

The Consumer Voice in Europe

Ref.: BEUC-X-2017-069/MGO/cm

13 June 2017

Re: Brand Mascots and Licensed Media Characters

Dear Mr. Vernay,

BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation is deeply concerned by children's diets and the alarmingly high levels of obesity. We are writing to you regarding the issue of brand mascots and licensed media characters used to promote foods to children which are high in fat, salt and sugar.

We urge you to end the use of such brand mascots and licensed media characters for advertising and marketing of Unilever HFSS products. To determine whether a product is HFSS we encourage you to use the World Health Organisation (WHO) European Regional Office's nutrient profile.

With one in three children in Europe either overweight or obese, it is crucial that strong action is swiftly taken to tackle this serious public health problem. Research has shown that advertising to children of foods high in fat, salt and sugar is a significant risk factor for obesity. Numerous international bodies, health experts and consumer organisations have urged food companies to improve their food marketing practices to better protect children from such advertising.

Nevertheless, children remain exposed to many forms of persuasive and pervasive forms of marketing for foods high in fat, salt and sugar.

Fictional human and animal cartoons or animated objects are regularly used on such foods which are advertised and marketed to children. The use of such mascots is of especial concern for younger children who do not have the cognitive capacity to properly distinguish between cartoons they see in TV programs or digital games and those cartoons which are used by food companies.

Attractive cartoon characters suggest a sense of fun and adventure to young children who can develop emotional bonds with the characters. **Scientific research has shown that such characters can have a powerful influence in shaping children's food preferences and purchase requests.**

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Packaging is a key form of marketing to children who are much more likely to assess products on a visual level. Brand mascots children have been exposed to through TV or digital advertising can provoke powerful purchase requests to parents when seen on packaging in the supermarket. **It is thus important that any restrictions are not just limited to advertising alone but should be extended to packaging as well.**

The EU Pledge, the food industry's voluntary initiative of which you are a member, has taken some notable initial steps to restrict the marketing of some of its products to children. In particular, it is to be welcomed that Pledge members have now recognised the impact licensed media characters can have on children and the most recent Pledge commitments now restrict the use of such characters in certain forms of advertising.

The announcement of the Netherlands Food Industry Federation, representing 450 food companies, in December 2016 that it intends to restrict the use of licensed media characters on packaging is a welcome first move. It follows the initiative of Dutch supermarkets, Albert Heijn and Plus making commitments earlier in 2016 to remove cartoon characters on the packaging of unhealthy own-brand children food products.

We believe that EU Pledge members should step forward and extend this initiative to all European countries and further widen its scope to include brand mascots.

Kind Regards,

Monique Goyens
Director General

CC: Ms Georgescu