

# They're grrreat! How do brands create loyalty that lasts a lifetime?

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From a very young age, children are targeted with advertising messages that emphasize fun and happiness, especially for food products and toys. But what happens to these beliefs once the child is grown? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, children develop brand loyalty and biases that carry over into their adult lives and are often difficult to change.

"Our research provides an initial investigation into how exposure to ads in childhood can lead to enduring biases that favor [products](#) associated with the ads once the kids grow up," write authors Paul M. Connell (Stony Brook University), Merrie Brucks, and Jesper H. Nielsen (both University of Arizona).

In four studies, the authors examined adults' judgments of the healthiness of various products, some of which were heavily advertised in their childhood years. Participants viewed images of characters that would have been widely advertised when they were [children](#). Study results showed that when exposed to [advertising](#) using characters before age 13, we develop positive long-term feelings towards the characters and the brands' nutrition for years to come.

Additionally, the researchers found that people who harbor strongly positive feelings toward the advertising character resist changing their minds about the products featured in the ads. They discovered that these effects are not limited to the products that were originally advertised. That is, if people continue to have positive feelings toward advertising

characters, then they also rated fictitious new brand extensions as healthier.

The findings may give some insight into public health and safety campaigns aimed at children. Companies producing health-oriented media campaigns targeted at children could aim to relate to children on an emotional level, for example, by emphasizing loveable characters and fun narratives.

"These results are interesting for consumers themselves, particularly parents," the authors conclude. "We recommend adults reexamine the nutrition labels on favorite products from childhood, and also suggest that parents discuss the persuasive nature of advertising with their children—encouraging them to develop critical thinking skills in response to advertising messages."

**More information:** Paul M. Connell, Merrie Brucks, and Jesper H. Nielsen. "How Childhood Advertising Exposure Can Create Biased Product Evaluations That Persist into Adulthood." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2014.

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