



MASCOTS MATTER:

Gender and Race Representation in Consumer Packaged Goods Mascots

INTRODUCTION

This is the first study to systematically examine how gender and race are represented in brand mascots. Branding is the *sine qua non* of successful products, and top selling brands have a name, symbol, design, motto and other features that make it easy to readily identify them. Mascots, which typically take the form of spokespeople or spokescreatures, are vital to effective branding because they are the image that succinctly conveys the spirit of the brand.¹ Mascot images also convey notions of who matters more in society. Like representation in film, television, and other forms of mass communication, gender and race representations in the familiar images seen in brand advertising send subtle messages about which identities have the authority to confirm value on a product. In this report, we examine how women and people of color are represented in the top selling products in the U.S. to determine whether gender and racial bias exists with mascots.

This executive summary reports the findings of a content analysis of mascots from the 500 top selling products in each of the following thirteen consumer product categories: Bakery; beauty care; dairy; deli; frozen foods; general merchandise; grocery; health care; household care; meat; produce; pet care; and personal care. A team of five researchers systematically reviewed advertising and packaging for the 6,500 products in these product categories and identified products with mascots. The findings in this report are based on an analysis of 1,096 product mascots.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In this section, we summarize the major findings of the study. Additional findings are included in the full report below.

Gender

- Male mascots outnumber female mascots two-to-one (67.1% compared to 31.4%).
- One-in-four (25.4%) female mascots are presented as gender stereotypes; significantly more than male mascots (15.9%).
- Female mascots are significantly less likely to be shown as commanding (possessing authority) than male mascots (22.9% compared to 14.5%).
- Male mascots are also more likely to be shown as threatening (likely to cause damage or danger) than female mascots (4.1% compared to 1.5%).
- One-in-five female mascots is shown as skinny or very skinny (19.4%), while one-in-ten (11.0%) male mascots is shown with unusually large muscles.
- Nearly one-in-ten (8.0%) female mascots are shown as wearing sexually revealing clothing, while less than 1% of male mascots wear revealing clothing.
- Female mascots are more likely to be shown as partially nude than male mascots (7.5% compared to 0.3%).
- Male mascots are seven times more likely to be shown as funny than female mascots (18.4% compared to 2.6%).

Race

- People of color constitute 38% of the U.S. population, but only 15.2% of mascots.
- Among mascots of color, 18.1% are female while 12.7% are male.
- Mascots of color are significantly more likely to be shown as cooking or preparing food than white mascots (28.1% compared to 10.6%).
- White mascots are more likely to be shown eating or drinking than mascots of color (8.4% compared to 0%).
- Two-thirds (65.6%) of mascots of color are represented as racial/ethnic stereotypes compared to only 2.8% of white mascots.
- Mascots of color are twice as likely to be portrayed as threatening than white mascots (4.7% compared to 1.7%).
- White mascots are twice as likely to be shown as commanding than mascots of color (27.0% compared to 14.1%).

REPORT

We begin this full report with a review of existing research on the question of why mascots matter. In the second section, we describe the methodology of this study. In the third section, we present findings from a content analysis of mascots associated with top selling brands to determine how women and people of color are represented as mascots. We conclude this report with recommendations for mascot creation moving forward.

Why Mascots Matter

Mascots matter to product success because consumers base purchasing decisions largely on the brand image, not the product itself.² Brand mascots are also important because they convey meaning with just one image, and if that image reflects bias, they can be a lightning rod for public criticism that brings unwanted attention to the brand. For example, in 1967, Frito-Lay introduced the Frito Bandito mascot, a pudgy, greasy character who stole Frito corn chips at gunpoint, reinforcing negative ethnic stereotypes (see Figure 1). After nearly four years of activism from Latinx groups, Frito Lay retired this mascot.

Figure 1
THE FRITO BANDITO DEBACLE

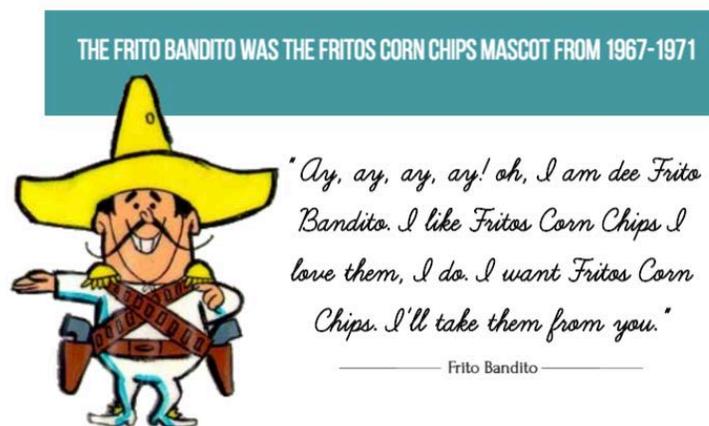


Figure 2
THE CORN POPS CONTROVERSY



More recently, in the fall of 2017, cereal maker Kellogg's received a firestorm of criticism for producing a cereal box featuring dozens of Corn Pops characters at a mall, with the only character of color shown as a janitor pushing a floor polisher (see Figure 2).

Activists took to social media to criticize the company for promoting racism, and Kellogg's immediately responded with an apology via Twitter (see Figure 3). They also altered their cereal box in response to the controversy.

With the rise of social media and the ability for consumers to provide instant, public feedback, companies have to be particularly careful about which mascots they choose to

represent their brands. Companies today are much more aware of the social and political impact of their branding than in the past, and are more cautious in choosing mascots that will appeal to a wide spectrum of consumers without offending social or political sensibilities.

Figure 3
KELLOGG APOLOGY



Mascots also matter because of their influence on consumers. Who gets represented as mascots and how they are represented shapes the value we as a society place on different people. For example, mascots can increase racial and gender bias amongst consumers. A recent study finds that exposure to stereotypical Native American sports mascots

(e.g., the Cleveland Indians, Chicago Blackhawks, Florida State Seminoles, and the Washington Redskins) strengthens implicit stereotypes about Native Americans.³ Similarly, when viewers see images of sexually objectified women, their brain sees her as a collection of parts rather than a whole person,⁴ and they care less about her pain and suffering.⁵ Also, the more men view images of sexually objectified women, the more likely they are to be tolerant of sexual harassment and violence against women.⁶ This means that exposure to mascots based on racial stereotypes or sexually objectified women increases bias against these groups.

Mascot influence is especially pronounced for children. Marketers spend an estimated \$12 billion annually to reach children and teens, and young people are exposed to approximately 40,000 ads per year.⁷ Brands serve as a special type of signal to children, who develop an emotional bond with the brand that enhances recognition over the course of their lives.⁸ Children are more vulnerable to marketing appeals than adults.⁹ For example, a series of studies find that mascots have a powerful influence on children's food choices,¹⁰ so much so that in the past decade, experts, government agencies, and national health organizations have organized campaigns to get corporations to use their power for good—to promote healthy food and beverage choices.

Marketing expert Amy Nutt finds that mascots influence everyone who sees them, “but mascots impact on children is much stronger and profound than with any other age group” because of their vulnerability to marketing messages.¹¹ Furthermore, mascots are easy to present as fun and lovable to children through exaggerated physical characteristics and engaging activities such as dancing or singing. The impact of mascots has increased since the mid-2000s with the advent of social media and the importance of personalization amongst millennial consumers who are now parents.¹² Marketers now recognize popular mascots as a way for a parent or caregiver to connect with their child. It is no wonder then that U.S. companies spend \$1.8 billion a year on marketing products to U.S. consumers, nearly half of which is spent targeting children (\$531 million).¹³ Children see product promotion in advertisements, cross-promotions, merchandising, and cross-marketing with television programs, movies, video games, and social media. Mascots are often the primary way the brand is instantly conveyed across these platforms.

Methodology

We conducted a content analysis to assess representations of gender and race for mascots in the U.S. Content analysis is ideal for systematically analyzing the content of communications. The unit of analysis is a character (mascot). Our categories of mascots included human (e.g., a celebrity), humanoids (e.g., talking M&Ms), animals (e.g., Tony the Tiger for Frosted Flakes), or other characters that can be classified as a “being.”¹⁴

We analyzed the content of the 500 top selling products in each of the following thirteen consumer product categories: Bakery; beauty care; dairy; deli; frozen foods; general merchandise; grocery; health care; household care; meat; produce; pet care; and personal care. A team of five researchers systematically reviewed advertising and packaging for the 6,500 products in the sample and identified 1,096 products with mascots. (The remaining products had distinctive symbols or packaging, but did not use a human, humanoid, animal, or other being as a mascot.) The figures in this report are based on the 1,096 mascots from our sample of top-selling brands.

Table 1
MASCOTS WITHIN EACH PRODUCT CATEGORY

PRODUCT CATEGORY	% OF SAMPLE
BAKERY	10.9%
BEAUTY CARE	1.6%
DAIRY	8.2%
DELI	8.9%
FROZEN FOODS	6.6%
GENERAL MERCHANDISE	2.6%
GROCERY	10.8%
HEALTH CARE	3.6%
HOUSEHOLD CARE	5.7%
MEAT	10.4%
PRODUCE	5.7%
PET CARE	19.1%
PERSONAL CARE	5.8%

Prior to initiating the work, the research team engaged in a total of 51 hours of training and codebook development. The team also performed a test to measure inter-coder reliability. Initial inter-coder

reliability tests were performed on 10 mascots to ensure that members of the research team reached agreement on mascot evaluations. Inter-coder reliability was achieved in terms of both absolute agreement (87%) and Cohen's Kappa (.71) measures.

Sample Description

Products in some categories rarely feature mascots, while most products in other categories use a mascot for promotional purposes. Pet care products are the most likely to feature a mascot on the packaging and in advertisements (19.1% of the sample), while bakery goods (10.9%), groceries (10.8%), and meat products (10.4%) each account for about ten percent of the sample. Few beauty care products feature mascots (1.6%).

When it comes to the type of mascots in the sample, nearly half are animals (45.2%) while one-in-three are non-celebrity humans (36.8%). Fewer mascots are humanoid characters (13.0%) and celebrities (5.0%).

Table 2
MASCOT TYPES

MASCOT TYPE	% OF SAMPLE
HUMAN CELEBRITY	5.0%
HUMAN NON-CELEBRITY	36.8%
HUMANOID	13.0%
ANIMAL	45.2%
OTHER	0.1%

Analysis and Findings

Gender

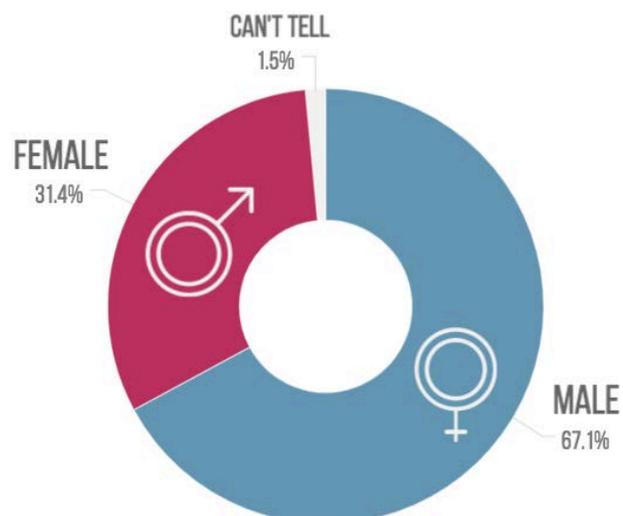
In this section, we analyze gender gaps in the presence, activities, settings, gender stereotypes, appearance, and sexualization of male and female mascots. All differences reported here are statistically significant at the .05 level.

Presence

Women constitute 51% of the population in the United States,¹⁵ but in the world of mascots, male characters outnumber female characters two-to-one (67.1% compared to 31.4%).

This large gender gap means that men are vastly overrepresented as mascots, while women are significantly underrepresented. The two-to-one mascot figure looks similar to gender gaps found for female protagonists in film and television. For example, the Geena Davis Institute found that 65.0% of protagonists in the top grossing films of 2016 were male compared to 32.0% who were female.

Figure 4
GENDER OF MASCOTS



Activity

We also measured whether mascots were shown as active/energetic versus inactive/docile. Male mascots are significantly more likely to be shown as active than female mascots (48.4% compared to 43.4%).

We also assessed the activities mascots were shown engaging in. Among mascots that are engaged in some sort of activity, female mascots are more likely to be shown cleaning than male mascots (4.5% compared to 0%). Male mascots are twice as likely to be shown working (7.8% compared to 4.5%).

In short, male mascots are shown as more active, and the activities that male and female mascots engage in reflect gender stereotypes of women as domestic keepers and men as paid laborers.

Setting

We examined the settings in which mascots are represented. Of the mascots that were shown in settings, no gender differences were found in terms of office, outdoor, living room, bedroom, restaurant, or gym settings. However, female mascots are more likely to be shown in a kitchen than male mascots (16.3% compared to 12.2%).

Gender Stereotypes

We also analyzed gender stereotypes in mascot portrayals. Gender stereotypes involve mascots being presented in simplified ways that are linked to traditional gender roles (e.g., male mascots playing sports, female mascots cooking in the kitchen). One-in-four female mascots (25.4%) are presented with gender stereotypes, significantly more than male mascots (15.9%).

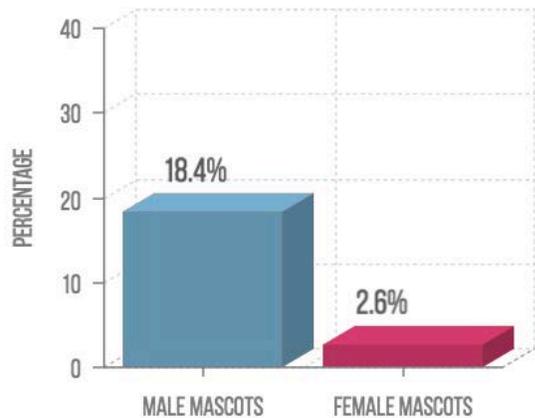


Mascot Characteristics

Gender stereotypes are also present in mascot characteristics. Female mascots are significantly more likely than male mascots to be shown as friendly (65.4% compared to 54.0%), but half as likely as male mascots to be shown as commanding (22.9% compared to 14.5%). Being commanding means having authority; a mascot that exudes control, advantage, or superiority.

Male mascots are also more likely to be shown as threatening than female mascots (4.1% compared to 1.5%). A threatening mascot is one that is portrayed as likely to cause damage or danger. Mascots with weapons or threatening facial expressions are threatening. The gender gap here indicates that mascots promote the stereotypical idea of men as violent.

Figure 6
PERCENTAGE OF MASCOTS
SHOWN AS FUNNY



When it comes to body types, one-in-five female mascots is shown as skinny or very skinny (19.4%), while one-in-ten (11.0%) male mascots is shown with unusually large muscles. This means that a sizable portion of mascots promote body standards for women and men that are difficult to achieve.

We analyzed gender gaps in the sexualization of mascots by looking at whether they are shown in sexually revealing clothing or portrayed as partially or fully nude. The widespread sexual objectification of girls and women in U.S. media has been linked to higher rates of body shame and hatred,¹⁶ eating disorders,¹⁷ lower self-esteem,¹⁸ depression,¹⁹ lower cognitive functioning,²⁰ impaired motor skill development,²¹ compromised sexual functioning,²² lower grade-point averages,²³ lower political efficacy,²⁴ and lower engagement in social and political activism.²⁵ Nearly one-in-ten (8.0%) female mascots are shown as wearing sexually revealing clothing, while less than 1% of male mascots wear revealing clothing.

Figure 8
PERCENTAGE OF MASCOTS PORTRAYED IN
SEXUALLY REVEALING CLOTHING



When it comes to mascots and humor, nearly one-in-five male mascots are shown as funny (18.4%). Male mascots are seven times more likely than female mascots (2.6%) to be shown as funny. This gender gap reinforces the notion that men are humorous while women lack humor.

Appearance and Sexualization

We also analyzed gender differences in the physical appearance and sexualization of mascots for the 600 human and humanoid mascots in the sample. (We excluded animal mascots because these concepts do not apply.)

Figure 7
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF MASCOTS



Nearly one-in-ten (8.0%) female mascots are shown as wearing sexually revealing clothing, while less than 1% of male mascots wear revealing clothing.

Female mascots are also more likely to be shown as partially nude than male mascots (7.5% compared to 0.3%). One female mascot in our sample was shown as fully nude.

Race

In this section, we analyze race/ethnicity gaps in the presence, activities, settings, racial/ethnic stereotypes for white mascots and mascots of color. All differences reported here are statistically significant at the .05 level.

Presence

People of color constitute 38% of the U.S. population, but only 15.2% of mascots.²⁶ This underrepresentation of people of color as mascots looks similar to numbers in other forms of media. For example, the Geena Davis Institute finds that only 20.2% of protagonists in the top 100 grossing films of 2016 were people of color.

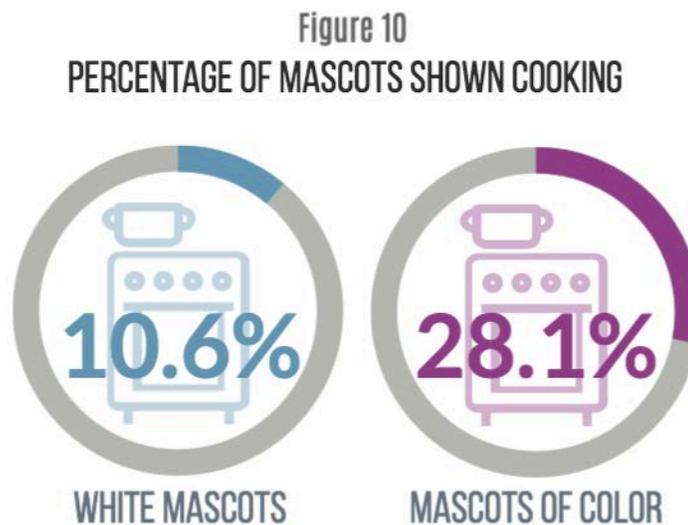


The lack of mascots of color spans different races/ethnicities. Amongst racial/ethnic minorities, Latinx characters constitute 8.2% of mascots, followed by Black (2.9%), Native American/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2.2%), Asian (1.2%), and Middle Eastern (1.0%) mascots. This means that most racial/ethnic minorities are virtually erased in product mascot representations.

Activity

We also measured whether mascots were shown as active/energetic versus inactive/docile. White mascots are significantly more likely to be shown as active than mascots of color (48.9% compared to 39.1%).

When it comes to mascot activities, no racial/ethnic differences were found in terms of shopping, cleaning, or socializing. However, mascots of color are significantly more likely to be shown as cooking or preparing food (28.1% compared to 10.6%) and working (28.1% compared to 7.8%) than white mascots. White mascots are more likely to be shown eating or drinking than mascots of color (8.4% compared to 0%). These representations reinforce notions of people of color as working to serve others, and white people as consumers.



Setting

No racial/ethnic differences were found in terms of mascot settings in offices, bedrooms, the outdoors, restaurants, or the gym. White mascots are more likely to be shown in the living room (7.2% compared to 0%) and kitchen (25.7% compared to 17.6%) than mascots of color. This suggests that white mascots are portrayed as more family-oriented than mascots of color.

Racial/Ethnic Stereotypes

Racial stereotypes involve mascots from minority cultures being portrayed in oversimplified ways pertaining to their culture (e.g., a Native American mascot with a tomahawk; a black male mascot as a burglar, a Latinx mascot as a bandito). Two-thirds (65.6%) of mascots of color are represented as racial/ethnic stereotypes compared to only

2.8% of white mascots.

This means that mascots of color are rare, but when people of color are portrayed as mascots, they are overwhelmingly presented in ways that reinforce stereotypes.

Mascot Characteristics

Racial/ethnic stereotypes are also evident in mascot characteristics. Mascots of color are twice as likely to be portrayed as threatening than white mascots (4.7% compared to 1.7%). White mascots are twice as likely to be shown as commanding than mascots of color (27.0% compared to 14.1%).

Figure 11
PERCENTAGE OF MASCOTS REPRESENTED AS RACIAL/ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

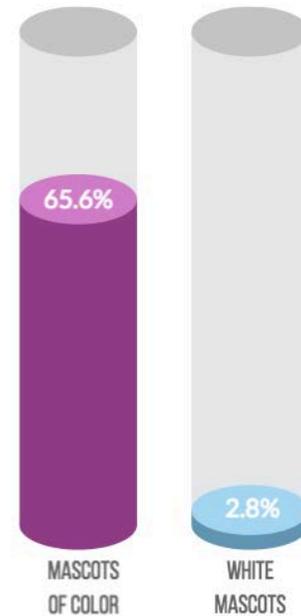
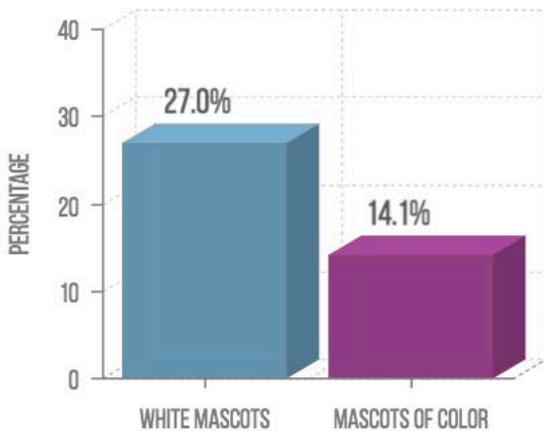


Figure 12
PERCENTAGE OF MASCOTS SHOWN AS COMMANDING



RECOMMENDATIONS

This is the first systematic study of gender and race representations for product mascots. The findings are stark. Male mascots outnumber female mascots two-to-one, and female mascots are more likely to be sexualized and presented in ways that reflect gender stereotypes about what activities men and women engage in. Female mascots are also shown as being less funny, friendlier, and less commanding than male mascots. Male mascots are shown as being more threatening than female mascots. In short, product mascots commonly reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes.

We also found large racial/ethnic gaps in portrayals of mascots. White characters are vastly

overrepresented in the ranks of mascots compared to their numbers in the general population, and mascots of color are shown in stereotypical ways. Nearly two-thirds of mascots of color are shown as racial stereotypes. When it comes to activities, white mascots are more likely to be shown as consuming meals, while mascots of color are more likely to be shown preparing meals. Mascots of color are also shown as less commanding and more threatening than white mascots.

Given the general lack of women and people of color in mascot representation, and the stereotypical ways in which these groups are presented in product mascots, we recommend that industry officials consider the following when developing new mascots:

- Prioritize women when creating a new mascot character.
- Prioritize people of color when creating a new mascot character.
- When creating a female mascot, commit to characters that challenge gender stereotypes about character traits, physical appearance, surroundings, and activities. Ask, is she presented as impossibly thin? Is she sexualized or shown as partially or fully nude? Is she presented in a stereotypically gendered location or engaging in a stereotypical activity? Do the personal characteristics embodied in the mascot reinforce or defy gender stereotypes?
- When creating a mascot of color, commit to challenging racial stereotypes. Ask, is the mascot shown in positions that serve others, such as a cook or janitor? Is the mascot presented in settings that reinforce or challenge racial stereotypes? Does their physical appearance, clothing, or activity reduce them to a racial/ethnic stereotype? Is this character shown as threatening?

Mascots matter because they are readily identifiable characters that millions of Americans come into contact with on a regular basis. These images reinforce gender and racial stereotypes that might go unnoticed when viewed one at a time, but on a cumulative level, influence the value we place on women and people of color. Corporations can be a powerful force for interrupting and challenging gender and racial stereotypes by creating mascots that include these groups more often, and by portraying them in more positive, complex, and ultimately humanizing ways.

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