bearing on health or nutrition, an idea supported by the fact that the child-targeted packaged foods in this study did not typically promote nutrition/nutritional awareness to children (even though appeals to health were made to parents). Framing food as “fun” collapses all products—irrespective of nutritional value—under one, standardized thematic. The emotional connection being promoted as a consequence is not without difficulties, because it encourages children to approach eating primarily as a type of entertainment. This matters because externally manufactured food cues teach children to overlook internal cues to satiety (Kessler, 2010). Plausibly, children may ask to eat or snack because of the play involved instead of hunger, or they may eat more than necessary because the food is “fun.” This argument is not purely speculative; consumer research shows that environmental and situational cues associated with eating can influence overall food intake (Shimizu, Payne, & Wansink, 2010). Adults, research has also shown, eat considerably more when distracted or engaged in other activities (Wansink, 2006). This practice might equally apply to children distracted by their food. And even though policymakers might be concerned by recent findings that young children (ages four to six) rated the taste of identical cereal higher
when the box featured licensed cartoon characters (Lapierre, Vaala, & Linebarger, 2011),
the issue at hand is far broader than manipulating children’s taste through packaging
appeals. It has to do with relationships with food, and with quantity.

**Food quantity, portability, and normalizing eatertainment**

The question of food quantity is important because “portion distortion” is frequently
singled out as a key contributor to increasing rates of overweight or obesity. When
viewed in light of children's fun food, the implications pertaining to portion distortion
prove quite complex. A study conducted by Cornell’s Food and Brand lab, for example,
reported that preschoolers would eat 50% more vegetables when they were given
catchy names (Wansink, 2009, p. 1). Apparently, this is because “giving a food a fun
name makes kids think it will be more fun to eat” (p. 1). Yet if children double up on
their serving sizes just because of catchy names and appeals to fun, then what about
the fact that virtually all child-oriented supermarket consumables (from cereals to
cookies) have these characteristics? Seemingly, such characteristics in packaged food
products set up children to consistently overeat.

Besides portion distortion, eating too much is equally attributed to promoting food
as “an inexpensive form of entertainment” and to its ubiquity (Kessler, 2009, pp. 80,
250). The strategy of marketing edibles as a gateway to fun, as this analysis reveals of
child-targeted packaged foods, is thus problematic. As detailed, children’s packaged
products may provide the vehicle to fun by promoting (or allowing for) other activi-
ties—such as the cereal boxes with passes to the zoo or movies, or the products that di-
rect children to games on websites or offer the chance to win prizes. And the gateway
appears to be increasingly enlarged: compared to a 2008 analysis of child-targeted su-
permarket foods, in which 28% of products were unusually shaped (Elliott, 2008), this
study revealed a notable increase in the number of unusually shaped foods (34%), per-
haps reflecting an acceptance, or even expectation, of trans-toying when it comes to
children’s food.

Even the foods themselves—the pink waffles and purple squiggleable yogurts (in
tubes), the multicoloured and/or squiggly fruit snacks, the “Xplosive pizza” flavoured
crackers—pivot on fun, a marketing strategy that matters because it works to normal-
ize the idea of evaluating food in light of its fun factor. We might fairly ask: why does
food have to be fun? Children’s food products are currently the only edibles promoted
for their capacity to entertain.

Eatertainment does not fulfill the goal to help promote the health of children.
Moreover, the fact that 55% of the foods analyzed were packaged for portability is not
simply a matter of convenience (a positive thing) but could have the unintended con-
sequence of encouraging all-the-time eating. As a box of brownie Bear Paws cookies
asserts: “[T]win wrapped in a fresh pack, Bear Paws are the ideal cookie to snack on
anywhere and anytime!” Since a negligible fraction of the child-targeted foods in the
study were fruits and vegetables (1%), there are significant implications to increasing
the convenience of eating cookies, et cetera. Apples, oranges, baby tomatoes, and a
range of fruits and vegetables equally offer portability and convenience, yet such un-
processed edibles are disadvantaged in the current food environment because they
do not typically have multi-million-dollar advertising budgets driving their promotion.
Marketing strategies that promote the “anytime” eating possibilities of cookies and similar processed foods do not work to advance the health of children.

**Package semiotics and the complex nature of “healthier for you” products**

The significance of the package semiotics extends beyond the colours used, although a nod to this is warranted. The popularity of blue on the packages analyzed is possibly due to its consumer association with “high quality” (Kauppinen-Raisanen & Luomala, 2010, p. 290). Blue equally connotes “coolness” (Birren, 1961), a logical explanation for its prevalence in the Dairy, Refrigerated/Frozen Foods, and Frozen Desserts categories. Yellow, which ranked second as a primary colour for packaging (and the top secondary colour used), also is expected, since vivid colours such as yellow (and red) have a high capacity to attract attention (Kauppinen-Raisanen & Luomala, 2010). The “conspicuity” of these colours (Green, 2001) makes them an excellent choice for encouraging point-of-purchase sales.

Although statistically significant differences in colour use in all fun foods do exist, one must be careful not to conclude that the “quality”-communicating blue or attention-grabbing yellow (and red) is unique to child-targeted food. More likely the use of these colours reflects broader patterns of colour use in food marketing. Moreover, the presence of child-targeted brands, which may use consistent colour combinations to communicate products within the brand line, means that the blue of Mini Chefs or the green and white of Eating Right Kids is found across several categories of food.

Although these packaging colours may in themselves be innocuous, a more problematic aspect of child-targeted packaging exists. Identical marketing techniques are used on products of varying nutritional quality. Cartoon images, fun names, and appeals to interactivity and entertainment are as likely to be found on cheese strings as on cookies. Products high in sugar, fat, and/or sodium frequently had front-of-pack nutrition claims, trumpeting other component parts of the product (see Table 3). Although policy approaches related to obesity often emphasize the need to make the healthy choice the easy choice, the healthy choice is complicated by these front-of-pack claims, as well as the identical packaging appeals found on healthy and less healthy products.

This said, several laudable developments exist. Compared to an earlier study (Elliott, 2008), fewer products trumpet the artificial aspects of the food or emphasize as a selling feature their (respective product’s) distance from natural or unprocessed edibles. Instead, almost 12% of the products claim on the front of the package to have *No artificial colours or flavours*; in terms of ingredient listing, 45% of the products studied contain no artificial colours and no artificial flavours. Further, in response to increased consumer interest in health (Jacobsen, 2011; Scott-Thomas, 2010; Starling, 2010), a solid number of “better for you” products are now targeted at children. Of the 354 fun foods purchased, about a quarter of the items (82 products) could be classified as “better for you” due to the brand’s (or individual product’s) emphasis on *health, natural, organic,* or *environmental* aspects. This compares to only 14% of products from the 2008 dataset and is a positive indicator of the food industry’s responsiveness to consumer demand. Even though it is not the focus of this analysis, it is
worth noting that statistically, better-for-you products were indeed better nutritionally than the “regular” fun food—although “healthier” is not synonymous with healthy, and a few exceptions exist. For instance, in certain cases the “better for you” products had an equal percentage of calories, or even more calories, coming from sugar than their “regular” fun food counterparts (Elliott, 2012).

Yet, and to reiterate, a challenge arises because the better-for-you products still use the exact same appeals to fun and the exact same techniques to attract attention (“fun” shapes, cartoon images, et cetera) as the “regular” fun foods. In fact, the better-for-you food had a higher percentage of products that directly reference “fun” somewhere on the package. Approximately 29% of the better-for-you products make a direct statement about “fun” somewhere on the package, compared to 23% of the “regular” products. Eating for entertainment thus triumphs any consideration of health. Such appeals also suggest that a very critical point is being missed. “Good” food should not have to be fun to be valued. Even considering the better-for-you foods, a key fact remains: fruits and vegetables comprised only 1% of the sample, and less than 1% of products coded promoted nutrition-related activities on the package. Despite the ever-increasing interest in children’s health and nutrition—and the fact that inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption has been deemed “an important public health issue” (Shields, 2004)—children’s fare in the world of produce remains limited, as do the food package appeals that specifically promote nutrition to children.

Overall, the marketing of foods to children in the supermarket raises a number of important communication and policy considerations that can work to promote, rather than undermine, the health of our children. It is indisputable that both fun food and its packaging communicate powerful messages about eating and about what should be valued when it comes to food. One has to seriously consider the long-term consequences of such a marketing strategy. Foregrounding fun has nothing to do with health or nutrition, and eating for entertainment promotes overeating and problematic relationships with food. Such messages targeted to children equally fail to promote the value of whole, unprocessed foods. Communicating the value of unprocessed fruits and vegetables, or of food origins, consequently remains the responsibility of parents, schools, and governmental initiatives. And while the food industry certainly should not be expected to launch campaigns promoting unprocessed fruits and vegetables, it is reasonable to expect that the marketing of processed food should not unduly complicate (or undermine) individual and societal efforts to make healthy food choices, promote good nutrition, and create positive relationships with food for children.

Notes
1. For example, soda pop, potato chips/cheezeies/nachos, and confectionery products.
3. As earlier noted, this project revisits the 2008 study titled “Marketing Fun Foods: A Profile and Analysis of Supermarket Food Messages Targeted at Children” (Elliott, 2008) and follows the same research design and lines of questioning. In so doing, it seeks to illuminate developments [(since the original study)] in child-targeted packaged foods and the significance of such developments.
4. Other variables pertaining to the package included the presence or type of nutrition claims, whether the product made any “unique” product claims, and whether a game or activity was present on the back of the package. The variables pertaining to the food itself dealt with whether the product was unusually coloured (e.g., blue fries, pink fruit snacks), unusually shaped (e.g., animals, letters), or had other special or fun qualities—such as changing colour (with the addition of milk or water) or even glowing in the dark.

5. This criterion was selected because it assesses the percentage of sugars (rather than an absolute cut-off regardless of portion size) and therefore allows for a more nuanced analysis. Although current recommendations for sugar pertain to added sugars, not naturally occurring sugars found in fruit or milk, product labels do not distinguish between the two. This means that the Nutrition Facts table must be read at face value.

6. Several months after the data collection period was complete, Disney Garden Quick Snacks became available in Safeway. Safeway offered Disney Garden fresh carrots and apples, cut and packaged in small bags with Disney character themes. Disney’s website indicates that celery and snap peas were part of the lineup, although they were not seen in the Calgary-based store used for the study.

7. Note that the Disney Garden line of products was not included in this particular study.

8. Products such as Dole’s Squish’ems, Yoplait’s Tubes, and (most recently) Danone’s Crush yogurt emphasize the edible’s interactivity right in the product name. Their containers are designed to be squished or “crushed” straight into the child’s mouth. (Note that Danone Crush was launched after the data collection phase. It is referenced here because of the tendency of yogurt brands, as well as cheese, to emphasize interactivity in their product promotion. This emphasis is unique to children’s yogurt/cheese and is not evident in “regular” yogurt or cheese brands.) Cheese strings are created to be peeled—a feature that cheese did not previously offer—and various fruit snacks ripped and/or unrolled.

9. The box also instructs readers to “Go to FrootLoops.ca for solutions and more fruity fun!”

10. This includes Barnum’s Arrowroot Animal Crackers in Dinosaur Shapes. The text on the box instructs children to “count how many different dinosaurs there are inside” the package.

11. As Table 3 reveals, the four most popular claims included No trans-fats, Source of calcium, No artificial flavours or colours, and Source of vitamin C. The “no trans fats” claim was most prevalent in the Dry Goods category, and found on 62% of the crackers and 30% of the cookies/biscuits. Source of calcium was most prevalent in the Dairy category (found on 46% of dairy products). No artificial flavours or colours was most prevalent in the category of Dry Goods, particularly with crackers (46% of crackers make this claim).

12. Similarly, Betty Crocker Mouth Mixers Create Your Colour Fruit Gushers call to “Check out what 2 colour combinations make your tongue turn different colours.” They instruct children on what two fruit gushers to eat simultaneously in order to turn their tongues purple, green, or orange.

13. Canadian data was not available. However, American market research affirms that the breakfast food market “rebounded” in 2010, with a 32.7% increase in new cereal product stock units in 2010 (i.e., 377 new breakfast cereals in the United States) compared to 2009 (Vierhile, 2011). Prepared Foods announced that these product launches showed that “breakfast was back” (Vierhile, 2011).

References


Horovitz, Bruce. (2011, February 21). Kraft hopes to make splash with new MiO water flavoring. *USA Today*.


