



Embodied Food Characters: The Unhidden Persuaders in Children's Knowledge about and Preferences for Foods & Beverages

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Introduction

- Marketing is an influential technique to sell foods and beverages to children.¹
- Given the practice of marketing unhealthy products to children, efforts have been made to investigate the influence of media characters on children's product preferences and purchase requests.²
- Some advertisers use branded characters, which represent companies and serve as mascots designed to sell products, to market to children.³
- These "unhidden persuaders" are not currently regulated and little is known about their properties as influencers of children's decisions.²

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to assess the role that branded characters play in children's knowledge of, and preferences for, foods and drinks.

Research Questions

- RQ₁) How many children know the names of food and drink products that feature branded characters on their packaging?
- RQ₂) How many children know the characters' names who are on those packages?
- RQ₃) Are there characteristics of branded characters that make them more memorable to children?
- RQ₄) Are there unique characteristics of children's favorite branded characters?
- RQ₅) Do parents report that their child requests and that they purchase the products represented by their child's favorite character?

Method

- Preschool children ($N = 57$, 29 girls, mean age 4.8) saw pictures of 14 different branded food and beverage characters on an iPad and answered questions about each character. Questions included "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 the **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 and instructed to choose where they thought the character belonged. (e.g.,

"Do they belong on **cereal**, **chips**, or **milk**?"



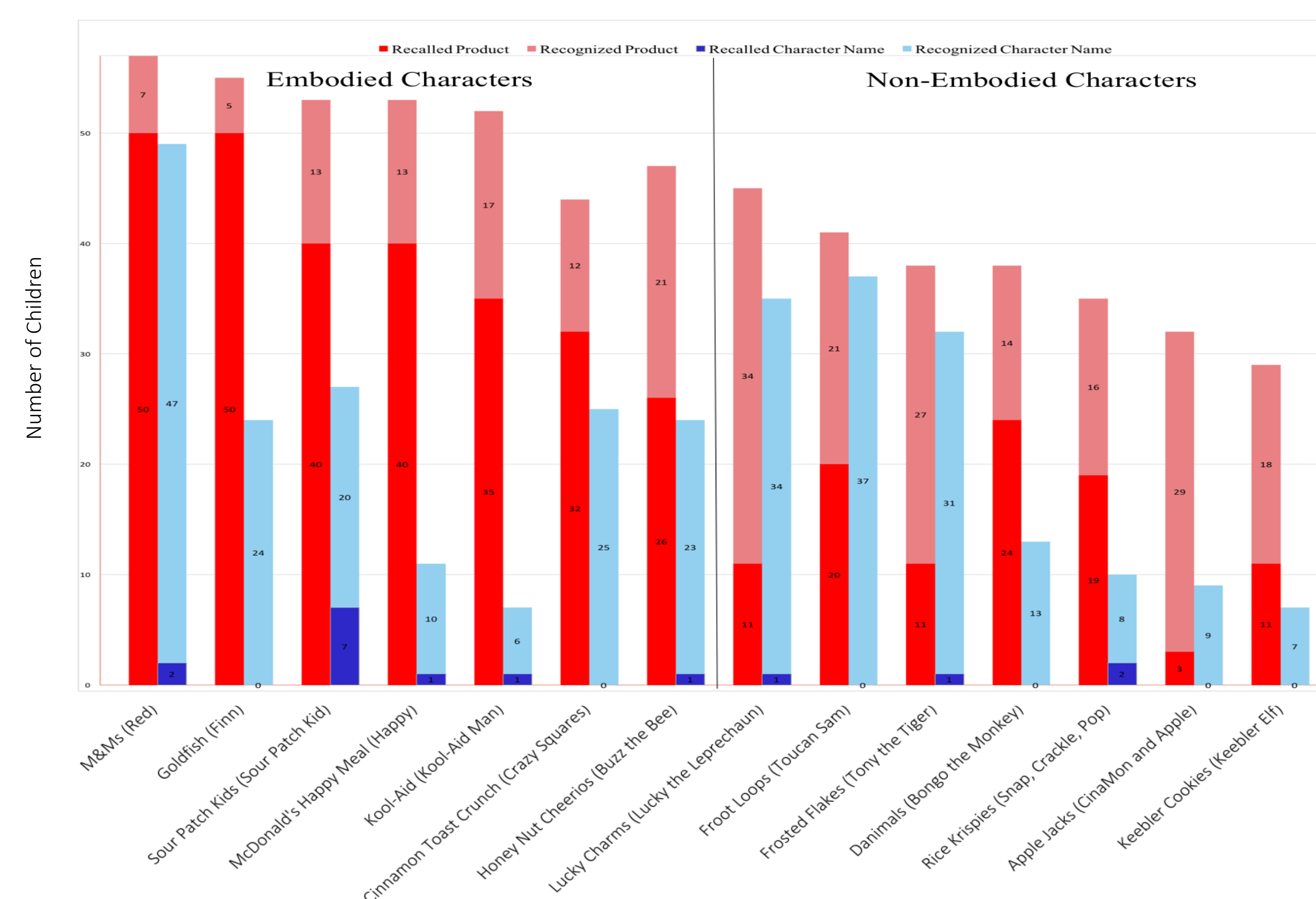
- Children were then asked to select and answer questions about their favorite character from those that they remembered best.⁴

Results

RQ₁ & RQ₂)

- Children knew almost twice the total number of names of food and drink products ($M = 10.86$, $SD = 2.65$) than the total number of branded character names ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.51$).
- Most known products: M&Ms, Goldfish, Sour Patch Kids, & McDonald's Happy Meal. See Figure 1.
- Most known character names: Red (M & M's), Toucan Sam (Froot Loops Cereal) & Lucky the Leprechaun (Lucky Charms Cereal). See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of Children Who Recalled and Recognized Products and Character Names



RQ₃)

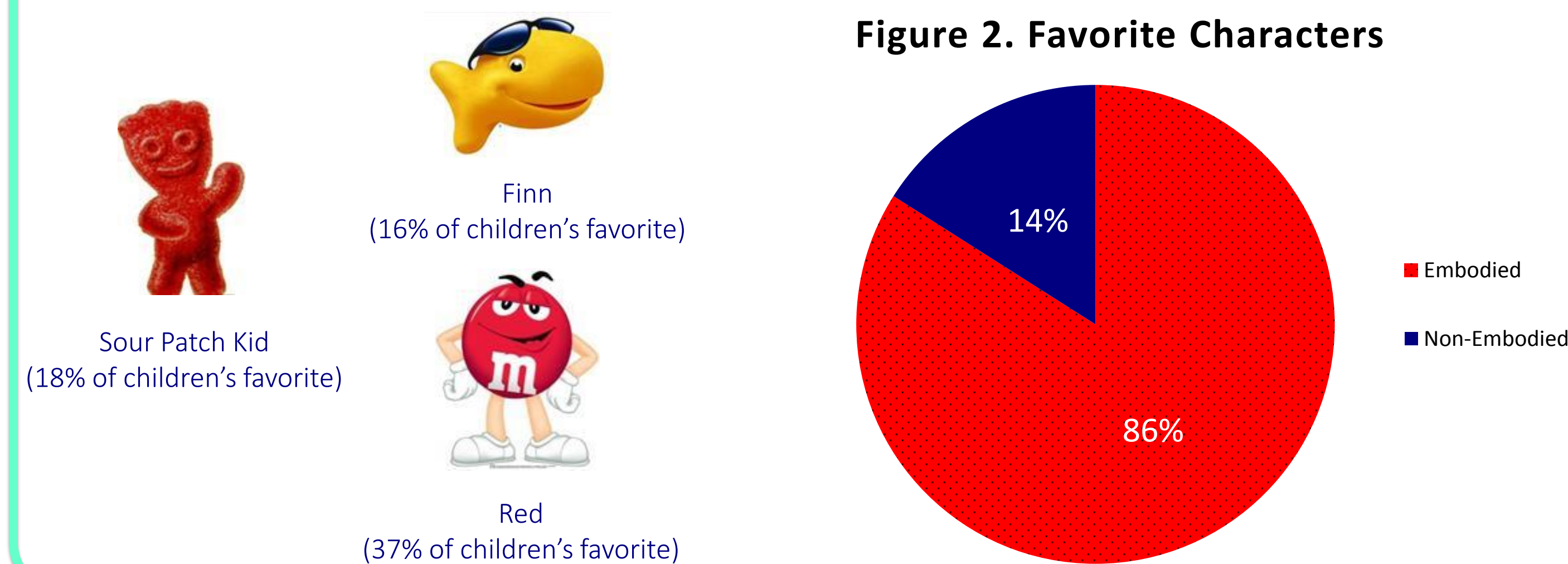
- Children remembered a greater percentage of the names of foods or drinks with branded characters who embody their products ($M = .918$, $SD = .158$) than those with branded characters who do not embody their products ($M = .669$, $SD = .252$), $t(57) = 8.725$, $p < .001$. (e.g., Sour Patch Kids is embodied as the food product; Tony the Tiger from Frosted Flakes is not). See Figure 1.
- This difference did not appear for children's knowledge of character names.



RQ₄)

- When asked to select a *favorite* branded character, 86% of children selected an embodied character of a product. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Favorite Characters



Results

RQ₅)

- 48% of parents reported that their child requested their favorite character's product.
- 45% of parents reported that they purchased that product.
- Those products were mostly represented by embodied characters. See Figures 3 & 4.

Figure 3. Selected Favorite Character When Child Requested Favorite Character's Product

	Chose Embodied Favorite Character	Chose Non-Embodied Favorite Character
Child Requested Favorite Character's Product	41% of sample	7% of sample

Figure 4. Selected Favorite Character When Parent Purchased Favorite Character's Product

	Chose Embodied Favorite Character	Chose Non-Embodied Favorite Character
Parent Purchased Favorite Character's Product	39% of sample	6% of sample

Discussion & Conclusion

- Children knew the names of more products with embodied characters. This suggests that the embodiment of the product provides a cue for children's memories of foods and drinks.
- Children also chose **embodied characters** as their **favorite** characters.
- Not only are embodied characters children's favorites, but they are also effective marketing tools. **Children were approximately six times more likely to request and parents were approximately six times more likely to purchase products with favorite embodied characters.**
- Branded characters on foods & drinks are not currently regulated. Given their influence on children's knowledge about and preferences for foods and drinks, the implications for public policy should be considered.

References

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