Whoa!, slow!, go!: Marketers Target Unhealthy Foods to Children Using Media Characters
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Background. Research suggests that media characters influence children’s food choice, leading the Institute of Medicine to recommend that characters be used to market healthy foods to children (IOM, 2006 & 2012). Some industry leaders have taken the initiative to promote healthy lifestyles. Sesame Street, for example, has put forth its Healthy Habits for Life initiative in which their characters are reserved for health eating. Seventeen food and beverage corporations have created pledges to change their marketing to support healthier options for children through the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI).

Purpose. The study examines the nutritional quality of foods featuring media characters on their packages in a general grocery store and a health-conscious grocery store using a simple classification system from the Department of Health and Human Services. It also evaluates the impact of self-regulation by food marketers and, specifically, the healthfulness of foods and beverages marketed by Sesame Street characters.

Results. As expected, the preponderance of foods marketed by media characters were unhealthy. While products detected at the healthy grocery store were, on average, more nutritionally sound than those at the general grocer, they still fell short of being called “healthy.” The same holds true for products marketed by Sesame Street. CFBAI corporations in fact marketed proportionally more unhealthy products using media characters than non-participating companies. The implication is, of course, that self-regulation is not effective in this industry.