



The Canberra Times

TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY AND THROUGH IT THE NATION

The influence of Freddo

Whether borrowed from literature or cinema or created specifically for the task, mascots and cartoon characters have proved to be wonderful aids to selling consumables, particularly junk food. Commercials aimed at a younger audience often contain an animal character belting out a jingle or promising a fun time for anyone consuming their product. Television used to be the medium of choice for advertisers who based campaigns on such characters, but in recent years these figures have turned up on websites, online games, apps and other new media. Advertisers are, after all, well aware of the fact that not only are children highly receptive to such messages but also enthusiastic and facile adopters of new technology.

This spread of advertising to new media platforms has alarmed health groups such as the Obesity Policy Coalition, which points out that regulators are frequently unaware of their existence. The fact many of the platforms have the appearance of interactive game sites – they lack company logos, for example – probably only adds to the confusion. Deakin University researcher Paul Harrison says there is no confusion in the minds of the young children who download the apps or visit the sites, and that all of them

“work out the association between a character and a product from a very young age, even if they are not together at the time”.

The Obesity Policy Coalition says that since such characters are the common factor used to draw children to fattening and sugary foods and drinks the federal government should ban their use on social media platforms and in free online games. Governments have already begun to address rising obesity levels by introducing school exercise programs, and limiting children's exposure to junk food advertising would seem to be a natural corollary to such prevention campaigns.

Whether they have the courage to do so, however, is open to debate. Despite repeated calls to limit the amount of junk food advertising shown during peak children's viewing times, governments have gone no further than the introduction of voluntary “self-regulation”. Not surprisingly, the frequency of ads has altered very little.

The other problem with efforts to limit the use of characters such as Freddo Frog and the Paddle Pop Lion on social media – other than the fact that it is not illegal – is that attempting to corral online content is nearly impossible, as Communications Minister Stephen Conroy discovered when he tried to make the filtering of certain internet sites mandatory.

Common sense suggests the best guardians of the television and computer viewing habits of children are parents, and that the best antidote to weight gain is fresh air and exercise. Instead of relying on others to safeguard their children's health and welfare, parents need to take greater responsibility for what their offspring consume – in both media and food. That, and the setting of limits on time spent in front of a TV or computer, is the best way to ensure children remain fit and healthy.