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There's an (branded) app for that! Branded mobile apps and food marketing

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I was on the train travelling south from Sydney idly watching people around me. A mother with a 2 year old child sat down across from me. In a bit, the child in her stroller began to cry and the mother had a hard time trying to calm her. When the offer of other toys and drinks did not appease her, the mother pulled out her iPhone and handed it to her child. The child fell silent immediately. She had no trouble clicking on the 'games icon' and playing a game that she seemed very familiar with.

The mother and I made eye contact, and curious, I commented on her baby's familiarity with the iPhone. She replied with a hint of pride 'Abby is really good with her hands, she can play several games on the iPad and uses it to draw as well.' I was left wondering what the implications of this use of new i-technology meant for children's 'hand-eye coordination' and so much more.

David Hockney's *iPhone* art came to mind. The simulacra evoked by this image, captures the marketer imagined world of 'games' and play that children today engage in on mobile devices. Is it more than a 'new toy' that children of this generation engage with, much as past generations did with computers, walkmans, Television, vinyls etc.?

I went home and checked out the app store. Yes, there were several free game apps. In a conversation with my research student Nicolla Confos chatting about the phenomenon of what we have now begun to call the 'i-baby' phenomenon, she showed me an app called Santa's Helper. The Santa's Helper app opens on a big image of a jovial Santa holding a bottle of *Coke*. The game consists of pressing a button to release a present from Santa's sleigh, which if aimed right goes down chimneys of snow covered houses in a Christmas landscape.



David Hockney x Yves Saint-Laurent
iPad/iPhone art exhibition.
Source: Firestein 2010.

Completely unrelated to the game are several *Coca Cola* trucks moving across the screen at the same time. Throughout the game we see trucks passing the foreground bearing prominent *Coke* signs. Additionally, several of the snow clad houses seem to have *Coke* vending machines and *Coke* signs in their gardens and by their front doors.

If one were to go into the 'privacy' section, this app has a disclaimer:

'Note Regarding Use of this Site by Children

This Site is not directed at children and we request that children do not provide personally identifiable information through the Site.'

It seems difficult to believe that the game is aimed at adults with a love of Santa and *Coke* signage. The brand placement in this 'game' is one of the more obvious examples of how fast food brands are becoming a part of the childhood environment of play.

Wall Street Journal reported recently that the most popular free children's games download since July has been 'Super-pretzel factory' and the 8 million download wonder 'Icee maker'.

Parents, while aware of the fascination the games hold for their pre schoolers, see it as harmless and entertaining. The *Wall Street Journal* reports them saying they prefer their children playing these games to the more violent video games. However, the key attractions of this form of 'brand placement' for marketers are many. First, it is really cheap to produce. About USD 10,000 to an independent app developer is all the investment needed. Second, this digital, wireless space is largely unregulated. While TV advertising by food marketers has come under pressure and is increasingly being policed and regulated in the UK and the USA, the Federal Trade Commission only just began to worry about the privacy issues around apps and children in their latest report (FTC 2012). In the UK, apart from specific concerns about 'in-app purchases' by child players, little debate is apparent. Thus, it is a simple, direct and relatively cheap way of reaching child audiences everywhere who are unaware they are being marketed to. Finally and importantly, the child interacts with the brand in a direct and positive way with little or no intervention by an adult. The ease of access to these games by the 18 month old child using an *iPhone* means that parental permission is much less of a barrier than a parental lock on the TV or internet access. Of course, the mobile phone also goes everywhere with its owner.

In the systematic analysis of several of these apps, freely downloadable, Nicolla and I found very similar placement of branded food placements. Some of the placement is subtle and so 'natural' as to almost escape notice even by a trained adult eye looking for branded cues. The 'psst' sound of a *Coke* bottle opening while the game uploads, or the golden arches posing as a rainbow in a game are just the tip of this 'under the cognitive radar' advertising iceberg. The brand characters such as the Paddlepop lion or Chupa Chuck would appear in the game or invite the child player to respond to their prompts, leading them up a (consuming) path into a magical (branded) candy world!

The apps were linked into the brand's *Facebook* and web page as well. Children could 'like' the brand, talk to the brand character on *Facebook*, or connect with other fans of the brand all through their smart phones. It is clear that these games present the food brand as a friend, as a social enabler and person/character (all aspects that are regulated in the TV advertising arena). So we wondered about whether the parents were worried by all this. We asked a forum of informed, engaged and media savvy parents on the 'Parents Jury' – an online forum hosted by the Cancer Council New South Wales (who have several campaigns running against food marketing to children in Australia) – if they were concerned about branded free game apps. While many expressed a general concern about the potential for marketers to exploit this media platform, several suggested that their children were far more influenced by TV food advertising. For most part they thought the games harmless and entertaining for their children. While they were vigilant and suspicious of TV advertising of unhealthy food to children, and very aware of

their role as guardians in countering this effect, they saw mobile and hand-held devices as a necessary and largely useful technology. They did not seem fully aware of the potential for marketers to reach out and directly speak to their very young children in the guise of educational games, entertainment or social networking.

Other mothers point out that the iPhone/pad can be educational: they pointed me to the *Fisher-Price iPhone* holder for babies (see the footnote for a story on these) which 'helped' young children use the *iPhone* safely (see Crane and Gough, 2012), and several puzzle games, which are simply digital versions of old wooden puzzles babies in the past played with. Many art and colouring apps are available (for example, *Kid Art for iPad*) that cost no more than the old paper colouring book. So the days of sticking your child's finger-painted masterpiece on the fridge are gone, and David Hockney's ironic image of the *iPad* on an easel shows us the new and central space that mobile technology already occupies for the next generation. This technology already educates, entertains, socialises, and manipulates the child. All aspects of cultural learning can now take place through this object of technological wonder. Art, music, literature, and popular culture can be channelled directly to the child through this hand-held device. No more paper to draw on, books to read from, puzzles to fit together or to sing alongside, and no more having to think up inventive, creative children's games... there's an app for that!

As Moore (2006) has shown through her comprehensive content analyses, 'advergaming' and other online marketing strategies are very pervasive and used extensively as a means of building brand familiarity and awareness amongst young children. The way brand mentions are processed by a young children in the 'naturalised' and 'embedded' online game is very different from how the adult consumer processes such advertising (understanding the intent behind the game). The entertainment/gaming context of the advertising lowers any cognitive 'defence' that the young consumer may have leading to the feelings of pleasure of playing a game associated with the brand itself.

The mobile app is increasingly what food marketing is moving its promotional dollars into, along with the *Facebook* apps and advergaming development. This engagement with very young children exposing them at a very young age to a far more frequent level of branded advertising of unhealthy food, at an almost unconscious level, is product placement taken to a new level. The integration of the brand into the game itself creates new and insidious 'under-the-radar' forms of promoting to children which costs less than traditional advertising and has almost unbelievably extensive reach. The policy makers are just about coming to grips with online marketing to children; branded mobile apps are still a free and unpoliced marketing space that marketers are happy to play in.

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