An accountability evaluation for the industry’s responsible use of brand mascots and licensed media characters to market a healthy diet to American children

Given the link between food marketing and childhood obesity, food marketing strategies are controversial. Children are exposed to a broad range of marketing practices that go beyond the ones directly targeting them. This case study explored diverse stakeholders’ accountability expectations and actions for industry policies and practices that used popular cartoon brand mascots and media characters to promote food products to American children.

The study was guided by four questions:

1. What were the performance expectations for industry’s use of brand mascots and media characters issued by expert and authoritative groups between 2000 and 2015?
2. What were the trends for cartoon brand mascot and media character marketing practices and the actions taken by the U.S. companies and industry sectors to promote food and beverage products to American children between 2000 and 2015?
3. How adequate were the accountability structures to guide the actions of relevant stakeholders during the period reviewed?
4. What actions can be taken by diverse stakeholders to ensure that brand mascots and media characters are used to promote healthy food environments for American children?

Overall, results suggest that food, beverage, restaurant, and media and entertainment firms could substantially improve their food marketing practices targeting children. While some seem to be heading in the right direction, a substantial amount of them have not yet achieved the suggested experts’ recommendations.