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Perspective

Food marketing and the regulation of children's taste: On packaged foods, paratexts, and prohibitions

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Abstract

Playing with food has long been understood as a part of childhood, with adults placing rules around children's eating. Over the past few decades, children's imaginative food play has been commodified by the food industry—the play has been packaged and sold back to children, with fun appeals, cartoon characters, and bright packaging used to identify packaged foods as 'for kids.' Yet with increasing rates of childhood obesity, the very foods designed to appeal to children are now subject to new forms of regulation. This Perspective explores how play and food are expressed and controlled in the world of children's packaged foods, including an exploration of how play and food are being promoted to children by the use of licensed characters from children's media culture. Specifically, I argue that there is particular purchase in recognizing licensed characters as *paratexts* (rather than simply cartoon appeals). Doing so reconfigures the conversations about child-targeted promotional appeals in new and significant ways, shifting the conversation from issues of obesity and regulation to those of media culture and commercialization.

Keywords: Food marketing; taste; child; packaging; regulation; food

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Don’t play with your food!

Such is the title of Jay Mechling’s delightful article in *Children’s Folklore Review,* which aims to “begin mapping the territory called ‘playing with food’” in order to better understand its meaning and functions (2000, p. 7). Although two decades old, the article still resonates. Mechling queries, “is there a person alive who hasn’t been told at some time “Don’t play with your food?” (2000, p. 7). His article explores why the “very triviality of food play” matters individually and socially (Mechling, 2000, p. 7). Children’s imaginary play with respect to food—be it creating “erupting volcanoes” out of mashed potatoes and gravy or biting the bottom off of a sugar cone to suck out the ice cream (Mechling, 2000, p. 13)—functions as a type of creative behaviour and expression of identity for children. The injunction “don’t play with your food”, he suggests, is an adult attempt to both establish rules around eating and to affirm power. Playing with food is one way children seek to demonstrate their own power; regulating and establishing rules around that play is how adults claim that power back.

The command “don’t play with your food!” neatly captures the various themes I wish to take up in this perspective, including notions of *food, children and identity*, and *play, governance and control*. Food is (obviously) sensory; children’s food play takes these sensory aspects, and then adds another tactile, imaginative layer of meaning. When adults place rules on children’s food play, complexity is added to the process; that is, children have their own tastes, but they are governed in particular ways.

Of the many potential angles one might consider on this topic, here I focus on how play and food are expressed, and also controlled, in the world of children’s packaged foods. My core argument is that the concept of ‘kids’ food’ has been powerfully advanced and channelled by the food industry, and central to that is the notion of fun. As promoted by the food industry, kids food is, by definition, ‘fun’ (Elliott, 2012; 2015). Fun and play are key to these foods—trumpeted from the packaging (with cartoon characters, colourful labels and fun names)—and sometimes found in the shapes and colours of the food itself. Due to rising rates of childhood obesity, however, the very appeals used to make foods ‘fun’ for kids are now viewed (by governments, the public health community and others) as ‘risky’ and requiring of regulation (Elliott, 2020). A tension thus arises: packaging appeals on child-targeted foods claim “this food is for play!” Government and public health concerns over the nutritional quality of these foods and the subsequent call for restrictions on the marketing those foods assert, such food, wrapped in playful appeals, is bad and such marketing to kids should be stopped. It is a new variant on the claim, “don’t play with your food!” In the final section, I take up how new forms of play and food are being promoted to children by the use of licensed characters from children’s media culture, and why such paratexts raise complicated questions when it comes to children, food play, and governance.

The co-optation and commercialization of food play

Mechling (2000) observes that adults send mixed messages to children when it comes to playing with food. Children engage in play with food, which is subject to rules by adults, but adults also co-opt that play by creating commercial products designed to be sold back to the kids (Mechling, 2000, p. 13). This is certainly the case when comes to packaged foods. Kids may play with food by pretending that a bowl of spaghetti is, instead, worms. But then bug-shaped pasta (including one product, with the nudge-and-wink name of "Bug-o-licious pasta") started to appear in the grocery stores, rendering the imaginary play unnecessary. Or consider the marketing of Nabisco Oreo cookies, which explicitly frames Oreos as vector for play. Its advertisements instruct: "Twist 'em, dunk' em, or just plain eat them! There are so many ways to enjoy OREO cookies." Oreo's website affirms that "it's important we stay home. It's also important, now more than ever, to stay together and stay playful", and that "playfulness and joy" can be found in its cookie collection (www.oreo.com). The back of an Oreo package enthuses, "Dip, Dip, Hooray!" Here, the company explicitly tags Oreo's interactive nature, instructing consumers on *how* to play with a cookie (i.e., dip, twist, dunk) and the fact that eating an Oreo is, fundamentally, about play.

While Oreo's campaign aims to appeal to both children and the child *in* us, child-targeted packaged foods are defined *by* these appeals to play (Elliott, 2020). *Betty Crocker Fruit by the Foot* fruit roll ups are to be unrolled into a "Foot of Fun," *Envirokidz Turtle Splash* cereal is "delicious, fun" cereal (naturespath.com) shaped into baby turtles for kids to chase in the bowl, and *Yoplait Tubes* of yogurt are not to be eaten with a spoon, but rather designed to be sucked or squirted directly into the mouth. Playfulness, in child-targeted packaged foods, exists on a scale of interactivity from the most minimal (such as the use of a cartoon character found on a package to communicate fun), to more moderate (such as the use of a licensed media character, which links the food to *other* forms of play/entertainment, such as children's television shows or movies), to highly interactive (such as the instruction to use the cereal or fruit snacks as game pieces for the game printed on the back of the package). Examinations of the highly interactive aspects of children's packaged food and the framing of kids' food as eatertainment have been taken up elsewhere (Elliott, 2008; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2015) and so will not be addressed here. Instead, I wish to engage directly with governing children's tastes, as well as some of the unique implications for playing with food when it comes to the less interactive examples of children's food, specifically the use of licensed media characters on packaged foods, which links them to *other* forms of entertainment and play.

Governing the play of child-targeted foods and the problem of paratexts

How does the governance of children's tastes play out in our contemporary environment? The situation is complex. Children have an innate tendency to play, and playing with food is part of

that (Mechling, 2000). Adults set rules around such play (e.g., *don't play with your food!*). These are individual interactions, child-parent negotiations over governing appropriate tastes.

As Mechling (2000) notes, adults also send contradictory messages by commodifying imaginary food play. Such commodification, I suggest, moves the negotiation to a more macro level. In this case, the food industry commercializes and channels kids' play by marketing food as fun and by creating child-targeted packaged foods for other adults (parents) to buy for their kids. Child-targeted foods powerfully affirm that *food is about play.* Yet, because of the dubious nutritional quality of the majority of these foods (Aerts & Smits, 2019; Chacon, Letona, & Barnoya, 2013; Chen, Chien, Yang, & Chen, 2019; Devi et al., 2014; Elliott, 2019; Elliott & Scime, 2019; Elliott & Truman, 2020; Giménez, Saldamando, Curutchet, & Ares, 2017;) and concerns over the negative effects of food marketing on children's health (Boyland et al., 2018; Smith, Yeatman & Boyland, 2019; WHO, 2010, 2012), many governments seek to limit the power of such messaging on children. Here, negotiation around governing tastes moves from individual, child-parent interactions to the macro-scale, with the food industry communicating that *this food is about play!* and governments providing the injunction, *don't play with this food!*

Currently, 16 countries have statutory regulations on unhealthy food marketing to children (Taillie, Busey, Stoltze, & Carpentier, 2019), and the Canadian federal government has committed to ban such marketing under its *Healthy Eating Strategy.* As part of this, Health Canada is exploring possible restrictions on the use of cartoon characters, licensed media characters, and other fun, kid-targeted appeals on food packaging.

Where does the notion of paratexts fit and why is it worthy of consideration? Paratexts is a term originating in literary studies used to refer to the physical and conceptual items that surround a literary work but are not the work itself (see Brookey & Gray 2017, p. 101). Paratexts include book covers, prefaces, book reviews, interviews, advertisements, and other promotional materials. They matter because they influence the meanings people attribute to a work (see Brookey & Gray 2017, p. 101). Over the past decade, the concept has been adopted by media scholars, who have used it productively for understanding the promotional and fan materials (such as trailers, merchandise, fan texts and licensed games) that surround film, television, and other media (Brookey & Gray, 2017; Gray, 2010). In fact, promotional culture itself can be understood as a world of paratexts (Aronczyk, 2017).

Given this, I suggest that there is particular purchase in viewing licensed characters found on children's packaged foods as paratexts. First, their presence is ubiquitous. In a recent study of 374 child-targeted foods found in the Canadian supermarket, roughly one of every six products had prominent character licensing (Elliott, 2019). Alongside the *brand mascots* created by food companies (such as Tony the Tiger or Lucky the Leprechaun) sit a vast array of licensed media characters: *Avengers Shreddies, Paw Patrol* waffles, *Minions* cereal, *Scooby Doo* fruit snacks, *Disney Frozen*-themed Cheerios, *Disney Frozen*-theme canned tuna fish, *Darth Vader* granola bars, and *Spiderman* canned pasta. The existence of these licensed characters reveals the extent to which children's media culture is being infused into food. Understanding these products *as paratexts* means a different perspective because the actual play with food is shifted: *Avengers*

Shreddies, for instance, is as much an advertisement for the movie as it is a strategy to make Shreddies more appealing to kids. *Avengers Shreddies* certainly communicates that the food is for kids by the cartoon image. More significantly, it directs kids' attention to other forms of entertainment. The package becomes an advertisement for 'play' that is to be consumed elsewhere (at the movie theatre). Simply put, unlike all other forms of *play (or don't play) with food*, the viewing of licensed media characters as paratexts also brings in concepts of distance and deferral: namely, that the play advertised on the package is not necessarily to be infused into the food. Rather, the food becomes the vehicle for promoting the movie and thus the 'play' with food refers to a completely different form of entertainment, consumed at another point in time.

Bringing the notion of paratexts to children's food marketing is especially significant in light of recent public health initiatives that aim to combat the negative impacts of food marketing to children. Over the past few years, public health advocates and scholars have championed the use of 'Big Food' marketing strategies on *unprocessed* foods as a means of 'fighting back' against the promotion of unhealthy, processed foods to children (Baldassarre & Campo, 2015; Bezbaruah & Brunt, 2012; Karst, 2018; Kolter, Schiffman & Hanson, 2012; Kraak & Story, 2015). The recommendation is to put licensed media character stickers on unprocessed fruits and vegetables in order to make them more appealing to children. *Sesame Street Elmo* stickers on a watermelon, avocados, and grapes or *Disney Beauty and the Beast* stickers on bananas, pineapples and bagged lettuce, for example, are promoted as a way to make produce more "fun" and "exciting" for children (Disney, n.d.; PMA, n.d.). The starting point for such initiatives is that 'playfulness' associated with such children's entertainment will be transferred by children onto 'boring' produce and that the produce is thereby transformed in some meaningful way.

When viewed through the lens of paratextual theory, we recognize that the assumptions of these initiatives are flawed from the start. Paratextual theory requires that one works out the relationship the paratext has to the larger text, namely, how the movie trailer relates to the movie or the promo to the television show. With the case of Disney, Sesame Street, and other produce character stickers, the larger text is *not* the banana or pineapple; the larger text is the Sesame Street show, the Disney movie and other media products that the produce cartoon sticker advertises. So the question of paratextual theory is *not* about the play that the licensed character produce sticker brings to the produce. Rather it is about what meaning the licenced media character produce sticker brings to the movie or television show it is promoting. Such food play, again, is about children's media culture rather than individual imagination and located worlds away from the sensory, tactile, playing with food that Mechling explores.

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