



# Do Embodied Food Characters Make Children from Lower-SES Homes “Happy©”?

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## Introduction

- Childhood obesity is associated with child-directed marketing of food & beverages.
- Marketing practice of branded characters: mascots created by companies to sell their products.<sup>1</sup>
- Children from lower-SES households could be more vulnerable to child-directed marketing practices because they have greater exposure to television advertisements compared to higher-SES households.<sup>2</sup>

### Purpose

To assess the role that SES plays in children’s knowledge of, & preferences for, foods & drinks marketed by branded characters.

### Research Questions

- RQ<sub>1</sub>) How many children know the names of food & drink products that feature branded characters on the packaging?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>) Are there characteristics of branded characters that make foods & drinks more memorable to children?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>) Who are children’s *favorite* branded characters?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>) How do children’s favorite branded characters differ among children from lower & higher SES households?
- RQ<sub>5</sub>) Are there differences in the products children request & the products parents purchase based on household SES?

## Method

- Preschool children ( $N = 81$ , 42 girls, 39 boys, mean age = 4.8 years, 21 from lower SES households, 60 from higher SES households) saw pictures of 14 branded food & drink characters on an iPad.
- Children were asked questions about each character, such as “What is this character’s name?” and “Have you seen this character on a food or a drink?”

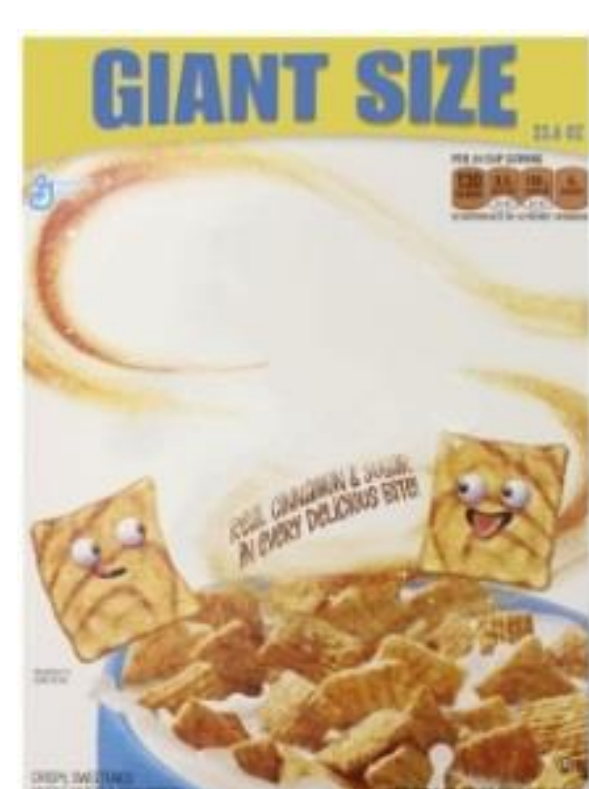


- If children did not recall a character’s name, they were given three name choices and instructed to choose which name they thought was correct, e.g.,

“Are these **Crazy Squares**, **Sassy Squares**, or **Chewy Squares**?”

- If children did not recall a character’s product, they were shown three pictures of food products featuring the character & instructed to choose where they thought the character belonged, e.g.,

“Do they belong on **cereal**, **chips**, or **milk**?”

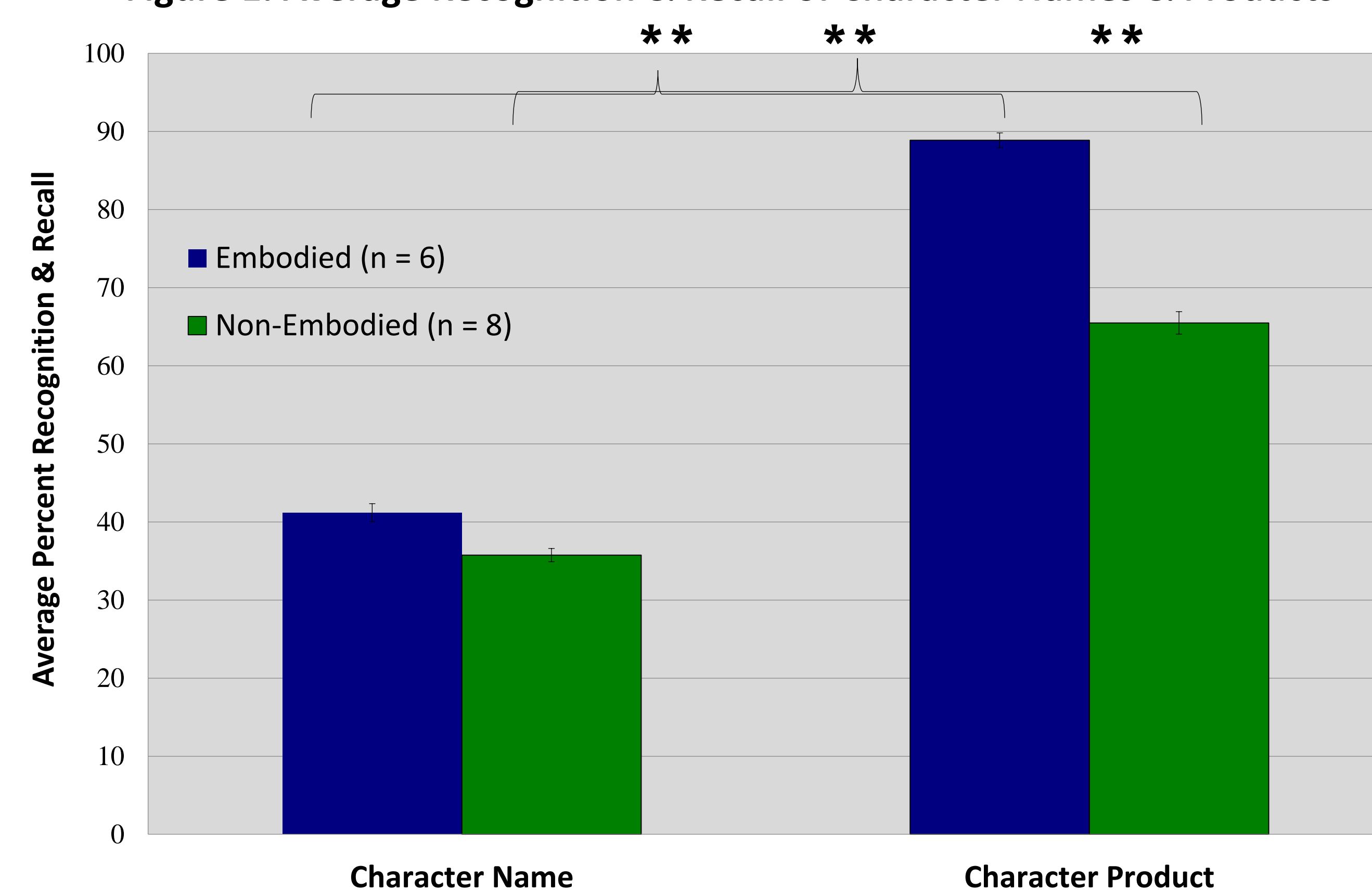


- Children were then asked to select & answer questions about their favorite character from those that they remembered best.<sup>3</sup>

## Results

RQ<sub>1</sub> & RQ<sub>2</sub>)

Figure 1. Average Recognition & Recall of Character Names & Products



\*\*  $p < .001$  for the main effects of type of recall (name vs. product), embodiment, and recall x embodiment interaction

### Embodied Characters:

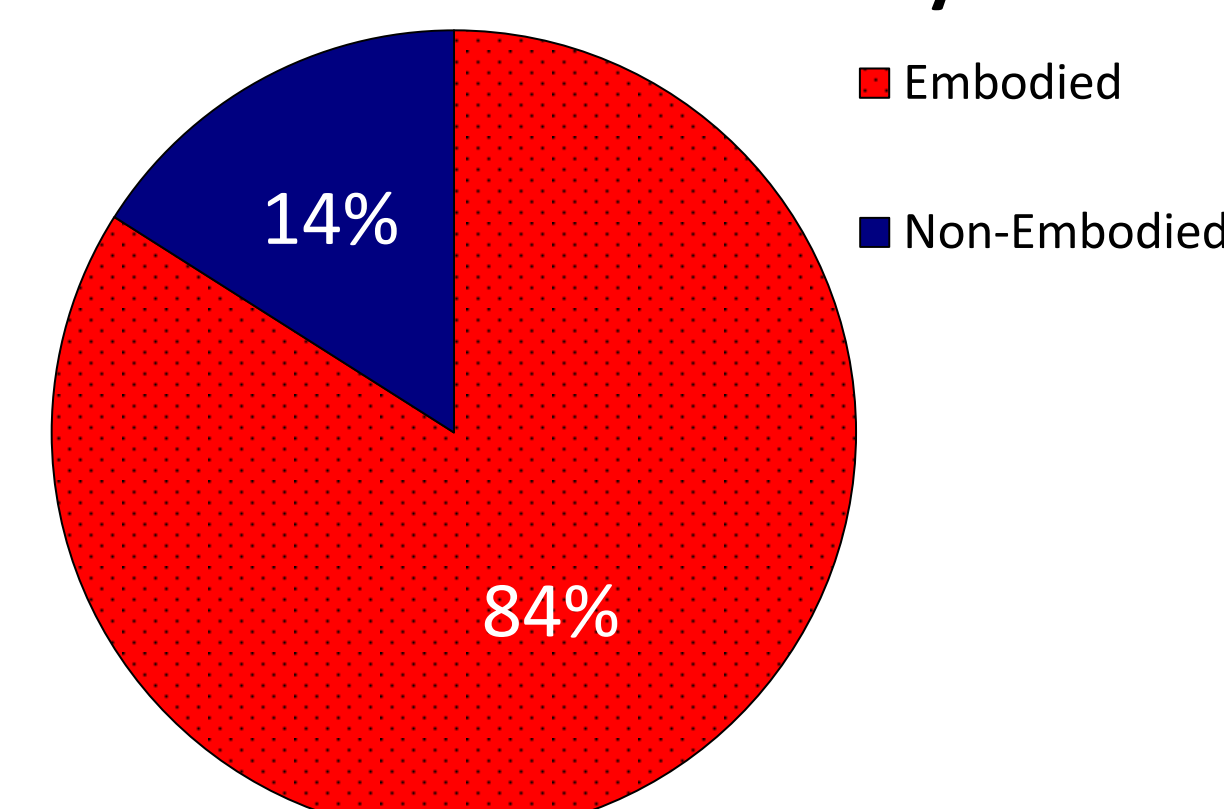
Characters look like the product they are selling (see examples below).



Figure 2: Children Favored Characters by Embodiment

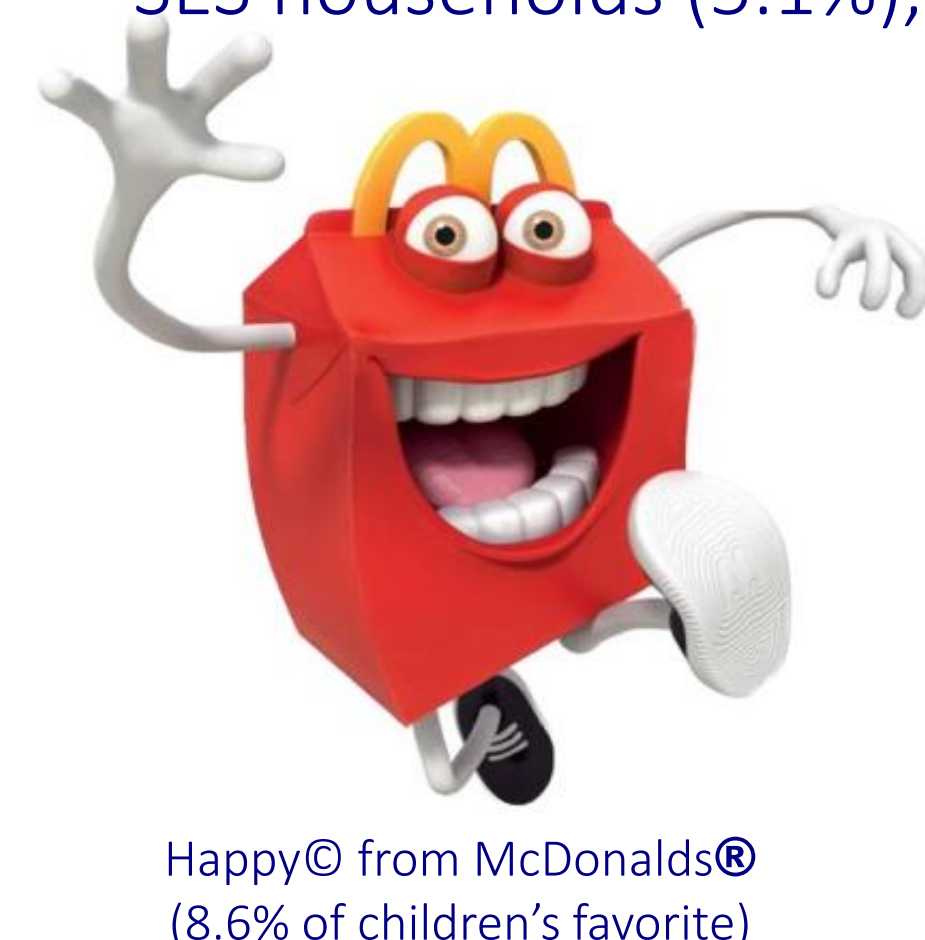
RQ<sub>3</sub>)

- When asked to select a *favorite* branded character, 84% of children selected an embodied character.



RQ<sub>4</sub>)

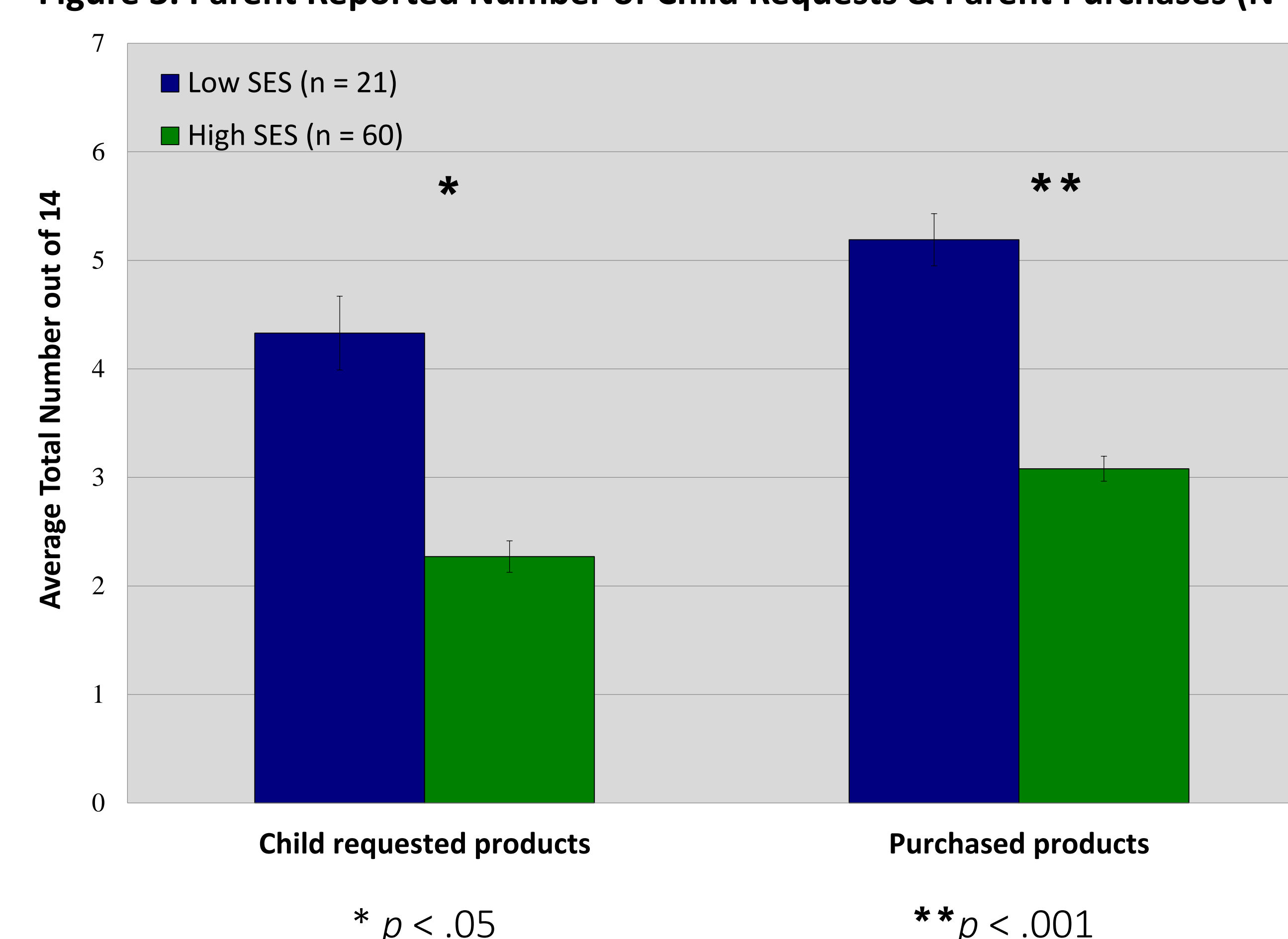
- Children from lower SES households (22.2%) were 4 times more likely to choose the embodied Happy© from McDonalds® (i.e., looks like a Happy Meal) as a favorite branded food character compared to children from higher SES households (5.1%),  $p = .05$ .
- Parents in lower SES households (75%) were more likely to report that their child requested McDonalds® products compared to parents in higher SES households (40%),  $p = .009$ .
- Parents in lower SES households (70%) were also more likely to report purchasing McDonalds® products compared to parents in higher SES households (41.7%),  $p = .03$ .



## Results

RQ<sub>5</sub>)

Figure 3. Parent Reported Number of Child Requests & Parent Purchases ( $N = 81$ )



- Of the 14 products, parents from lower SES households reported more overall child requests for these products & reported buying more of these products than parents in higher SES households.

## Discussion

- Children knew more products with embodied characters & demonstrated a preference for these characters. This suggests that embodiment enhances children’s familiarity with food & drink products.
- Children from lower SES homes preferred Happy© from McDonalds® as their favorite character. Parents from lower SES homes also reported more child requests for McDonalds® & recent purchases at McDonalds®.
- Parents in lower SES homes reported a greater number of child requests for, and purchases of, food & drink products marketed.
- Pattern of lower SES families may be related to their increased consumption of unhealthy products, which are relatively low in nutritional value.
- Embodied characters & family environments affect children’s food preferences & consumption patterns, potentially leading to “un-happy” health outcomes.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Calvert, S. L. (2008). Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 205-234.
- <sup>2</sup>Comstock, G., & Scharrer, E. (2012). The use of television and other screen media. In D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children in the media* (pp. 13-44). London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- <sup>3</sup>Richards, M. L. & Calvert, S.L. (2017). Parent versus Child Report of Young Children's Parasocial Relationships. *Journal of Children and Media*. DOI: 0.1080/17482798.2016.115750

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