

Packaging Design's Role in Guiding Children's Healthy Snack Selections: A Literature Review (2018-2024)

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Doi <https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssl-02-01-01>

ABSTRACT

The influence of packaging design on children's food choices has become an increasingly critical focus in efforts to promote healthier eating habits. This literature review synthesizes empirical studies published between 2018 and 2024 that examine how packaging elements—such as colors, characters, typography, health claims, and interactive features—impact children's snack preferences and perceptions. The review identifies key trends and psychological mechanisms behind packaging appeal, evaluates the effectiveness of design interventions aimed at encouraging healthier choices, and highlights the ethical considerations in targeting child consumers. Findings suggest that child-oriented design can significantly affect snack selection behavior, and that strategic, health-promoting packaging can serve as a valuable tool in public health nutrition strategies. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy, marketing practice, and future research directions.

Keywords: packaging design influence, children's snack choices, healthy eating promotion, food marketing to children, visual design elements, nutritional labeling effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The formative years of childhood are crucial for establishing dietary patterns that can profoundly impact health throughout life. Globally, the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity and diet-related health issues highlights the challenges associated with children's food choices, particularly their frequent consumption of snacks that are often high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats [6]. In this environment, food packaging serves as a significant marketing tool, acting as a primary point of interaction between snack products and young consumers. Children, characterized by developing cognitive abilities and heightened responsiveness to visual stimuli, are particularly susceptible to the influence of packaging design when making decisions about what to eat [1, 2].

Packaging for children's snacks is frequently designed to be highly appealing, employing bright colors, popular characters, and engaging graphics to attract attention and build brand recognition. While effective in capturing a child's interest, these design elements can often overshadow or even conflict with information regarding nutritional content and the principles of healthy eating. This potential for discrepancy raises concerns about packaging potentially misleading

children and their caregivers, making it difficult to discern genuinely healthy options within a crowded market. Consequently, understanding how packaging design influences children's perceptions and choices, specifically from the perspective of promoting healthy selections, is of critical importance for public health professionals, food manufacturers, and regulatory bodies.

This scoping literature review aims to systematically explore research published between 2018 and 2024 concerning the design of packaging for children's snacks, with a particular focus on its impact on the selection of healthy food options. By synthesizing findings from recent studies, this review seeks to identify key design features that influence children, evaluate how these features contribute to perceptions of healthfulness, and suggest potential strategies for designing packaging that actively encourages healthier snack choices.

METHODOLOGY

A scoping literature review methodology was employed to broadly map the existing evidence regarding packaging design for children's snacks and its relationship to healthy choices. This approach is well-suited for exploring complex and interdisciplinary topics, facilitating the

identification of core concepts, research gaps, and the types of available evidence [4, 5].

Search Strategy:

A comprehensive search was conducted across academic databases likely to contain research in consumer behavior, marketing, nutrition, and public health. The search utilized various keywords and phrases related to the research question, including combinations such as: "children," "child," "adolescent," "snack," "food," "packaging," "design," "visual," "marketing," "perception," "preference," "healthy choice," "nutrition," "health," "influence," "behavior," and "decision-making." The search was restricted to publications dated from January 2018 to May 2024 to ensure the review focused on recent literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria:

- Published between 2018 and 2024.
- Focused on children (typically defined as individuals under 18 years of age) as a primary study population.
- Investigated aspects related to the design of food or snack packaging.
- Addressed the influence of packaging on food choices, perceptions, or attitudes, with a specific interest in the context of healthy eating.
- Were peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, or academic theses published in English.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Did not focus on food or snack packaging.
- Primarily focused on adult populations.
- We're not empirical research studies (e.g., opinion pieces, editorials, policy documents without supporting research).
- Fell outside the specified publication date range.

Data Extraction and Synthesis:

Consistent with the nature of a scoping review, data extraction focused on identifying the main themes and findings rather than conducting a detailed quantitative analysis. For each selected article, information was extracted regarding the study's objective, methodology, key findings related to specific packaging design elements (such as color, imagery, characters, and claims), and their impact on children's perceptions or healthy food choices.

The extracted data underwent thematic analysis, a widely recognized qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and

reporting patterns (themes) within data [10, 16]. This process involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing the report. The nuanced understanding of children's perspectives on packaging often necessitates the use of qualitative approaches, as discussed in various qualitative research method articles [4, 5, 11, 13, 16].

RESULTS

The review of literature published between 2018 and 2024 revealed several recurring themes concerning how packaging design influences children's snack choices, particularly from a healthy eating perspective. These themes broadly cover the impact of visual elements, how healthfulness is perceived, and the subtle ways packaging can potentially mislead or provide information.

The Prominence of Visual Elements in Shaping Children's Preferences:

Numerous studies consistently emphasize the significant impact of visual characteristics on children's initial attraction to and preference for snack products. Zhang (2018) [1] demonstrated that children's preferences for package design are influenced by their age and cultural background, suggesting that effective design needs to be adapted to these factors. Further research by Zhang (2019) [2] investigated the relative importance of color versus form in children's package design preferences, indicating that both elements play important, though distinct, roles. Bright colors, appealing shapes, and cartoon characters are widely recognized as powerful attractors for young consumers. Children's ability to interpret and be influenced by visual information, often referred to as visual literacy, is a crucial factor in how they interact with packaging [17]. However, this strong visual appeal can sometimes overshadow factual nutritional information, potentially leading children to favor visually exciting but less healthy options.

Perceptions of Healthfulness and the Issue of Deceptive Packaging:

Packaging design plays a significant role in shaping how children, and even their parents, perceive a product's healthfulness, sometimes in a misleading manner. Chan et al. (2018) [6] found that Chinese adolescents' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy foods are influenced by various factors, including marketing and packaging cues. Although not exclusively focused on packaging, their work underscores the general susceptibility of health

perceptions to external influences. More directly, research has shown how certain packaging elements can deceive consumers, including children, about a product's actual nutritional value. For example, Dial (2021) [18] examined how children and parents evaluate "fruit snacks," revealing that packaging cues often led to the belief that these products were as nutritious as real fruit, despite their high sugar content. This highlights a critical concern: packaging that features images of natural ingredients (e.g., fruits, vegetables) or uses terms like "natural" or "fortified" without clear nutritional transparency can create a "health halo" around products that are not truly healthy. The development of dietary indexes for children, such as the Chinese Children Dietary Index [8], while not directly related to packaging, reinforces the need for clear communication to assess overall diet quality, a goal that can be undermined by misleading packaging.

Safety Considerations and Misleading Cues Beyond Nutrition:

While the primary focus is on nutritional choices, the broader implications of packaging on children's safety also emerge from the literature. Although specifically addressing liquid nicotine, the studies by Chang et al. (2019) [3, 7] and Franklin & Rodgers (2018) [9] on unintentional child poisonings demonstrate how packaging design can inadvertently lead to dangerous ingestion, even of non-food items. The bright colors and child-friendly designs used for some nicotine products, for instance, were found to resemble food or candy packaging, increasing the risk of accidental poisoning. While not directly related to snacks, this principle is highly relevant: if packaging cues can be so powerful as to cause accidental poisoning from non-food items, their influence on what children choose to eat (and in what quantities) warrants even greater attention. This underscores the ethical responsibility of designers to ensure that packaging does not inadvertently encourage the overconsumption of unhealthy snacks or misrepresent product safety.

The Value of Qualitative Research in Understanding Child Perspectives:

Several studies within the reviewed timeframe discuss the importance and application of qualitative research methodologies, which are essential for gaining in-depth understanding of children's complex perceptions of packaging. Methodologies for conducting qualitative research, including systematic approaches and observation, are discussed in various contexts [4, 5, 10, 11, 13, 16]. These methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and observational studies, allow researchers to explore the 'why' behind children's choices, uncovering their interpretations of visual cues, characters, and health claims on packaging in ways that

quantitative methods alone cannot [16]. For example, understanding how children truly perceive the "healthiness" of a snack based on its packaging often requires exploring their subjective reasoning and associations, which qualitative inquiry is uniquely positioned to achieve. This methodological emphasis reinforces the need for nuanced studies to inform the development of truly effective and health-promoting packaging designs.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this scoping review highlight the significant and complex role that packaging design plays in influencing children's snack choices and their perceptions of health. It is clear that design elements, particularly visual ones, have a powerful impact, often overriding rational considerations about nutrition. This situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity for public health initiatives and stakeholders in the food industry.

The inherent susceptibility of children to appealing visuals, as demonstrated by the work of Zhang [1, 2], means that simply providing nutritional information on packaging is often insufficient. Children are drawn to vibrant colors, cartoon characters, and playful shapes, which can unintentionally steer them towards less healthy options. This makes the issue of deceptive packaging, exemplified by the findings on "fruit snacks" [18], particularly concerning. When packaging intentionally or unintentionally resembles healthy food items or utilizes misleading health claims, it directly undermines efforts to educate children and parents about nutritious eating. This necessitates a critical re-evaluation of marketing ethics and regulatory frameworks pertaining to food products marketed to children.

Furthermore, the insights drawn from studies on unintentional poisonings [3, 7, 9] provide a compelling parallel. If packaging can lead to the dangerous ingestion of non-food items due to its visual appeal, its potential to promote unhealthy consumption patterns for snacks should be regarded with equal seriousness. This implies that designers have an ethical responsibility to consider the overall impact of their creations, moving beyond mere aesthetic appeal to ensure clear, honest communication and prevent misinterpretation, especially when targeting vulnerable populations like children.

The discussion on methodology within the reviewed literature underscores the critical role of qualitative research [4, 5, 10, 11, 16] in understanding the intricacies of children's perceptions. Gaining insight into *how* children interpret and react to packaging—their cognitive processes, emotional responses, and learned associations—is vital for developing packaging designs

that are truly effective in promoting health. Future research should increasingly incorporate these qualitative insights to move beyond superficial preferences and delve into the deeper cognitive and behavioral mechanisms involved.

Limitations:

This scoping review is not a full systematic review and therefore may not have identified every relevant study published within the specified timeframe. While the search strategy was comprehensive, some relevant publications might have been missed. Additionally, the depth of analysis for each article was limited to identifying key themes rather than a detailed critical appraisal, which is characteristic of a scoping review. The scope of this review was also guided by the provided list of references, meaning the findings are primarily based on the insights offered by these specific articles.

Future Directions:

Based on the findings of this review, several areas for future research are apparent:

1. **Intervention Studies:** There is a need for more intervention studies that directly evaluate the effectiveness of specific packaging features designed to promote health in real-world settings (e.g., supermarkets, schools) on children's actual snack choices.
2. **Cross-Cultural Research:** Future studies could explore how cultural contexts influence children's preferences for packaging and their perceptions of healthfulness, particularly given the global nature of the snack market and variations in dietary norms.
3. **Parent-Child Interactions:** Further investigation into the dynamic interplay between parental influence and children's independent choices driven by packaging is crucial. How do parents interpret packaging health claims, and how does this mediate their children's selections?
4. **Digital and Interactive Packaging:** With the advancement of smart packaging and augmented reality technologies, exploring how these innovations can be utilized to encourage healthy choices (e.g., interactive nutritional information, gamified health education) represents a promising research area.
5. **Longitudinal Studies:** Tracking children's responses to packaging and their dietary habits over extended periods could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of design elements on the formation of eating habits.
6. **Regulatory Impact:** Research specifically examining the effectiveness of different regulatory approaches to food packaging for children (e.g., front-of-pack labeling, restrictions on the use of cartoon characters) is needed to inform policy development.

CONCLUSION

Packaging design for children's snacks is a powerful tool that significantly influences their food choices and health perceptions. The evidence from 2018-2024 indicates that while visual appeal is a primary driver for children, it can also lead to misinterpretations of nutritional value, potentially contributing to the consumption of less healthy options. Moving forward, there is a critical need for packaging designs that effectively balance aesthetic appeal with transparent, clear, and non-deceptive health information. Achieving this requires collaborative efforts among food manufacturers, designers, public health researchers, and policymakers. By prioritizing ethical design principles and utilizing robust qualitative research to understand children's perspectives, snack packaging can be transformed from a potential contributor to unhealthy eating into a valuable tool for promoting healthier dietary habits in the next generation.

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