

# Product Evaluation: Do the Values Young Children Attach to Packaging Affect their Sensory Evaluation of a Food Product and Impair their Objectivity?

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## Abstract

The overall aim of this research was to find out what values young children attributed to certain food packages and whether these values influenced the children's judgement about the contents. The objectives for this research were to find out:

- what overall rating nine and ten-year-olds would give to four different brands of plain crisps on a blind tasting
- what overall rating the same children would give to the same crisps when they were tasted from the packets
- what values and images the packaging of these crisps conveyed to these children
- whether values and images attributed by the children to the packaging influenced their sensory evaluation of the crisps by improving the overall rating they gave to the crisps.

## Introduction

Design and technology in the National Curriculum requires children to investigate, evaluate and disassemble products: amongst these products should be food. Young children are avid consumers and are allowed to make many choices, particularly in terms of what they eat. Much of what we eat is packaged, not just for protection or hygiene, but principally for selling. This packaging may also affect children's sensory evaluation of the food product it contains. Products communicate values and meanings, either intended by the manufacturer or attached to the product by the consumer. Through the design and technology curriculum we should enable children to develop their capability in product evaluation and become 'product literate', ensuring that the choices children make about products are informed ones and that they are enabled to become discerning consumers and critically thinking designers. This in turn will inform their own designing and making in the classroom. The National Curriculum also requires children at Key Stage 2 to distinguish between the quality of design and the quality of manufacture and appreciate that the two do not necessarily go hand in hand. But there are other aspects of quality that need addressing too, and they need to think about the appropriateness of the underlying value judgements they make. For example, in relation to food and packaging, children should have opportunities to raise their awareness that whilst a package may possess quality in terms of its design and manufacture this does not of necessity indicate that the contents are of a similar quality.

The design and technology curriculum requires children to investigate and evaluate products, in order to inform their own designing and making. Some of these products will be food products which are often attractively packaged. In fact we are dealing with not just one product but two products, the package and the contents. This packaging is very often designed to make us make an instant judgement about the contents and so purchase the product. This is the affective component of values: how we respond to a product that we would like. As Goleman says,

*"in the first few milliseconds of our perceiving something we not only unconsciously comprehend what it is, but decide whether we like it or not; the 'cognitive unconscious' presents our awareness with not just the identity of what we see, but an opinion about it..."*

Rapid judgements like these may influence the evaluation of the product inside and consequently impair children's objectivity. This sort of rapid judgement of products based on their outer packaging is known as 'sensation transference', a term coined by Louis Cheskin and cited by Hine. As part of children's capability in design and technology SCAA states that we need to, "develop their ability to comment critically on those products" and make rational choices. Kline cites Rust as confirming that children do not make rational choices about products.

Consumerism is a major activity of adults and children alike. We seem to live in an age where consumerism is centred on self image, status and acquisition of products. Regardless of how mundane the products we buy appear to be, they often conceal many hidden messages. Products are not value free, but have values embedded in them prior to manufacture. These values may then be made more explicit through shrewd marketing. Products also have values embedded in them by the consumer which may differ from these altogether – something which I discovered in a previous research study into the values nine and ten-year-olds attributed to carrier bags (Allison, IDATER 1997). It was a chance remark from a child during that research that prompted this paper. The child in question suggested that he would be teased if he brought Kwik-Save No Frills crisps to school in his lunch box and anecdotal evidence suggests that in some schools children are called 'poor' if they are to be seen with these particular crisps.

The following research was conducted with 19 nine and ten-year-olds in a suburban school. The children were asked what crisps

they usually ate and who chose them. In focus groups of four or five they were asked to taste four different brands of plain crisps – Walkers, Kettle Chips, Regal (bought from Netto) and Kwik-Save No Frills. In the first tasting the children tasted the crisps blind, jotting down descriptors under four separate headings – appearance, smell, texture and taste. They then had to give each crisp an overall rating from 1-5. The ratings were:

- 1 liked a lot
- 2 liked a little
- 3 neither liked or disliked
- 4 disliked a little bit
- 5 disliked a lot.

Between each tasting the children were allowed a drink of water to cleanse their palates. Each child had their own disposable plastic cup. On completion of both tasting sessions the children were given the product names of the crisps that they had tasted blind. They were then asked to compare the ratings they had given to all the crisps on both tests.

In a second session the focus was on the packaging of the crisps, in particular Walkers and No Frills. The children were asked to consider first the colour red as this was the predominate colour of the Walkers packet, and any naming words or descriptors they would attach to this colour. They were then asked to do the same with the colour white, the predominate colour of the Kwik-Save No Frills packet. This was followed by asking the children to consider these packages as people and if they were people what sort of people would they be? The children then drew the person they thought was conveyed by the Walkers package and the person they thought was conveyed by the Kwik-Save package. This was an attempt to find out what sort of image the packages conveyed to the children themselves. This type of activity has been used by Gross, a marketing consultant referred to by Hine, when creating packaging for a particular product.

What I wanted to find out was whether the images children attached to the packages might influence their sensory evaluation and product purchases. The children were then asked to consider the price per 100 grams of each brand of crisps to find out whether they considered price to be an indicator of quality and whether they would appear to assume that “A quality product could not be sold below a quality price” (Kline). This brings to mind the phrase ‘you pay for what you get’, but is this always the case?

**Brand of crisps usually bought**

The children were asked if they had brought any crisps to school that day in their lunch boxes. Ten out of the 19 had done so. Seven had brought Walkers crisps, the other brands were KP, Golden Wonder and Sainsbury’s own. Five children said that their parents usually made the choice of brand, while 14 made their own choice. When asked why they chose a particular brand they all said flavour. Crisps were usually bought from Asda, Morrisons, Sainbury’s, Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Aldi and Mrs Patel’s. When asked if they would consider buying from anywhere else one child said “Netto – when broke.” Another child said that her mother did not like her eating “Netto things” and another said that anything from Netto was horrible. These comments did not appear to influence their judgements later. On the blind tasting the lowest score for Regal crisps from Netto was a 4 – disliked a little bit and the average score was a 3 on a par with Kettle Chip Gourmet Crisps. In fact Walkers crisps were rated a 5 by one child in the same taste test and scored the same average of 3.

**Table 1: Overall rating of crisps tasted blind and from package**

Tasting	Blind	From Package
Walkers	3	1
Kwik-Save	2	3
Regal	3	3
Kettle Chips	3	3

**Walkers**

Ratings given to Walkers crisps in the blind tasting ranged from 1 to 5, with the average rating being 3 (neither liked or disliked). When children were shown the Walkers packet for the next tasting, one boy immediately said, “That’s a definite 1!” before he even tasted the crisps. In total 14 out of 19 children gave the Walkers crisps a higher rating which raised the average rating to 1.

**Kwik-Save No Frills**

Ratings for these crisps when tasted blind ranged from 1 to 4. The average rating was 2. These crisps in fact had the best average score on the blind tasting. When tasted from the packet these crisps scored between 1 and 5. Five children on seeing the packet immediately said, “I don’t like those.” Ten children gave a lower rating. The average rating was then reduced to 3.

**Kettle Chip Gourmet**

Ratings for Regal on the blind taste test ranged between 1 and 4. Ratings in the same test for Kettle Chips ranged between 1 and 5.

The average score given by the children in both taste tests for both Kettle Chips and Regal was 3.

**The images conveyed to children by packaging**

The predominate colour red of the Walkers packet elicited the descriptors bright, easily seen, bold, fiery, warm, happy, cheerful. The nouns and descriptors for white, the predominate colour of the Kwik-Save packet were snow, icy, boring, plain, blank, hardhearted, miserable, and December. The children were then asked what sort of person the Walkers packet would be if it was a person. They then drew that person and added descriptors to their drawings. The words used to describe the Walkers person were cool, flash, trendy, fashionable, lots of friends, likes clubbing, daring, brave, enjoys life, content, rich, stands out, drives fast cars, famous, lively, funny, kind, and fun. Clearly this person was a well rounded, much liked character, at ease with him or herself and other people and likely to stand out in a crowd. In stark contrast the words used to describe the Kwik-Save person were poor, boring, plain, sad, stupid, a lout, no brains, lazy, old, miserable, unhappy, quiet, shy, no friends, fed up, weird, unfashionable, and not

important. One child clearly considered his drawing of the Kwik-Save person depicted too much affluence when he said, "Oh, mine's got Adidas trainers on, better rub them out." Stereotypes appear to have emerged and these are evidenced in the children's drawings. Only one child's descriptors were very different for the Kwik-Save person. They were normal, nice, friendly, kind, helpful, caring, peaceful and quiet.

It is clear from the children's drawings that they attach a particular lifestyle image to the Walkers packaging which I am sure is precisely what the manufacturer would like to convey through the use of such people as Gary Lineker and the Spice Girls in their advertising. Buy these crisps – buy this image and this lifestyle and acquire status and success along the way. The problem is that this distorts the judgements the consumer makes about the product and about those who do not have this particular product. It may also affect the way in which children behave towards each other.

**Conclusion**

The children were asked to consider their individual scores for each brand. Of the 14 children who gave a higher rating to Walkers

Figure 1



crisps from the packet most said that there must have been something wrong with those tasted blind. For example they were out of the packet and therefore not as fresh. They would not be convinced that I had just taken them out of the packet prior to the tasting. Given the evidence that on the blind tasting Kettle Chips, Regal and Walkers all scored the same the children were adamant that they would not change their minds and would still buy Walkers crisps if the three packets were side by side on a shelf. The children were then asked to compare the following prices (see above).

	Walkers	Regal	Kwik-Save	Kettle Chips
Price per 100g	70p	23p	17p	90p

They were still undeterred by the fact that they could have four times as many Kwik-Save crisps as Walkers, and that Kwik-Save were therefore far better value for money as well as being given either the same rating or an even better rating in the blind tasting by individual children. It may well be that these children have been heavily influenced by the hidden meanings of television advertising as the majority of children were familiar with the Gary Lineker commercial. The hidden message would appear to be if you want to be famous and well liked then eat these crisps. Postman rightly says that all television commercials,

“...provide a slogan, a symbol or a focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves.”

It appears that these children may have bought into the Walkers image without realising it. This focus on image, lifestyle and status through the media of television and packaging appears to effectively impair their objectivity when making judgements. The children were then asked who paid Gary Lineker to advertise the crisps. They all said “Walkers”. When asked where Walkers got their money from to pay him they all replied “Us”. Still they would not consider buying Kwik-Save crisps if the two packets were side by side on the shelf.

Values are at the heart of design decisions and intentions, they also appear to be at the heart of product choices even though these children may not be consciously aware of their values. If children are to evaluate food and its packaging objectively then we need to raise their awareness of the purpose of packaging and the ways in which we are influenced to buy products through clever marketing. We need to get children to question products and question their choices and develop their product literacy. The issue of values needs to be at the forefront of the design and technology curriculum. We need to try and educate children to be intelligent, discerning consumers and intelligent designers. For

example, in their own designing and making of packaging they should consider carefully the emotive power of colour, shape and graphics to provide visual impact and the lifestyle image that this might help to portray. Children need to be aware of the ways in which we are all manipulated and persuaded – even though we may like to think that this is not the case!

They need to be able to have the opportunity to market some of the products they design and make, and so gain a better understanding of the roles of the marketer and designer. This will enable them to become more ‘product literate’ and read the hidden meanings in products, including packaging. Postman argues that our languages are our media for communication and our tools for conversation. Here he includes television, books and information technology. One singular omission I believe is the products we create and through which we communicate many layers of meaning. Products are very powerful communicators and should be seen as such. Perhaps one key question we should ask children when evaluating products is ‘What is this product trying to tell me?’

I believe that we need to challenge children’s thinking and make them increasingly more aware of the factors influencing their value judgements and even our own. The effective component of values is just beginning to be addressed but the cognitive component of values – what we base our value judgements on – is largely neglected in the design and technology curriculum and needs to be addressed. Whitely rightly suggests that,

“In a democratic society values are explicitly and openly debated and justified.”

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