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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2023;380:p197

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p197>

Published: 01 February 2023

BMJ INVESTIGATION

Big Macs and the Beano: Is it time for the comic to drop the junk food brands?

The Beano website describes itself as “100% safe for children”—but is its junk food related content doing more harm than good? **Claire Mulrenan, Mark Petticrew, and Harry Wallop** investigate

Claire Mulrenan,¹ Mark Petticrew,¹ Harry Wallop²

In 2021 the *Beano*, a UK children’s comic that started more than 80 years ago, decided to stop using the nickname Fatty for one of its most famous characters in the *Bash Street Kids* strip. The obese schoolchild—whose motto is “Everything is delicious!”—was renamed Freddy in a bid to discourage bullying among its readers.

At the time, Mike Stirling, editorial director of Beano Studios (the multimedia business responsible for both the *Beano* comic and the website), said, “Kids come in all shapes and sizes, and we absolutely celebrate that. We don’t want to risk someone using it in a mean way.” But he insisted that Freddy would not be depicted any thinner. “All the characters overindulge at times, and Freddy is no different,” said Stirling.

It would seem, however, that the Beano brand has been overindulging in a surfeit of burgers, pizzas, cakes, fried chicken, sweets, chocolate bars, and fizzy drinks. Its website,¹ aimed predominantly at children aged 6–12, publishes more than 1000 quizzes, games, jokes, and facts. But alongside “Which Harry Potter House am I?” and the “Ultimate Football Quiz” are numerous quizzes involving foods that tend to be high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS). There are 125 separate quizzes or fact files that mention chocolate, 143 that feature cakes, and even one that features alcohol, asking, “How long have humans been making beer for?”—accompanied by an image of a pint being poured. It has 10 food games, eight of which revolve around chocolate, cakes, sweets, doughnuts, or fried chicken.

Of more concern, in the eyes of some campaigners, are the frequent references to well known HFSS brands. There’s an “Ultimate McDonald’s Quiz” (one question is, “How many McDonald’s are there in the world?”), a “How well do you know the Nando’s menu?” quiz, and a “Skittles jokes” page, including this rib tickler: “Why did the leprechaun eat Skittles? Because he wanted to taste the rainbow”—a reference to the advertising slogan of the sweet owned by Mars Wrigley. Another quiz asks children what flavour the brown Hula Hoop crisps are, and there’s an “Ultimate Food Logo” quiz whose 10 answers are: Heinz, Pizza Hut, Nando’s, Subway, Domino’s, KFC, Greggs, Quorn, Pizza Express, and Burger King.

Kat Jenner, director of nutrition, research, campaigns, and policy at the Obesity Health Alliance, says, “It’s an incredibly irresponsible way of promoting unhealthy food. We should be taking unhealthy food

out of the spotlight. At the moment unhealthy food has a starring role in children’s minds, and things like this glamorise it and make it more appealing. We should be making healthy food more appealing and affordable.”

Brands and advertising

Filled with anarchist humour and entertaining tales of misbehaving characters such as Dennis the Menace and Minnie the Minx, the *Beano* is the world’s longest running comic and has successfully managed not just to survive but to thrive despite the arrival of children’s television and then the internet. In 2016 the *Beano* franchise expanded by creating Beano Studios, which launched a television programme based on the comic and a new website, www.beano.com, promoted as a digital hub for 6–12 year olds. Since its launch 47.9 million children have visited [beano.com](http://www.beano.com), helping the *Beano* to achieve a 77% brand recognition among 6–12 year olds.

Beano.com describes itself as “100% safe for children” and, in the words of one of its executives, “like a fun but trusted babysitter who lets the kids stay up a bit late.” But is this assurance of safety and care warranted? Is the babysitter doing more than letting the children stay up past their bedtime?

The free website has little explicit advertising, save for a few banner advertisements for its own shop, merchandise section, and subscription to the magazine itself. It explains its business model on the website: “Just as the *Beano* comic always has been, we are partially funded by brands. Unlike many digital destinations we handpick the brands we work with to make sure kids only see what’s appropriate for them.”

Beano makes some of its money by running sponsored quizzes and games. There’s no suggestion that any of these quizzes referencing HFSS food brands have been paid for by the brands themselves, and Beano says that it “runs age appropriate, compliant advertising . . . from brands we selectively choose to work with,” which is “always clearly marked,” and that this “would never include HFSS products or brands.”

However, in other cases where games or quizzes have been sponsored by HFSS companies they’ve been deemed to be a form of advertising known as “advergaming” under the self-regulating UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing, known as the CAP Code. These rules state

that HFSS food can't be marketed on websites aimed predominantly at children, whether by means of "advergames" or otherwise.² Back in 2018 Swizzels Matlow, a confectionery company, was found to be in breach of the code after it launched an advergame app called Squashies World, featuring a game in which players matched pairs of Squashies (chewy sweets) by flicking them towards each other, at increasing levels of difficulty.³

Although the *Beano* hasn't been paid for this content, one leading obesity expert believes that the company is being "naive" in giving "free advertising" to HFSS brands and products. Boyd Swinburn, professor of population nutrition and global health at the University of Auckland and honorary professor at the Global Obesity Centre in Melbourne, says, "They are just giving free advertising to products which are harmful to the health of the children who are their users. If it is not the commercial coin that is driving this extensive product placement, then it is blindness and naivety of the Beano corporation that is allowing this content to pass its low ethical standards."

One page on the Beano website tells users, "You can stay in the Coca-Cola Christmas truck!" with a one minute video featuring the soda company's festive lorry. It adds, "Remember the iconic Coca-Cola Christmas truck from the adverts? Well now you can stay the night in it!"

When approached by *The BMJ*, Beano commented, "This is a historic piece of editorial content from 2017 and was not paid for by Coca-Cola. The American drinks company confirms it was an editorial decision by Beano to showcase the fizzy drink's advertising campaign—without payment."

Health campaigners, however, are disappointed with Beano's willingness to showcase so many junk food brands—and to put these brands right at the front of children's minds, suggesting that a chocolate, fizzy drink, or burger brand is "cool"—even if it's not taking money from the companies themselves.

Data collection

In addition to exposing children to HFSS content, the Beano website collects data on children's opinions through these interactive games in the form of Totally Random Questions, often found halfway through a quiz or at the start of a game. These are surveys aimed at children to discover their consumption preferences.

A frequent question is, "Which of these brands do you think is cool?" before listing 10 different consumer brands. Children are asked to pick as many as they like, ranging from technology (Microsoft, WhatsApp, PlayStation) to retail (Amazon, B&M), fashion (Primark, Brandy Melville, New Balance), and HFSS food and drink brands. They include Burger King, KFC, Sprite, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Cadbury, Oreo, Pringles, Snickers, Haribo, and Sour Patch Kids.

The children taking part are asked to state their gender and age. These data are then sold, on an anonymised basis, to companies looking to find out more about what children like and don't like. The answers are also used to help compile something called the Beano Brain index—a ranking of different brands, many of which target children.

The thinking behind this approach is explained on the website of "Beano Brain," the "insights consultancy" arm of Beano Studios⁴: "Our surveys are taken by kids in a safe environment they enjoy: an entertainment platform with fun quizzes and games. This means that the insights we provide are truly direct from young people themselves—and are not filtered by parents' bias."

The company insists that, despite these HFSS companies appearing in Totally Random Questions (TRQs), none of the following has in

the past five years paid any money to Beano: PepsiCo (owner of Doritos, Pepsi), Mondelez (owner of Oreo cookies, Cadbury, Sour Patch Kids), Greggs, McDonald's, Coca-Cola (also owner of Fanta, Sprite), Mars Wrigley (owner of Skittles, Snickers), Five Guys, Ferrero (owner of Kinder), Yum! Brands (owner of Pizza Hut, KFC), Burger King, and Kellogg's (owner of Pringles).

In its website policy statement the company further clarifies: "When a TRQ is sponsored it will be very clearly marked as so, and all questions are audited and approved by Beano Studios insight professionals before publication. Use of the website does not require any user to respond to TRQ questions, and they are completely optional to answer."⁵

It added, "Beano Studios takes data collection and analysis extremely seriously and complies with all relevant GDPR (EU) and COPPA (US) regulations," saying that no personal data are collected or stored by Beano. The information collected is not used to profile or target a child; it is anonymised and aggregated and so cannot be linked to an individual.

Beano does admit, however, that one chocolate company has paid for its data in order to develop a new line of Easter eggs.⁶ Kinnerton, which supplies most UK supermarkets, launched its Forest of Hope range of chocolate eggs in 2021 after paying Beano Brain for consumption preferences and insights about children of primary school age. Part of Beano Brain's remit, says Beano, was to "develop a brand positioning and marketing strategy which will encourage purchase and loyalty from kids 7-11 and their families." Beano Brain did this by creating "an immersive deep dive into the UK children's market—behaviours, attitudes, and trends."

Beano told *The BMJ*, "Any suggestion that Beano is somehow contributing to increased consumption of HFSS products in children is false, misleading and damaging." And although the company highlights its work with Kinnerton as a case study on its website, it added that this project "represents 0.9% of the insights projects the business has worked on and does not accurately represent the type of work Beano Brain does."

Diets and regulations

Beyond any legal obligations, campaigners say that there's a question around whether the company has an ethical duty to safeguard child health.

Henry Dibley is the lead author of the National Food Strategy, commissioned by Boris Johnson's government, which called for a salt and sugar tax on processed food. "Beano is an absolutely fantastic institution in our household," he says, adding that he was "sad" to see quizzes featuring McDonald's, chocolate bars, sweets, and crisps on its website.

He explains, "There is a real problem in society with diet related disease. The stat that frightens me most is the fact that in 2035 we're going to be spending more on treating type 2 diabetes alone than we spend on all cancers today."

Long running trends in childhood obesity are certainly a cause for concern. Recent statistics estimate that 22% of reception aged schoolchildren are overweight or obese, rising to 37% of children by year 6.⁷

Dibley adds, "People at Beano might be thinking, 'Oh, well, you know, it's just a little bit of fun, that's what the kids like.' But I just think it is all pervasive in society. This stuff invades every element of their lives."

“The brilliant thing about *the Beano* is that it’s rebellious. And no one wants to be the nanny, but at some point you have to say, sorry, it’s causing too much harm. It’s just got to stop.”

Attempts to counter childhood exposure to HFSS content have faced multiple setbacks in recent years. The National Food Strategy was partially overtaken by the government’s own obesity strategy, which back in 2020 recommended a ban on television advertisements for HFSS foods before 9 pm, as well as a total ban of HFSS advertising online—a move that was due to come into force from January 2023.⁸ However, last May it was delayed for a year by Johnson, then prime minister. And in December the policy’s implementation was delayed again, to 2025.⁹

James Bethell is a former health minister, having served in Johnson’s government, and is furious about the further delay, saying it was “ludicrous” to suggest that the industry needed more time to prepare. “It’s heart breaking,” he says. “The reason why it’s so heart breaking and so demoralising is that this is the first tiny footstep. We’re asking to take junk food out of the everyday, hour after hour, lives of our children, in order to change the environment in which they encounter food.”

Bethell says that one McDonald’s quiz on the Beano website would in itself do very little to affect obesity. He explains, “The children of Britain can handle a picture of a burger without exploding. It’s just that this remorseless bombardment creates an environment around junk food [where] (a) you think that this is all that’s available, and (b) because you are consuming quite a lot of it, you are semi-addicted to the oily, salty, sugary foods, and you end up with cravings for it through the day. What annoys me about this is just the relentlessness of it in young people’s lives. There’s no escape.”

Because Beano says that it hasn’t taken money from any of the HFSS brands that so often feature in its quizzes, the stricter (and now delayed) rules about marketing junk food to children would not stop the company from continuing to showcase so many burgers, pizzas, crisps, and fizzy drinks or from suggesting that these brands were “cool.” Nor would it stop the comic running *Forknite*, a game fronted by Minnie the Minx, who has “been served up a plate of vile veg and she needs your help to eat them and defeat them!”

When asked about its ethical duty to safeguard children’s health, Beano stated, “Our quizzes, like the comic, aim to represent life in the modern world and reflect what children are interested in and we know is relevant to them.”

J Bernadette Moore, associate professor of obesity at the University of Leeds, says, “This idea that children won’t like healthy food pervades all aspects of our society. Yet companies with such extensive young audiences must acknowledge that they are not merely reflecting child preferences but shaping them.”

Beano responded, “We take enormous care in what we present to children particularly around health and wellbeing,” adding that its website also runs some positive content about fruit, vegetables, and healthy eating, including the “Ultimate Vegetarian Quiz.”

But Swinburn argues that Beano must do better, and he called on the company to change its policy and to no longer showcase products that are harmful to children—including alcohol, fast food, confectionery, soft drinks, and ultra-processed food.

He concludes, “Corporations which are clever enough to capture and hold children’s attention need to have very high ethical standards to ensure that they are not exploiting those same children by promoting unhealthy products to them.”

Additional contributions from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine include: Kate Dun-Campbell, specialist registrar in public health; Greg Hartwell, clinical assistant professor; Katherine Körner, specialist registrar in public health; Nason Maani, assistant professor; and May CI van Schalkwyk, specialist registrar in public health and NIHR doctoral fellow.

This feature has been funded by the BMJ Investigations Unit. For details see www.bmj.com/investigations

Competing interests: The authors have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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