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# A Content Analysis of Advertising on Children's Television Networks

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A Content Analysis of Advertising on Children's Television Networks

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, 2012

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This content analysis study on licensed characters in advertising collected data in summer 2015 from three children's cable networks: Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. Using social cognitive theory and based on past research (Barcus, 1975; Atkin, 1976; Calcott & Lee, 1994; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008; LoDolce et al., 2013; Castonguay et al., 2013), the study examined whether the use of licensed characters and emotional appeals varied in advertising for healthy or unhealthy foods, mass media genre and the character's gender. The study found licensed characters are more likely to be used to promote unhealthy foods, originate from movies and reinforce gender stereotypes.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Thank you Rachael Caldwell for being my independent coder, and I would also like to acknowledge my graduate school cohort peers, Kendra Williams and Danny Henkel.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the person who inspired me to study children's advertising, my little brother Jaden. Also, without the support and encouragement of my parents, maternal grandparents and cousin Yvonne, my goal of completing a master's degree would not have been possible. This thesis is dedicated not only to my thesis committee, but also to Dr. Phyllis Miller, the first person to encourage me to pursue an advanced degree. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this work to my late great-grandmother, Mamie Elliott (1929-2016), who passed away before my thesis defense.

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## **I. Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how licensed characters are used in advertising targeted to children on children's cable television networks: Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, using a content analysis. The data was collected from June 2015 through August 2015. Licensing is a contractual agreement allowing copyright holders to loan out their intellectual property (a character) for another company to use for a fee of 5 to 15% of the wholesale cost of the item (i.e. a licensed character) (Strasburger, Wilson & Jordan, 2014; Callcott & Lee, 1994; Allen, 2001; Castonguay, Kunkel, Wright & Duff, 2013; Stitt & Kunkel, 1992). A licensed character is defined as a character that was not created by advertisers but is used in advertising campaigns, the character originates from other media including television programs, films and games (Callcott & Lee 1994; Castonguay et al., 2013; Stitt & Kunkel, 1992).

The major variables examined include whether the licensed character was animated or non-animated (Callcott & Lee 1994; Castonguay et al., 2013), the product type (Stitt & Kunkel, 1992), the gender of the character (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010), the emotional message of the ad (Bakir, Palan & Kolbe, 2013), the character's role (Moon, 2010; Barcus, 1975) and media origin of the character (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012). The main goal was to find out what products use licensed characters in advertising, because it appears these characters are used more to advertise unhealthy foods. In 2006, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommended licensed characters be used only for the promotion of foods and beverages encouraging children to be more physically active and making healthy food choices (Castonguay et al., 2013). This study defines healthy foods as fruits, vegetables and 100% fruit juices (Stitt & Kunkel, 2008); however, while the types of products using licensed characters is examined, this content analysis

cannot assess the actual effects of unhealthy food advertising featuring licensed characters directed to children.

It is important to study the use of licensed characters in children's advertising because children were classified as a special audience by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the 1960s, and a child's cognitive ability to understand advertising differs from adults (Pecora, 1995). Children have limited abilities to process advertising and do not have the cognitive ability to understand an advertisement's biased point of view until age eight (LoDolce et al, 2013). Bandura (1986; 2001; 2002) said children learn from advertising by observing and modeling the behavior of the characters on television, including licensed characters, based on social cognitive theory. From advertising, children have the potential of learning unhealthy eating habits and gender stereotypes.

Social cognitive theory (SCT) explains how children learn in a natural environment and retain information through three determinants: behavior, personal and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986; 2001; 2002). Children learn by considering personal factors and observing behavioral patterns and environmental events, which are influential determinants interacting with one another. Bandura (1986) stated behavior, cognitive and other personal factors plus the environment work together using a triadic model concurrently (p. 18; see Appendix A). Bandura (2001; 2002) stated personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events along with behavioral patterns and environmental events are influential determinants that interact with one another and can affect children. If a child has a positive opinion (personal factors) of the SpongeBob SquarePants character and watches *SpongeBob SquarePants* (environment), the child is more likely to associate positive feelings (cognitive) to anything SpongeBob promotes, such as unhealthy foods. The child then believes he or she will have the same positive experience



using every product SpongeBob is licensed to promote because the licensed character is a stimulus for that child to recognize and because of the character's appearance on television the character has celebrity status in the child's mind (Atkin, 1976).

Mass media is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Mass Media, n.d.) as the radio stations, television stations, and newspapers through which information is communicated to the public. Mass media in this study are television programs, films, games and other genres. Social cognitive theory applies to licensed characters and their use in advertising because children do not possess the fully-developed cognitive skills needed to understand their favorite television characters are being used to sell them a product, not to entertain them (Danovitch & Mills, 2014).

Donovitch and Mills (2014) stated children between the ages of four and six prefer foods that are packaged with a licensed character, and they examined the relationship between a child's trust in a licensed character even when the character made false statements. Connel, Brucks and Nielsen (2014) argued there is an issue of theoretical and practical importance in studying children's advertising because children are more likely to develop a preference for products continues into adulthood. Children's developing skills make them vulnerable to audiovisual effects in advertising. The cognitive skills, such as words, objects, faces and brand name are learned at an early age from frequent exposure to advertising. Connel et al. (2014) found in the early stages of childhood a bias for advertised products is developed due to the positive affect created by the ad-related stimuli. Stitt and Kunkel (2008), LoDolce et al. (2013), and Castonguay et al. (2013) found licensed characters are frequently used to advertise to children. Danovitch and Mills (2014) reported children will desire a product advertised with a licensed character over a product without one because of their familiarity with the character. Once a preference or bias for

a product advertised using a licensed character is developed, Connel et al. (2014) said the bias is difficult to alter.

It is important to study the effects of using licensed characters in television advertising directed to children because children are more involved in the shopping habits of their households (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra & Sharp, 2001). Children have influence over their parents' consumption habits beginning at an early age. The historical changes of relaxed parenting styles and increased family incomes due to more parents working outside the household contribute to a child's increased economic influence in the household (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). The buying power of children has grown from \$42 billion in 2007 to around \$200 billion in 2011 (Stasburger et al., 2014). In 2013, *Time* reported the ad agency Digitas had stated children's buying power had grown to \$1.2 trillion (White, 2013). Marketers knew in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the importance of a child audience due to their capability to influence their parents. It was not until the 1950s when children became a solidified consumer audience. These parents, who grew up poor during the Great Depression, had a new level of economic prosperity in adulthood and shared this new economic freedom with their children, who would be labeled baby boomers. (Stasburger et al., 2014). Although children's advertising dates back to radio (Stasburger et al., 2014) and internet is widely available, television is the preferred medium to reach children (Calvert, 2008).

It is important to examine children's advertising on cable television because cable is regulated differently than broadcast television. The mission of the FCC, an independent government agency regulated by Congress, is to regulate interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories (FCC, 2015). The FCC is the primary authority for

communications laws, regulation and technological innovation. The FCC was created by the Communications Act of 1934, which consolidated the regulation of wired and wireless services (Bloom, 2007). The creation and expansion of cable television, incorporating broadcasting into a subscription service, was unforeseen when the Communications Act was enacted in 1934.

Cable television does not have to adhere to FCC guidelines regarding children's programming and advertising. Congress decided both commercial and non-commercial broadcast television stations had an obligation to offer education and informational children's programming, and limited the amount of advertisements during children's programming (FCC, 2015). The Children's Television Act of 1990 (CTA) increased the amount of education and informational programming for children and limited the amount of time dedicated to commercials during children's programs. Three guidelines must be met by television broadcast stations: air at least three hours per week of core programs, identify core programs by displaying the symbol E/I throughout the program and provide parents and consumers with information about core programs and when they air. The FCC defines core programs as programming specifically designed to serve the educational and informational needs of children 16 years of age and under, meeting or enhancing the child's intellectual/cognitive or social/emotional needs (FCC, 2015). This core programming must: serve to educate and inform the needs of children as a significant purpose; air at least 30 minutes; air between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m.; be a regularly scheduled weekly program; and be identified as specifically designed to educate and inform children using the display of the symbol E/I on the television screen throughout the airing of the program. The FCC's rules limit advertising in children's programming to 10.5 minutes per hour on the weekends and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. The CTA reestablished

the commercial time limits in children's programming that had been eliminated during the 1980s (Jordan, 2008).

The CTA only applies to broadcast television because broadcast TV is part of the limited spectrum owned and regulated by the U.S. government (Jordan, 2008). Cable, which includes satellite television, has always been a private, subscription-based service. Unlike broadcast television, cable television is transmitted to subscribers using privately fixed coaxial cables or fiber optic cables (Bloom, 2007). Children's cable networks are examined in this study because of these differences in the regulation of broadcast networks and cable networks. Because the FCC laws only apply to broadcast networks, cable networks have more control on how much or how little advertising is shown on children's programs.

This study differs from past studies (Barcus, (1975); Atkins, (1976); Calcott and Lee, 1994; Stitt and Kunkel (2008); LoDolce et al., (2013); Castonguay et al., (2013) because it focuses solely on the usage of licensed characters on children's cable networks; no broadcast networks were included in the sample. Children's advertising shifted more from broadcast to cable beginning in the 1990s. Past content analyses (Barcus, 1975; Atkins, 1976; Calcott & Lee, 1994; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008; LoDolce et al., 2013; Castonguay et al., 2013), focused heavily on broadcast networks. Some studies may have included one children's network, examining the usage of trade characters, non-licensed characters created for the purpose of advertising (Calcott & Lee 1994; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008). However, there was not a current study examining the usage of only licensed characters on children's cable networks. Beginning in the 1990s, cable became more readily available to audiences, with channels such as Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, became the new target for reaching the child audience (Singer & Singer, 2001). At the time of data collection, in the opinion of the author, there was not enough

children's programming on broadcast networks to justify data collection. It is important to continue the study of the usage of licensed characters in children's advertising to further understand what children may be learning from these characters, and whether such advertising is encouraging unhealthy eating habits while reinforcing gender stereotypes among child viewers.

## II. Literature Review

Licensing is a contractual agreement allowing copyright holders to loan out their intellectual property for another company to use, as when the Minions are licensed to appear in Go-Gurt commercials. Licensed characters are used for a fee of 5 to 15% of the wholesale cost of the item they are being licensed to promote. Licensed characters incorporate images from children's media programs and accounted for over \$5 billion in sales in 2011 (Donovitch & Mills, 2014). The toy industry has benefited the most from the licensed characters of children's movies and television shows, followed by snack food companies, fast food restaurants and clothing manufacturers (Allen, 2001). The toy industry created and licensed their own characters, made television shows and along with earning money from the licensing fees, other manufacturers paid to capitalize on these characters (Allen, 2001, p. 483). Licensed characters benefit both the copyright holder and manufacturer because licensed characters enhance the popularity of products, and the program owners make money without risking the capital to produce a product themselves (Allen, 2001). This reversed the traditional relationship between toys and television because the toy industry did not wait for the television industry to provide the programming that could be licensed. Allen (2001) stated toy-based programs functioned as their own commercials, portraying characters, setting and vehicle for the toy industry to manufacture (p. 483).

As children learn differently from adults, advertisers recognized they had to use different techniques to reach the young versus their parents. Pecora (1995) stated children were identified as a specialized audience of consumers in the 1950s. One technique advertisers recognized as effective in reaching children was using licensed characters. An early example of using a licensed character in advertising to children was in 1955 for *The Mickey Mouse Club*, which sold

licensed Mickey Mouse merchandise. Marketers in the toy industry began to aggressively advertise on television following *The Mickey Mouse Club* success.

Licensed characters have great influence because they are modeling stimuli for children and hold a status of greater value in children's minds (Atkin, 1976). Regarding social cognitive theory (SCT), the status attribute is the result of a child's response to the image of the licensed character, it serves to preserve the imagery, in this case symbolic representation for the purpose of advertising (Bandura, 1986). Moon (2010) found health-related claims in food ads were delivered in audio-visual cues, text and by a spokesperson; also some modes of presentation are identified as potentially misleading with child audiences. Moon (2010) found the current practice of television food advertising was to heavily promote unhealthy foods rather than healthy foods. Unhealthy food advertising is more likely to use appeals like taste/flavor/smell/texture and mood alteration. Danovitch and Mills (2014) reported licensed characters are symbols for children to reference, children can recall the image's name and are more likely to trust the character. With this type of influence, the IOM recommended in 2006 licensed characters be used only for the promotion of foods and beverages that support healthy diets for children in mass media (Castonguay et al., 2013). Stitt and Kunkel (2008) defined healthy foods as fruits, vegetables and 100% fruit juices; the same definition was used for this study. The Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children, a federal task force, proposed licensed characters be limited to products that make a meaningful contribution to a healthful diet (Castonguay et al., 2013). Based on Moon (2010) and Danovitch and Mills (2014), it appears children will be influenced by the interaction of a licensed character and the product it is used to promote. While any interaction between a licensed character and product is more likely to affect the child's view of the product, it can be inferred using the product will heavily influence the child.

Social cognitive theory (SCT) extends social learning theory by adding and explaining how children learn. Bandura (1986; 1977) said learning can occur through the observation of others' behavior and its consequences because of vicarious capability. For example, if a child sees a person or a cartoon character burn itself on a stove, the child associates the stove with heat and the potential to be burned. This is how the child learns through observation rather than actually burning himself. In this case, when the child sees a licensed character eat unhealthy foods the child is learning it is okay to eat unhealthy foods.

The theory explains how children understand the psychosocial mechanisms through the influences of human thought, affect and action after a form of communication is presented (Bandura, 2001). Children have limited abilities to process advertising and do not have the cognitive ability to understand an advertisement's biased point of view until they reach the age eight (LoDolce et al, 2013). Children think differently than adults. Bandura (1977; 1986) states how children learn plays an important role in SCT because the child's brain and the nervous system are evolving over time. As humans we are constantly learning and children learn a vast majority of knowledge from ages 0 to 11 years old. Haefner (1991) cited (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) when discussing the four stages of child development: the sensorimotor stage (ages 0 to 2), the preoperational stage (ages 2 to 7), the concrete operational stage (ages 7 to 11) and finally the formal operational stage (beginning at age 12).

In the sensorimotor stage, children are developing their language skills but lack in logical thinking. A child in this stage would literally believe he or she could visit could visit SpongeBob SquarePants at his pineapple home under the sea. In the preoperational stage, a child's language skills begin to improve and children begin to learn how to read. As a child advances through this stage, he or she begins to understand the difference between reality and



television. Children would understand *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a cartoon show and the character and location do not exist in reality. They still struggle with abstract concepts, but in the latter part of the stage children can differentiate between an advertisement and a television program. The concrete operational stage is when a child begins to understand advertising is persuading him or her to want something, along with having a decrease in egocentric thinking of ones' self. When a child reaches the formal operational stage, he or she is able to understand logical and abstract ideas through cognitive development. He or she fully understands advertising and exhibits more in-depth reasoning about ideas. The child is able to engage in hypothetical thinking and abstract thought. Children gain the maturity to understand a commercial's intent in the concrete operational stage and can differentiate between a program intended to entertain versus a program intended to sell a product. It is imperative for advertisers to understand the impact commercials have on children because children see advertisements from a very young age (Danovitch & Mills, 2014).

Social cognitive theory assumes the learning process includes cognitive processing and decision-making skills relating back to understanding the purpose of advertising (Gredler, 2009). Children under the age of eight are not able to process that an advertisement persuades the consumer to purchase an item due to their lack of logical thinking and developing cognitive skills (Calvert, 2008). The child makes the decision, part of the decision-making skills of the subject, that he or she wants the product and proceeds to ask his or her parent to buy the product. Advertisers use licensed characters to draw children in and retain their attention. Children's advertising relies heavily on animated ads because they are attractive and draw attention to younger audiences through action, movement and sound effects (Atkin, 1976). The licensed characters provide centrality for the ads through large, colorful, action oriented attributes and the

silly voices and effects. Repetition and attention-getting production features keep children engaged in the commercial. Repetition is a vital factor in children retaining a message because younger children have a limited capacity in storing presenting messages. The theory states that subjects learn through repetition and repetition is used in marketing to a child audience. When the ad is repeated enough times, the child becomes familiar with the licensed character and will attach that character to a specific brand, whether the character is animated or non-animated. Companies use features in their ads that include action and movement, rapid pacing, sound effects and loud music to appeal to younger views (Calvert, 2008).

According to SCT, the child will be affected through positive, neutral or negative effects. Children will evaluate what they see and experience then internalize their experiences into cognitive models they can recall (Potter, 2012). The young child may learn poor eating habits from seeing a licensed character advertise an unhealthy food, especially if the character is shown eating the food. Constantly eating unhealthy foods creates unhealthy habits that last into adulthood, resulting in obesity as an adult, with a direct negative effect on public health. Approximately half of all children's advertising in the United States promotes food and the majority of food advertising is for high-calorie foods (Bakir et al., 2013).

Connel et al. (2014) explained the personal factors in SCT by stating licensed characters may not share the same perspective as parents and the perspectives portrayed on screen can directly create conflict. For example, a child asking for a sugared cereal for breakfast creates conflict in a household where sugared cereals aren't purchased for the household. Connel et al. (2014) also showed there was a positive affect for advertisers that develops from ad-related stimuli in the early stages of childhood, resulting in a bias or positive affect for advertised products. The bias or preference for the advertised products was difficult to correct. Connel et al.

(2014) also found that the biased evaluations are not limited to the original product, but can transfer to the extensions of the brand that are introduced, with such biases lasting into adulthood. Therefore, if children are exposed to advertised products frequently during childhood, they will become consumers for those advertised products through adulthood.

For children, the licensed character is a symbol of reference and modeling stimulus (Atkins, 1976). From the reference the child can either recall positive, neutral or negative emotions when a licensed character is presented to them. If a child prefers SpongeBob SquarePants over the Minions from the movie *Minions*, the child is more inclined to want items bearing SpongeBob's image. This is one way a child may prioritize his preferences through symbolization. If a child prioritizes SpongeBob, and SpongeBob is only used in advertisements for unhealthy foods, the child is more likely to have preferences for unhealthy foods.

SCT is the relationship between environments, personal factors and behavior (Gredler, 2009). Children are seeing television advertisements in their homes (their natural environment) and begin to process the ads. Individual attributes contribute to the child's development because all children are not raised the same. For example, some children come from households where eating breakfast is eating a sugary cereal versus households where breakfast is whole wheat toast and a bowl of fruit with yogurt. Also, a child with limited television time will view television differently than a child who is free to watch television at his or her leisure. The child may have parents that buy her anything requested versus a child who only receives gifts on his birthday and holidays. The child may only watch television when a parent is around to co-view in contrast to a child who watches television with other children or alone. Social cognitive theory takes the individual aspect into account that all children have different experiences. The individual aspect is important because it has been an accepted component of SCT (Bandura, 1986; Gredler, 2009).

Bandura (1986) said the cognitive representation that children develop have a strong impact on present action. For example, a child who watches SpongeBob regularly creates an idea on how to react to the character and show. If the child is happy while watching the show, he or she will experience the same type of happiness when encountering SpongeBob in another setting. What the child associates with SpongeBob's image helps the child convert future consequences into current motivators because forethought is the product of generative and reflective ideation (Bandura, 1986).

Bandura (1986) said the experience a child has with licensed characters in advertising is based on the child's experience with the character itself. A child can reflect on his experience with the character and on what he or she knows to be true about the character through generic knowledge about himself or herself and the world. If a little girl sees Queen Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* and does not like the character nor movie, she will have a neutral or negative opinion of a product bearing Queen Elsa's image. If she likes the character she will be more inclined to want a product with Queen Elsa's image. This is the self-reflective capability social cognitive theory teaches. Children will act on their thoughts and analyze how well their thoughts are reinforced or challenged internally (Bandura, 1986 p. 21).

Bandura (1986) states how children learn plays an important role in SCT because the brain and the nervous system are evolving over time. The advanced neural systems for processing, retaining and using coded information provide the capacity for the human experience. Children develop symbolization, forethought, evaluative self-regulation, reflective self-consciousness and symbolic communication (p. 21). Children will be able to connect thoughts and ideas through symbolism, think abstractly and have a greater sense of themselves and the world around them. This information leads us into the triadic reciprocity of the three determinants (see Appendix A).

Bandura (1986) states it is the basis of SCT: behavior, cognitive and other personal factors and environmental influences operating interactively as determinants of each other (p. 23).

Atkin's (1976) was one of the first studies to attach social learning theory to children's advertising; social learning theory was the predecessor of SCT. Direct instrumental training is a type of training where learning is based on imitation (Atkin, 1976). Noting the four processes in Atkin (1976) (attention, retentional, motoric reproduction and reinforcement and motivational), reinforcement influences the attentional and retentional processes; the observers are more attentive of the activities of the effective models and more likely to code practical model responses. Atkin (1976) found observational learning occurs when observers obtain response patterns by viewing the depictions of others through physical demonstrations, visual representing or verbal descriptions (i.e. watching television). This explains why children, especially young children, learn from watching television.

Children who have not developed language skills are more dependent on pictorial repetitions, while adults learn from verbal modeling (Atkin, 1976). Young children do not fully understand what they are viewing is having an effect on them. For example, a child who has positive feelings for a licensed character does not understand, because of that positive association, the licensed character serves as a reference model for positive feelings. Atkin (1976) stated: "Models who are perceived to have high competence, expertise, power, celebrity standing or socio-economic status are overtly imitated to considerably greater degree compared to models lacking these qualities" (p. 514). A child imitates the behavior of the licensed character. The image of the licensed character, as a representation of a product, enables the child to connect the character with the product, attracting the child's attention. Children will think that by copying the actions of the licensed character, they are more likely to be rewarded.

Atkin (1976) used SCT to examine 470 commercials directed to children that aired on ABC, CBS, and NBC on two Saturday mornings in 1972 and 1973. Every commercial included positive reinforcements for the products shown. When the child sees the positive reinforcement in the ad, he or she will expect the same reinforcement if the product is purchased. Ads are also repeated in children's programming because repetition helps children retain a message, younger children have a limited capacity for storing messages. If a child repeatedly sees a licensed character in an ad with a happy emotional appeal, he will conclude that the licensed character is associated with happiness. Jingles and slogans stimulate retention, especially in younger children who lack reading skills or are just learning how to read (Atkin, 1976).

Atkin (1976) found using fun, as a positive reinforcement, appeared in 67% of the sampled advertisements, especially foods ads. Toy advertisements displayed attributes of power and feelings of being an adult. When children are the models in an ad, children will believe the product has been approved by their peers. An adult model in the ads reinforces to children that authority figures, most likely their parents, approve of the use of the product (Atkin, 1976). Children, especially younger children, could view this as being a reward for consuming the product and excessive use of the product will not warrant a punishment.

Danovitch and Mills (2014) found children preferred a low-quality product with a licensed character over a high-quality product with an unfamiliar character 74% of the time. Children between the ages of four and six prefer foods bearing a licensed character's image. Children reported the product featuring a licensed character tasted better than the product without the licensed character. The repeated presentation of licensed characters makes them more influential because they are seen consistently, whether the child wants to see them or not. These findings reinforce social cognitive theory because the child's choice is based on the licensed character

appearance not facts. Children are learning to trust these characters and the represented products. The repetition of the ads creates familiarity and retention, developing a strong influence of trust in children, representing the environmental component of the theory and creating reinforcement and motivation for the child to want the product.

Donovitch and Mills (2014) examined the relationship between children trusting a licensed character, even when the character made false statements, to understand the vulnerability of children as marketing targets. Children chose the damaged objects with a licensed character 67% of the time. Child subjects preferred the licensed character over the unfamiliar character; even when the character made incorrect statements, the preference of the children did not change.

Stitt and Kunkel (2008) found 46.1% of 1,209 commercials airing during children's television were for food products. In an average hour, out of 102 television programs, there was an average of 23.7 commercials totaling 9:51 minutes of advertising. The types of food ads shown on child shows on both broadcast and cable television were primarily unhealthy: sugared snacks (20.8%), salted snacks (8.4%), sugared beverages (9.5%), sugared cereals (26%), pastries/waffles (5.9%), pasta (2.5%), fast foods/restaurants (20.8%), dairy products (2.5%), fruits/vegetables/100% juice (2.5%), protein (0%) and other (2.9%). The primary appeals presented in the ads reinforce that the product is either good or will bring children enjoyment.

Stitt and Kunkel (2008) found that 42.2% of products used a trade character, a non-licensed character, which were used in ads for sugared snacks (19.8%), salted snacks (87.2%), sugared beverages (42.3%), sugared cereals (42.8%), pastries/waffles (9.1%), fast food/restaurants (54.8%), dairy (64.3%) and other advertisements (35.7%). Licensed characters were used much less frequently, appearing in 9.7% of all food ads: sugared snacks (4.3%), salted snacks (10.6%)

sugared beverages (1.9%), sugared cereals (20.7%), pastries/waffles (3%), fast food/restaurants (7%), and dairy (21.4%) ads used a licensed character.

Stitt and Kunkel (2008) found almost half (46.8%) of sampled food advertising was for sugared snacks and cereal. Three types of food product categories dominated the findings: fats/sweets (38.7%), breads/cereals (34.4%) and fast foods/restaurants (20.8%). Less than four percent of sampled ads were for dairy, fruits/vegetables and proteins. Licensed characters were frequently portrayed in ads for dairy products (21.4%) and sugared cereal advertising (20.7%).

Castonguay et al. (2013) found 73% of 544 sampled food ads targeted to children used either a licensed or trade character. They used the Go, Slow and Whoa food rating system to define foods. Go foods are rich in nutrients and low in calories that can be consumed regularly. Slow foods have more fat, added sugar and calories and should be consumed a few times a week. Whoa foods have the highest calories and fewest nutrients and should be consumed sparingly. Most ads were for Whoa foods (72.3%), followed by Slow foods (21.3%) and Go foods (6.4%). Trade characters appeared in 56% compared to licensed characters who appeared in 17% of sampled food ads. Familiar characters, licensed and/or trade characters, appeared in 88% of all sugared cereals ads and 78% of all restaurant/fast foods. Such characters were least likely to appear in ads for sugared drinks (32%) and sugared snacks (54%). Trade characters appeared in more than half of ads for sugared cereals, restaurants/fast foods and dairy. Trade characters (71%) appeared in ads for sugared cereals more frequently than licensed characters (17%). Licensed characters appeared in 17% of food ads, primarily for sugared snacks (23%), restaurant/fast foods (20%), sugared drinks (18%) and sugared cereals (17%). Trade characters appeared in 56% of the sampled food ads.



LoDolce et al. (2013) found of 158 cereal advertisements, high-sugar cereals were 47% of the sample, followed by low sugar cereals (33%), and the other 20% were not high- or low-sugared cereals. Children view 42% more ready-to-eat cereal ads than adults. Nearly half (49%) of cereal ads promoted a specific health/nutrition claim or other health-related benefit. Human characters appeared in 63% of low-sugared cereal ads and 61% of high-sugar cereal ads. Animated characters appeared in 55% of high-sugared ads versus 19% of low-sugar cereal ads. The cereal was animated in 44% of high-sugar cereals and 21% of low-sugar cereal ads. Emotional benefits were promised in 59% of high-sugared cereal ads versus 2% in low-sugar cereal ads. Lo Dolce et al. concluded food ads lead children to believe that high-sugar cereals are healthy foods choices.

Connel et al. (2014) reported children are more likely to retain childhood product preferences into adulthood. Adults use the same products they were exposed to as children for themselves and their children. Approximately half of all U.S. children's advertising promotes food and most food advertising is for high-calorie foods. The frequent exposure to unhealthy food advertising can lead to consuming unhealthy foods, creating poor health habits lasting into adulthood and can have a direct, negative effect on public health.

Connel et al. (2014) explained how licensed characters relate to personal factors in social cognitive theory. Children's developing skills make them vulnerable to audiovisual effects in advertising such as animated licensed characters. Children learn words, objects, faces and brand names at an early age with frequent exposure. Licensed characters are used to advertise sugared cereals and may encourage children to ask for unhealthy products the parent will not purchase, creating parent-child conflict. Connel et al. (2014) reported that a positive affect develops from ad-related stimuli in early childhood, creating a bias or positive affect for products that is

difficult to correct. Animation is a visual stimulant young children can recognize. Children's biased evaluations are long-lasting, transferring to brand extensions of favored advertised products introduced during childhood and lasting throughout adulthood.

Stitt and Kunkel (2008), LoDolce et al. (2013), and Castonguay et al. (2013) found licensed characters are frequently used to advertise to children and create long-term preferences for brands, often for unhealthy food products. Danovitch and Mills (2014) reported children prefer a product using a licensed character over a product without one because of child's familiarity with the character. If children continue to see licensed characters advertise unhealthy products, then the bias will carry into adulthood, likely leading to public health concerns. As noted by Connel et al. (2014), the bias is difficult to alter. Bandura (1986), Atkins (1976) and Gredler (2009) all explain why social cognitive theory relates to the usage of licensed characters in children's advertising and their effect on children because the character is a symbol for a product shown in an advertisement that reinforces a positive effect.

Bakir et al. (2013) conducted a content analysis of children's commercials in the United States, Mexico and Turkey and stated there were higher incidences of fun, happiness, and pleasure displays in the U.S. ads compared to Mexico and Turkey. An emotional argument (98.4%) was used most frequently in ads compared to rational (1.6%) or moral (0.8%) arguments. They found fun (92.7%) was the most used emotional appeal followed by pleasure (80.6%), happiness (71.8%), and adventure (32.3%). Wicks et al. (2009) found nearly a third (28.6%) of advertisements in children's programs used product and emotional appeals including mood alteration (17%), action/adventure (9%), and achievement/enablement (2%). Kunkel and Gantz (1992) found that 26.6% of ads sampled used fun/happiness themes, specifically ads for

fast food (71.9%), toys (35.3%), cereal and breakfast (15.4%), snacks and drinks (26.1%), healthy foods (46.7%) and other (27.5%) products.

SCT also teaches and reinforces gender roles and stereotypes. Male and female characters are treated differently on television. Johnson and Young (2003) said advertising portrayals of males and females are still the same despite changes in social norms. Children responded less favorably to feminine products with male characters (Bakir et al., 2013). Palmer (2003) said boys' ads often feature high levels of action/aggression compared to girls' ads, which feature more tranquil and passive behavior. Aggression was present in 35% of commercials, mostly when boys and girls appear together (Larson, 2001). Boys ads most often contained more than one type of violence: physical (14.8%), verbal (6.8%), object (26%), fortuitous (22.7%) and more than one type of violence (29.6%), compared to girls' ads, which contained very little violence: physical (0%), verbal (0%), object (22.2%), fortuitous (66.7%) and more than one type of violence (11.1%).

Smith (1994) found 100% of ads targeted to boys used male narrators for their voice-overs, compared to advertisements targeted to girls where 90.9% used female voices, and 9% of girl-directed ads used male and female voices, while no ads directed to girls used male narrators. Larson (2001) found more girls (51%) than boys (49%) among 892 identifiable children in 595 commercials; however, of the total, 284 were in single-gender commercials, 117 featured girls-only and 167 featured boys-only. Girls (39%) were most likely to be set in a home setting versus boys (13%) in single-gender commercials. Boys were more likely to appear in other settings (47%) than girls (21%). Smith (1994) found girl-directed ads were more likely to use home as a setting (71.4%) versus boys who were more likely to be shown away from home (39.1%).

Larson (2001) study classified ads by product and found zero commercials featuring boys only for clothes compared to girls (2.6% or 3 of 117). Girls were least likely to appear in ads for entertainment (2.6% or 3 of 117) versus boys (18.6% or 31 of 167). Girls (69.2% or 81 of 117) were represented more in single-gendered ads compared to boys, who were represented more for toys (46.7% or 78 of 167). Boys and girls appeared together the most in ads for food/grocery (45% or 140 of 311); however, boys (28.7% or 48 of 167) were more likely to appear in a single-gendered ad for the food/grocery compared to girls (15.4% or 18 of 117).

Merskin (2002) found nearly half (43%) of advertisements target both boys and girls, one third (34%) target boys only and 23 percent target girls only. Kahlenberg and Hein (2010) found more girls-only ads featured dolls (58.3%) and animals (82.6%) than either boys-only or boys-and-girls commercials. Zero boys-only commercials were for dolls and few dolls were advertised in boys-and-girls commercials (14.4%). Less than 10% of animals were shown in boys-only (8.7%) or boys-and girls (1.4%) ads. Gender stereotypes aren't limited to commercials, Hentges and Case (2013) reported physical aggression was the top behavior displayed across programming on Cartoon Network, Disney, Channel and Nickelodeon for males (27.5%) and females (24.9%). Female characters were more likely to display affection on Nickelodeon (35.1%), compared to Cartoon Network (9.7%) and (Disney 6.2%). Male characters were represented more on Cartoon Network (73.6%), followed by Nickelodeon (66.1%) and Disney Channel (55.9%) (Hentges & Case, 2013). The gender of the character in an ad can leave a lasting impact. Research suggests girls are still being portrayed differently on television, depicted as more submissive and affectionate. Dolls are still being advertised primarily to girls and girls are more likely to be used in commercials for stuffed animals.

As explained by SCT, children are more likely to learn gender and sex roles from television programs and advertising. The advertisers are using licensed characters because the characters are famous and will garner attention. When the ads are repeated, a child retains the memory of the licensed character and its association with the product. SCT explains how children learn and since children are learning all the time, one can conclude a child is learning something from viewing advertising on children's cable networks.

### III. Hypotheses and Questions

Previous research suggests licensed characters appear more frequently in advertising for unhealthy foods. By using a licensed character advertisers are hoping a child will retain the memory of the character to be motivated to purchase the item themselves or ask a parent, but the IOM recommended licensed characters be used only for the promotion of healthy foods and activities (Castonguay et al., 2013). Stitt and Kunkel (2008) found that dairy (21.4%) and sugared cereal (20.7%) advertising used licensed characters the most. Stitt and Kunkel (2008) defined healthy foods as fruits, vegetables and 100% fruit juices. Trade characters were used more frequently for salted snacks (87.2%) and dairy products (64.3%) advertisements. Kunkel and Gantz (1992) found toy ads (33.8%) frequently appeared in children's programming but healthy food ads were rarely seen (2.8%). Bakir et al. (2013) found the majority of advertised products for U.S. children were for food, drinks, candy and restaurants (63.7%). Connel et al (2014) and Atkin (1976) both reported animation is used heavily to reach the child audience because animation is a stimulant young children can recognize. Danovitch and Mills (2014) found children said a product with a known licensed character tasted better than a product without the licensed character; this was based on the child's limited knowledge, not facts.

Social cognitive theory states children will evaluate what they see and experience, then internalize their experiences into cognitive models they can recall (Potter, 2012). If a child sees his favorite television character promote an unhealthy food product, he will develop an interest in the product because he is seeing the product advertised. Although the actual effects of viewing licensed characters in advertising cannot be examined in this content analysis study, it is important to see how frequently they appear on children's cable networks.

Moon (2010) found general health claims were delivered by a spokesperson more frequently than nutrition/substance claims. Since the licensed character is the spokesperson for the advertisements it is important to know how the licensed character interacts with the product it is licensed to promote. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 predicts.

*H1:* Licensed characters are expected to appear more frequently in advertising for unhealthy foods in children's programs than in ads for healthy foods.

Previous research suggests positive emotional appeals appear most frequently in advertising directed to children and presumably in ads featuring licensed characters as well. By encouraging positive emotional appeals advertisers are hoping children will retain positive associations with the licensed character and pass that opinion on to the promoted product. Connel et al. (2014) found a positive affect develops from ad-related stimuli, such as animation, in the early stages of childhood, resulting in a preference for products. Kunkel and Gantz (1992) found 26.6% of ads sampled used fun/happiness themes, specifically ads for fast food (71.9%), toys (35.3%), cereal and breakfast (15.4%), snacks and drinks (26.1%), healthy foods (46.7%) and other products (27.5%). Wicks et al. (2009) found nearly a third (28.6%) of advertisements in children's programs used product and emotional appeals including mood alteration (17%), action/adventure (9%), and achievement/enablement (2%). Bakir et al. (2013) found 98.4% of children's commercials used emotional appeals: fun (92.7%), happiness (71.8%), pleasure (80.6%) adventure (32.3%) and fear (0%). Smits and Vandebosch (2012) found ads with licensed characters encouraged children to eat more and the children wanted a food product more. Bandura (1986) said the cognitive representations children develop have a strong impact on present action. The child is more likely to want to experience the same emotion he or she feels

from viewing an advertisement with a licensed character when the child engages with the product. If a child only knows positive emotional appeals from viewing a certain character, social cognitive theory predicts the child will want to experience positive emotions anytime the child sees the character. This is not limited to just watching the character on television, but buying their branded clothes, toys and food.

*H2:* Positive emotional appeals are used most in advertisements using licensed characters to sell unhealthy foods.

The proposed study examines whether animated, licensed characters are more frequently derived from movies, television programs, games or other mass media. Calvert (2008) stated when children view advertisements repeatedly, it increases the familiarity with a product and the likelihood of purchasing and using that product. IOM 2006 recommendations stated licensed characters derive from a variety of mass media sources including film, cartoons, toys, live-action featuring films, comic and fiction books and videos games (Castonguay et al., 2013). Different characters are used to target varied age groups to appeal to the cognitive abilities of the child and for the character to appeal to both the child and parents. Connel et al. (2014) showed there was a positive affect that develops from ad-related stimuli, such as animation, in the early stages of life of childhood and a preference for products. The preference for these products in childhood can carry over in adulthood.

SCT predicts a child is more inclined to want a food product bearing SpongeBob SquarePants if she watches *SpongeBob SquarePants* on television, and then repeatedly sees SpongeBob in advertising for a product. Therefore, if most licensed characters used in ads directed to children come from children's television shows, and most are for unhealthy foods, children may be very likely to ask for and receive unhealthy foods. Atkin (1976) found



observational learning occurs when observers obtain response patterns by viewing the depictions of others through watching television. Social cognitive theory explains the visual demonstration is important, so this study examines where most licensed characters originate. This is important for parents who want to limit their child's exposure to licensed characters. A parent can easily choose not to allow a child to see a movie with a particular character or not buy a game featuring a character, but restricting access can be more difficult if the character is used in advertising on television. Therefore, this study assesses the genre of mass media from which most licensed characters originate.

*RQ1:* What genre of mass media (including television programs, films, video games, etc.) do most licensed characters originate from?

Previous research suggests males are more represented on television programs and ads with certain emotions compared to females. Hentges and Case (2013) reported physical aggression was the top behavior displayed across programming on Cartoon Network, Disney, Channel and Nickelodeon for males (27.5%) and females (24.9%). Male characters were represented more on Cartoon Network (73.6%), followed by Nickelodeon (66.1%) and Disney Channel (55.9%). Female characters were more likely to display affection on Nickelodeon (35.1%), compared to Cartoon Network (9.7%) and Disney (6.2%). Merskin (2002) found nearly half (43%) of ads target both boys and girls, one third (34%) target to boys only and 23 percent target girls only. Children responded less favorably to feminine products with male characters (Bakir, et al., 2013).

SCT predicts children learn about socially constructed sex roles and stereotypes about gender from television and advertising; it is important to understand whether certain positive or negative emotional appeals tend to appear more in ads featuring male or female licensed

characters. Results may reveal whether commercials reinforce the gender stereotypes portrayed on television programs. Research suggests children are visual learners, especially if they cannot read (Atkin, 1976). How children view other children is just as important as how they view other characters. Children will be able to connect thoughts and ideas through symbolism, think abstractly and have a greater sense of themselves and the world around them (Bandura, 1986). Male licensed characters and female licensed characters are symbols for children on how each gender is to behave and how to treat the opposite gender. Ads featuring licensed characters can be a vital factor in children retaining a message because younger children have a limited capacity for storing messages, so using a licensed character may be more likely to be retained. If children constantly see girls are treated differently than boys, they will develop the idea girls and boys are not equal. If girls are repeatedly shown in submissive or non-active roles, SCT predicts that boys and girls will learn girls are not supposed to be active or leaders. Therefore, this question examined whether there are differences in ads with male and female licensed characters.

*RQ2:* Are there differences in the emotional appeals found in advertisements directed to children when a male or female licensed character is used in the ad?

#### **IV. Methods**

A content analysis of advertisements in children's programming appearing on Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon (Callcott & Lee, 1994; Moore, 2004; Merskin, 2002; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008, Wicks et al. 2009, Hentges & Case, 2013 LoDolce et al. 2013,) between 8:00 am and 8:00 pm Central Daylight Savings Time was conducted from June 1, 2015 through August 31, 2015 using Cox Cable on the University of Arkansas campus. Children's cable networks were chosen because the FCC does not regulate children's advertising on cable networks the same way it regulates children's advertising on broadcast networks (Bloom, 2007; Jordan, 2008, FCC, 2015). Composite week sampling (Callcott & Lee, 1994; Kunkel & Gantz, 1992) was used by randomly selecting one day during the sampling period, June 1, 2015 through August 31, 2015 to represent each day of the week. For example, one Sunday was randomly selected to represent the thirteen Sundays during the collection period, with one randomly selected day for each day of the week. Sampling occurred between 8:00 am through 8:00 pm when more children tend to be in the audience. Children watch television the most during the weekdays (70%), and most children under age 11 watch television during the afternoon, early evening and prime-time (Wicks et al., 2009). A composite week of programming was compiled for each network record three four-hour blocks of programming on each cable network, via three DVRs for a total of 12 hours of programming per day of the week.

Television is the top medium for children's advertising (Kissell, 2015), the children's cable networks, Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, were chosen because they are the top three cable networks targeting children. Forbes estimated \$800 million was spent on advertising on Nickelodeon in 2014 (Trefis Team 2015). Nickelodeon held a 20-year record for number one in total-viewer category appeal among kids 2-11 years-old, until Disney Channel

broke this record in 2015 (Kissell, 2015). Specifically, “The only noticeable competitors (for Nickelodeon) are The Disney Channel and Cartoon Network” (Trefis Team, 2015). Disney Channel was the top-rated children’s network for the third consecutive summer in 2014. In primetime for summer Disney Channel ranked number three in total viewers (behind TNT and USA) whereas Nickelodeon ranked sixth overall. In December 2015, Cartoon Network finished number one among ad-supported cable networks reaching children ages six to eleven for the first time in network history (Kissell, 2015).

A licensed character is defined as a character not originally associated or created for advertising a product, rather originating from television, movies, video games and other non-advertising media. It is the opposite of a trade character, which is created for advertising purposes (Stitt & Kunkel, 1992; Calcott & Lee, 1994; Neeley & Schumann, 2004; Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Danovitch & Mills, 2014). If an ad using a licensed characters appeared more than once in the sample, it was coded more than once. All commercials with licensed characters were coded as follows: whether the character was animated or non-animated (Calcott & Lee, 1994); the gender of the licensed character, either male, female, gender unclear, or both genders (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010); and whether the licensed character was a celebrity or not (; Calcott & Lee, 1994; Neeley & Schumann, 2004; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008; Smits & Vandebosch, 2012; Danovitch and Mills, 2014). The origin of the licensed character was coded, originating from television, film, books, video games, or other (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012). The licensed character’s role in the ad was coded as: does not appear with the product, appears with the product, or uses the product (Bakir et al, 2013; Barcus, 1975; Moon, 2010; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008). The coded emotional appeal or message appearing in the ad with the licensed character included adventure, fun, happiness, pleasure, fear, or neutral (Bakir, Palin & Kolbe, 2013). The

product type of the ad using the licensed character appeared in was coded, including toys/games, cereals/breakfast foods, sugared snacks/drinks, fast food/restaurants, healthy foods/drinks and other (Stitt & Kunkel, 1992). (See Appendix B for complete definitions of all variables.)

### *Reliability and Data Analysis*

The researcher coded 90% of the sample and one independent coder coded 10% of the sample. The independent coder was a graduate student with some knowledge of the topic. The researcher and the independent coder conducted a practice round, using extra data collected that was not included in the sample, to ensure the independent coder understood the task and the terms used for coding. After being trained and agreeing 100% on the variables and definitions, the independent coder was given the coding guide, and randomly given six disks to code. The independent coder was able to ask questions about the sample via email. The researcher and the coder were not in the same facility when the final coding occurred. The Scott's pi intercoder reliabilities were: 1 for animated or non-animated character, 0.918 for product type, 0.918 for gender, 0.843 for emotional appeals, 0.918 for character appearance, and 0.918 for media origin.

## V. Results

A total of 458 advertisements with licensed characters were found. Of those 458 ads, 50.7% (232) aired on Nickelodeon, 36.7% (168) aired on Cartoon Network and 12.7% (58) aired on Disney Channel. All duplicate advertisements featuring the same licensed character and product were included in the sample. Most licensed characters were animated (83.6% or 383) rather than not animated (16.4% or 75). The licensed characters were mostly male (49.8% or 228), followed by female (22.5% or 103), gender unclear (14.8% or 68) or both genders (12.9% or 59). Most ads with licensed characters (73.1% or 335) aired in the afternoon and early evening versus the morning (26.9% or 123). The 4 p.m. through 8 p.m. early evening slot (36.9% or 169), and noon through 3:59 p.m. afternoon slot (36.2% or 166) had ads with similar percentages of licensed characters. For product category (See Table 1), 38.4% (176) of licensed character ads were for toys/games, followed by fast food/restaurants (23.8% or 109) and sugared snacks/drinks (20.7% or 95).

Table 1

	Frequency	Percent
Toys/Games	176	38.4%
Cereal/Breakfast Foods	14	3.1%
Sugared Snacks/Drinks	95	20.7%
Fast Food/Restaurants	109	23.8%
Books	17	3.7%
Clothes	13	2.8%
Diapers	6	1.3%
Insurance	9	2.0%
Paper Towels	2	0.4%
Movies/CDs	14	3.1%
Band-Aid	3	0.7%
Total	458	100%

When considering all advertisements (458), the most frequent emotional appeal was happiness (31% or 142), followed by fun (21.4% or 98), fear/neutral (16.6% or 76), adventure (15.5% or 71) and pleasure (15.5% or 71). Most licensed characters appeared with the product (74.2% or 340) rather than using the product (14.4% or 66) followed by not appearing with the product (11.4% or 52). The majority of licensed characters originated from films (65.7% or 301), followed by television (19.4% or 89), toys (9.8% or 45), and video games (5% or 23).

Hypothesis 1 predicted licensed characters would appear more frequently in advertising for unhealthy foods airing in children's programs rather than in ads for healthy foods. This hypothesis also examined whether or not the 2006 IOM recommendation of only using licensed characters for healthy foods and activities was being upheld. Hypothesis 1 is supported because almost half or 47.6% (or 218 of 458) of sampled ads were for unhealthy foods or beverages, 38.4% (176) were for toys/games and 14% (64) were for all other, non-food products. There were zero ads for healthy foods or beverages in the sample. Stated another way, 47.6% of sampled ads were for unhealthy foods and 52.4% (or 240 of 458) were for all other, non-food products. Of the 47.6% of ads for unhealthy food ads with licensed characters, 23.8% (109 of 458) were for fast food restaurants, 20.7% (95) were for sugared snacks/drinks and 3.1% (14) cereal/breakfast food ads. In addition, licensed characters were more likely than expected to be shown using the product in ads for unhealthy products. In 83.3% (or 55 of 66) of depictions when licensed characters were shown using the product, it was for an unhealthy product [ $\chi^2 = (2, N = 458) = 41.37, p = .000$ ]. See Table 2.

Table 2

Licensed character	Not unhealthy/Other Product	Percent of Total	Unhealthy Product	Percent of Total	Total	Percent
Doesn't Appear With	35	7.6%	17	3.7%	52	11.4%
Appears With Product	194	42.4%	146	31.9%	340	74.2%
Uses Product	11	2.4%	55	12.0%	66	14.4
Total	240	52.4%	218	47.6%	458	100.0%

Hypothesis 2 predicted that positive emotional appeals would be used most in ads featuring licensed characters to sell unhealthy foods. Hypothesis 2 is supported because positive emotional appeals (78.4% or 171 of 218) were used to sell unhealthy products more frequently than neutral/negative (21.6% or 76, with 69 neutral and 7 fear) appeals. From those ads, 83.6% (or 383 of 458) were animated licensed characters versus 16.4% (or 75) non-animated characters. Specifically, pleasure and fear/neutral appeals were more likely than expected to appear in unhealthy product commercials featuring licensed characters, while adventure, fun and happiness appeals were less likely to appear than expected [ $\chi^2 = (4, N = 458) = 70.43, p = .000$ ]. See Table 3.



Table 3

Emotional Appeal	Not unhealthy/other	Percent of Total	Healthy	Percent of Total	Total	Percent
Adventure	47	10.3%	24	5.2%	71	15.5%
Fun	73	15.9%	25	5.5%	98	21.4%
Happiness	80	17.5%	62	13.5%	142	31.0%
Pleasure	11	2.4%	60	13.1%	71	15.5%
Fear/Neutral	29	6.3%	47	10.3%	76	16.6%
Total	240	52.4%	218	47.6%	458	100.0%

Research Question 1 examined the media origin of licensed characters (see Table 4).

Most licensed characters in this study originated from films (65.7% or 301 of 458), followed by television (19.4% or 89), toys (9.8% or 45) and video games (5% or 23).

Table 4

	Frequency	Percent
Television	89	19.4%
Film	301	65.7%
Video Games	23	5.0%
Toys	45	9.8%
Total	458	100.0%

It is important to note that sampling coincided with the release of the films *Minions* and Disney Pixar's *Inside Out*, accounting for the large number of licensed characters originating from films. The toys and video games categories were combined to allow sufficient observations to run a Chi-Square test. Licensed characters from films and other media (toys and video games) appeared more frequently than expected in advertisements for unhealthy products [ $\chi^2 = (2, N = 458) = 43.22, p = .000$ ]. See Table 5.

Table 5

Origin of Media Recoded	Not unhealthy/ other	Percent of Total	Unhealthy	Percent of Total	Total	Percent
Television	73	15.9%	16	3.5%	89	19.4%
Film	144	31.4%	157	34.3%	301	65.7%
Other (Books, Video Games & Toys)	23	5.0%	45	9.8%	68	14.8%
Total	240	52.4%	218	47.6%	458	100.0%

Research Question 2 examined the relationship between emotional appeals and gender. Male licensed characters appeared more frequently in ads with the following emotional appeals: adventure (93.8% or 43 of 45), happiness (78.4% or 76 of 98), fun (65.3% or 64 of 98), and fear/neutral (47.4% or 36 of 76). Female licensed characters appeared more frequently in ads with the pleasure emotional appeal (59.2% or 42 of 71), followed by fun (30), neutral/fear (21), happiness (10) and no adventure appeals. The pleasure emotional appeal (31% or 22 of 71) was used most frequently in ads featuring licensed characters of both genders as well. The adventure emotional appeal was not used in any ads with only female licensed characters (0%), compared to ads with males (93.8%) and both genders (6.3%). The fear emotional appeal represented 2% (or 7 of 458) and was combined with the neutral emotional appeal (15% or 69).

## **VI. Discussion**

Children frequently see licensed characters appearing in ads for unhealthy products. Most ads with licensed characters appeared on Nickelodeon (50.7% or 232 of 458) followed by Cartoon Network (36.7% or 168 of 458) and Disney Channel (12.7% or 58 of 458) (see Table 5).

Hypothesis 1 was supported because almost half (47.6% or 218 of 458) of sampled ads were for unhealthy foods or beverages, followed by toys and games 38.4% (176). There were no ads for healthy foods and the other food categories were combined into the unhealthy foods category: fast food/restaurants (23.8% or 109), sugared snacks/drinks (20.7% or 95) and cereal/breakfast foods (3.1% or 14). Results suggest advertisers are not following the IOM recommendation as children are more likely to see a licensed characters used to advertise unhealthy foods in commercials.

Based on these results and SCT, children appear more likely to want to consume unhealthy foods because of the repetition of unhealthy food advertising featuring licensed characters in children's programming. Atkin (1976), stated children's advertising relies heavily on animated ads to attract the attention of younger audiences. Most sampled ads (83.6% or 383 of 458) using licensed characters were animated, compared to the 16.4% (or 75 of 458) of non-animated commercials using licensed characters. From Connel et al.'s (2014) finding that children develop a bias for products from positive affect created by frequently viewing ads, especially with animation, the implication is children may learn unhealthy foods are good for them. As no sampled ads were for healthy foods, children are not seeing their favorite character used to promote healthy products, and are not learning anything about healthy foods. The limited ability of children to comprehend advertising's intent makes them vulnerable to the reinforcement of

unhealthy eating habits portrayed in commercials, making it more difficult for parents to teach their children healthy eating habits.

This study found 47.6% of sample commercials were for unhealthy foods and none were for healthy foods and drinks. This is similar to Stitt and Kunkel (2008), who found 46.1% of 1,209 sampled ads were for foods, primarily unhealthy foods (46.8%), and only 2.5% for healthy foods. Stitt and Kunkel (2008) found licensed characters appeared in only 9.7% of ads, with most for dairy commercials (21.4%) and sugared cereals (20.7%). Castonguay et al. (2013) found licensed characters appeared in only 17% of their 544 sampled ads, primarily for sugared snacks (23%), restaurant/fast foods (20%), sugared drinks (18%) and sugared cereals (17%).

While this study did not gather data on trade characters, licensed characters are still primarily used to advertise unhealthy food products on children's cable networks. As explained earlier, Connel et al. (2014) argued that the use of licensed characters will create long-term preference for unhealthy foods among child viewers, due to the child being familiar with the character and the frequency of the character appearing during commercials. Once created, this preference is difficult to correct in adulthood and most adults may prefer to eat unhealthy foods. The lasting effects of licensed characters being used to advertise unhealthy foods may continue to contribute to rising obesity rates in both children and adults. Social cognitive theory, as explained by Bandura (1986), Atkins (1976) and Gredler (2009), suggests the use of licensed characters in children's advertising will have an effect on children because the character is a status symbol a child can reference.

Hypothesis 2 is supported because positive emotional appeals (78.4% or 171 of 218) were used to sell unhealthy products more frequently than neutral/negative (21.6% of 47) appeals. Understanding SCT, children will learn to associate positive emotional appeals with

unhealthy foods. Children will want to experience these same positive emotions, encouraging children to ask for unhealthy products, simply because they want the same pleasant experience portrayed in the unhealthy product ad. Young children focus their attention on audio/visual cues, excluding verbal content (Moon, 2010). It appears that the cue of a licensed character using the product could lead to even more trust between the child and the character and product. The use of positive emotional appeals was higher in this study, when compared to Kunkel and Gantz (1992) and Wicks et al. (2009). However, this study found less than the 98.4% of positive emotional appeals found by Bakir et al. (2013). Overall, the results of this study suggest the use of positive emotional appeals has increased in the last 20 years. Smits and Vandebosch (2012) found licensed characters encouraged children to eat more of a product, as well as desire the product more. SCT suggests that children are affected by the use of licensed characters in advertising. Presumably a child will want to experience the same emotion displayed in a commercial when he or she consumes the branded product.

SCT predicts that a child will want to recreate the same emotion he or she experiences, through motoric reproduction, from watching a licensed character while eating/using a product bearing the character's image. The child is more likely learning foods with licensed characters are "good" for them because of the positive emotions displayed when the product is consumed, especially in ads where 14.4% (or 66 of 458) of licensed characters are shown using the product. Most licensed characters (74.2%) only appear with the product in the ad and do not use or consume it. The absence of ads for healthy products featuring licensed characters may reinforce the idea a child's favorite character does not approve of healthy foods. Although unhealthy foods are represented in the sample, this study did not and cannot measure or demonstrate the actual effects of viewing these commercials on children.

Research Question 1 examined the media origin of licensed characters. Most licensed characters in this study originated from films (65.7% or 301 of 458), followed by television (19.4% or 89), toys (9.8% or 45) and video games (5% or 23) (see Table 6). The implication is children are more likely to see a licensed character from a film due to the promotion of the film. Parents have more control over what films their children can watch; however, if a new film character excites them the child may continue to ask a parent to take him to the movies to see this new character. The child may then want to own all advertised merchandise bearing the new character's image. Although the character is new to the child, it is exciting to see the new character repeatedly on television. When new licensed characters are repeatedly shown, the child has the opportunity to learn more about and develop a liking for the characters.

Atkins (1976) stated most animated licensed characters originated from movies, television, games or other forms of mass media. The use of all types of licensed characters led to the 2006 IOM recommendation that licensed characters only be used to promote healthy foods because of their visibility across forms of mass media. Bandura (1986) and Atkin (1976) explained how repetition and observational learning enable children to retain a message from television. These results suggest television advertising limits the ability of parents to control exposure to licensed characters used for commercial purposes. Parents cannot limit exposure effectively unless they prevent their children from watching television. Children's films use a hard sell approach because of the limited timeframe to build an audience. Ads for Disney Pixar's *Inside Out* and *Minions* aired frequently on children's cable networks during the sampling period because movie studios must build an audience quickly to maximize ticket sales. Licensing a character benefits both the owner of the character and the product it is licensed to sell, but makes it harder for parents to limit a child's exposure to such characters in television advertising.

Donovitch and Mills (2014) found children are less likely to trust a character that is unknown to them. As television based licensed characters were the second most frequently represented genre in the study, they still may influence children's preferences of the child from repetition of a program on television that could be considered a 30-minute commercial. Almost half (47.6%) of licensed characters were used to advertise unhealthy foods and children are learning to associate the licensed characters, whether they come from film or television, with unhealthy foods or toys/games (38.4%).

The results for Research Question 2 revealed that male licensed characters were used more in ads with adventure, happiness, fun and fear/neutral emotional appeals. Pleasure was the only emotional appeal appearing more frequently in ads featuring female licensed characters than males. Thus, children are learning that girls are not associated with fun and adventure, due to their lack of representation in the study. Female licensed characters were absent in ads where adventure was the emotional message and less likely to appear in ads for products where happiness was the emotional appeal. It appears that children are subconsciously learning that girls don't have adventure, fun nor happiness. The implication is girls should not have adventures and that they are not equal to boys.

The findings suggest a child is more likely to recognize a licensed character from a film (65.7% or 301 of 458) versus television (19.4% or 89 of 458). Female licensed characters (22.5% or 103 of 458) were underrepresented in the study compared to males (49.8% or 228 of 458). Positive emotional appeals (83.4% or 382 of 458) were more likely to be used in ads featuring licensed characters than neutral (10% or 47 of 458) or fear appeals (2% or 7 of 458, totaling 16.6% or 76 of 458).

Most fear appeals were for a Legos ad featuring *Scooby-Doo*. Because the plot of the *Scooby-Doo* series often involves fear, it only makes the same appeal would be used in ads bearing his image. Most neutral ads were for fast food restaurants using licensed characters for toys a child receives when ordering a meal. The toy was displayed on the screen without a child present in the scene. However, more licensed characters (38.4% or 176 of 458) appeared in ads for toys and games compared to sugared snacks (20.7% or 95 of 458) and fast food/restaurants (23.8% or 109 of 458). For most ads children are learning to associate an emotion when he or she sees a licensed character in a television ad.

Social cognitive theory suggests children who watch television are more likely to associate licensed characters with unhealthy products and reinforce gender stereotypes. Children's preferences for unhealthy products may increase as their rate of watching television increases. These biased evaluations are long-lasting, continue into adulthood and can be difficult to change (Connel et al., 2014). With frequent repetition of these ads for unhealthy foods, children are learning to trust licensed characters and may prefer the unhealthy foods they promote, representing the environmental component of the theory of social cognitive theory (Donovitch & Mills, 2014). Repeatedly viewing stereotypical depictions of male and female licensed characters over time also suggests why it is important that female and male licensed characters are portrayed equitably in mass media. It appears that gender stereotypes and unhealthy eating habits are still being portrayed frequently on television, reinforcing these negative perceptions among children.

This study reviewed whether the emotional appeals used varied by gender of a licensed character. Social cognitive theory suggests the emotions used to sell products in ads featuring male and female characters may teach children about gender roles and stereotypes. Female



characters only appeared more frequently than male characters when pleasure was the emotional appeal (59.2% or 42 of 71) used in an ad. No ads in the sample used adventure as the major emotional appeal when female licensed characters were used. The results of this study, as well as the results of Bakir et al. (2013), Larson (2001), and Merskin (2002), suggests that if female licensed characters are used at all they are not portrayed the same as male licensed characters. Male licensed characters are used to sell to both boys and girls whereas female licensed characters primarily sell to girls only. When emotional appeals are considered, it appears that girls are being taught they cannot be adventurous because no ads featuring girls using the adventure emotional appeal. Boys are depicted as able to have fun, be happy and adventurous. Girls are apparently being taught to be submissive.

In conclusion, the findings suggest advertisers are not following the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommendation. Licensed characters are not used only for the promotion of foods and beverages that support healthy diets for children in mass media. Instead, licensed characters are modeling unhealthy eating habits and gender stereotypes to children in advertising on cable television.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study had several key limitations. At the time of data collection, children's programming was not sampled on broadcast networks because it appeared to the researcher that there were not enough children's programs on broadcast networks to justify data collection. In the future, both broadcast and cable networks should be sampled. Data was collected from popular children's cable networks, but not from spinoff networks such as Nick JR. (Nickelodeon), Disney Junior (Disney Channel) and Boomerang (Cartoon Network). Future research should sample all major children's networks and their spinoffs. Past research had also

examined both trade and licensed characters; it was an important omission in this study. Although trade characters were not analyzed, it would have been useful to compare the differences in the use of trade and licensed characters as both serve as important models to children. Trade and licensed characters should be examined in future research, as both types of characters were analyzed in previous research.

A clearer guide for coding emotional appeals would be beneficial for future research. The variable definitions in the coding guide from Bakir et al. (2013) were not clearly defined, nor defined in sufficient detail, with thorough examples. Future research should seek to clarify and expand on these variables and operational definitions. In addition, while fear and neutral appeals were combined into one category in this study to aid in data analysis, these two categories have not been combined in past research. Nor was a clear theoretical reason for comparing the combined fear/neutral category with other categories found, so future research may need to examine how to address this problem in the future.

Sampling occurred only during the summer season when many children are on summer vacation. In the future, research should sample other seasons when ads for licensed products are more likely to appear (e.g., during the fourth quarter when holiday ads appear and the first quarter or January, February and March when fewer ads appear). Future research might use a composite day sample, which Stitt and Kunkel (2008) said examined the representativeness of the advertising across a broader range of campaigns, in this case, summer campaigns. The sampling period coincided with the campaigns for Disney Pixar's *Inside Out* and *Minions*; both were heavily represented in the data.

## VII. Conclusion

While this content analysis of licensed characters was based on previous content analyses (Barcus, 1975, Atkins, 1976, Stitt & Kunkel, 1992; Calcott & Lee, 1994; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008, Wicks et al. 2009, LoDolce et al., 2013), this study is the first to look solely at licensed character usage on children's cable networks. Advertisers must adhere to strict guidelines when advertising to children on broadcast networks, but cable networks do not have to abide by the same guidelines. The FCC (2015) is clear in its distinction between children's advertising on cable versus broadcast. The data collected in this study shows how cable networks can air as much (like Nickelodeon) or as little (like Disney Channel) advertising as they want.

Advertisers did not follow the Institute of Medicine (2006) recommendation of using only licensed characters to advertise healthy foods and beverages as 47.8% (or 218 of 458) of ads with licensed characters were for unhealthy foods. Although this content analysis study did not and cannot measure the effects these licensed characters have on children, children are not seeing licensed characters promote healthy foods. Presumably children are not learning healthy eating habits by watching their favorite characters. The primary goal of the advertiser is to make money and it is a parent or guardian's responsibility to teach the child healthy eating habits; however, advertisers could help improve children's eating habits and health by following the 2006 IOM suggestions. The owners of the licensed characters have the potential to use their characters for the social good, but these characters are still used to market unhealthy snacks to children. Children were deemed a special audience by the FCC, which has guidelines and restrictions on advertising to children for broadcast television networks. However, those guidelines do not apply to child-directed advertising on cable, suggesting that the FCC's protections may not matter because more and more children are choosing to watch children's cable networks.

Today, the television viewing experience of children is very different than the experience found in previous content analyses. Children can watch their favorite programs on tablets and smartphones. Streaming services like Netflix, Hulu Plus and Amazon Prime enable children to watch content with limited or no commercial exposure. It will be interesting to see how advertisers try to appeal to a child audience when many parents are choosing streaming services over traditional cable outlets. Advertisers will continually find ways of reaching children as new viewing platforms develop, but researchers should examine the implications of children's licensed character advertising on those platforms, and parents can mediate their children's viewing of such advertisements.

## VIII. References

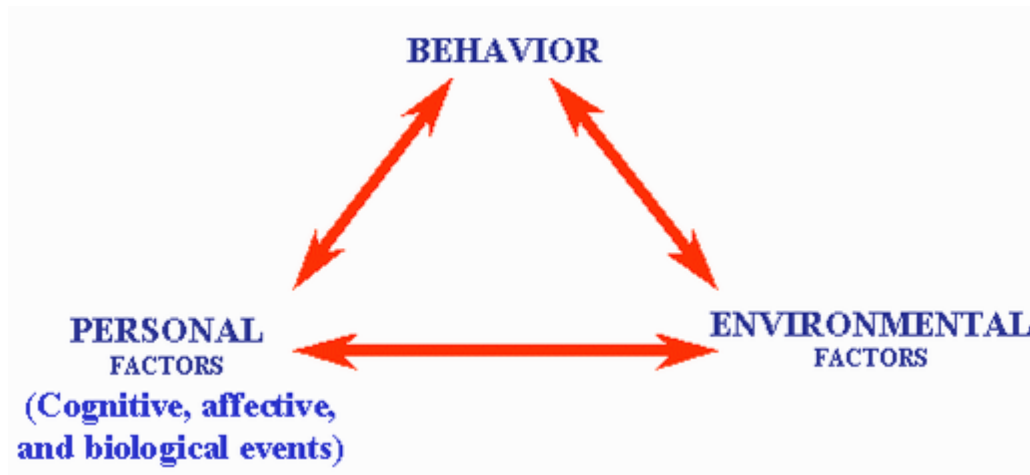
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**IX. Appendix A**

Figure 1.





## X. Appendix B

### Coding Guide

#### Spokes-Characters in Children's Advertising Coding Guide

Spokes-character is a term used to describe both licensed characters and trade characters (Stitt & Kunkel, 2008). A licensed character is a live-action or animated character that was originally created for entertainment purposes such as a character originally created and appearing in a television show, movie, video game, or book (Callcott & Lee 1994; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008). A trade character is live or animated character that was created as part of an advertising campaign and appears in the ad campaign associated with a specific brand or product) (Castonguay et al., 2013).

1. Animated licensed or non-animated licensed (Callcott & Lee, 1994) (Castonguay et al., 2013)
  - a. Animated licensed character (CODED AS 1) (e.g. Tony the Tiger, SpongeBob SquarePants, Dora the Explore, Kung Fu Panda) - Any character that is animated for a television show or commercial
  - b. Non-animated licensed character (CODED AS 2) (e.g. Ronald McDonald, Kermit the Frog, Power Rangers, Jessie from *Jessie*) - Any character that is not animated, including a human dressed in costume, that appears in either a live-action television show or commercial

2. Product Type (Stitt & Kunkel, 1992)

- a. Toys/Games: tangible toys and games (CODED AS 1; e.g. Lego Blocks, Monopoly)
- b. Cereals/Breakfast Foods (CODED AS 2; e.g. Kellogg's Frosted Flakes, Kellogg's Eggo Waffles, Pop Tarts)
- c. Sugared Snacks/Drinks (CODED AS 3) - Any food items with added sugar listed in its first three ingredients (e.g. Coca-Cola, Snickers Candy, Hawaiian Punch)
- d. Fast Food/Restaurants (CODED AS 4); McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Wendy's, Chuckie Cheese, TV Dinners)
- e. Healthy Foods/Drinks (CODED AS 5), (Fruits and Vegetables, 100% Fruits and Vegetables Juices)
- f. Other (CODED AS 6) any product that does not fall into the previous categories (please list the name and description of any other type of product that does not fall into the previous categories here)

i. \_\_\_\_\_

ii. \_\_\_\_\_

iii. \_\_\_\_\_

iv. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Gender of licensed character (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010)
  - a. Male (CODED AS 1)
  - b. Female (CODED AS 2)
  - c. Gender Unclear (CODED AS 3)
  - d. Both Genders (CODED AS 4)
  
4. Type of Emotional Message in the ad with the licensed character/s (Bakir, Palan & Kolbe, 2013)
  - a. ADVENTURE: To venture upon; Undertake or try something new (CODED AS 1)
  - b. FUN: Associates positive affect with product use by having joy and cheer. (CODED AS 2)
  - c. HAPPINESS: Associates positive affect with the product's use by smiling, dancing, etc. (CODED AS 3)
  - d. PLEASURE: Emphasizes the satisfaction or joy one gains through use of purchase of the product (CODED AS 4)
  - e. FEAR: Focus on emotional response to a threat expresses or at least implies, some sort of danger (i.e., physical danger, disapproval or social rejection) (CODED AS 5)
  - f. NEUTRAL: The product does not appear to provide an emotional message in the ad (CODED AS 6)

5. The licensed character's role in the ad (Moon, 2010) (Barcus, 1975)
  - a. Doesn't appear with product: the character does not share screen time (e.g. SpongeBob SquarePants does not appear on screen with product but is in the same advertisement) (CODED AS 0)
  - b. Appearance with product: the character and product appears on the screen at the same time. (e.g. SpongeBob SquarePants appears on screen next to a box of popsicles that bear his image) (CODED AS 1)
  - c. Use of the product: the character uses the product as intended by the company (e.g. Fred Flintstones eats a bowl of Fruity Pebbles) (CODED AS 2)
  
6. Origin of media that the licensed character originated from in context (Smits & Vandebosch, 2012).
  - a. Television: licensed character originally appears in a television show or television movie (CODED AS 1) (e.g. SpongeBob SquarePants originates from *SpongeBob SquarePants* not *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*)
  - b. Film: licensed character originates from films shown in theaters (CODED AS 2) (e.g. Queen Elsa from Disney's *Frozen*)
  - c. Books: celebrity originates from books (CODED AS 3) (e.g. The Cat from *The Cat and the Hat*)
  - d. Video Games: licensed character was created for video or applications for computers, cell phones and tablets (CODED AS 4) (e.g. The Angry Birds, Mario from *Super Mario Bros.*).
  - e. Other: (CODED AS 5) any licensed character that does not fall into the previous

categories (please list the name and description of other character types here)

i. \_\_\_\_\_

ii. \_\_\_\_\_

iii. \_\_\_\_\_