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Stay and Play with Mickey Mouse: Familiar Characters Increase Children's Exploratory Play

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Stay and Play with Mickey Mouse: Familiar Characters Increase Children's Exploratory Play

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BACKGROUND

- When children are given a novel toy without any instruction, they try to figure out how it works and explore its functions but they may not discover all the functions (e.g., Bonawitz et al., 2011).
- Children have a strong preference for objects that have a familiar character's image on them (Danovitch & Mills, 2014).
- Children are more likely to enjoy products when there is an image of a familiar character associated with the product (Roberto, Baik, Harris, & Brownell, 2010).
- Because familiar character images influence preferences, they may also increase children's interest in exploration.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

- Does the presence of a familiar character influence children's exploration of a novel toy?

METHODS

Participants:

40 4- and 5-year-olds (24 females; $M_{age} = 4.99$, $SD = .55$)

Procedure:

Children were first presented with four characters from popular TV shows and asked to pick their favorite.



Mickey

Minnie

Chase

Skye

The child was then taken into a room with the novel toy with the and image of the character or an image of the character's color scheme (which served as a control image) on it.

The experimenter said: "Wow, see this toy? Look at this! Wow, isn't that cool? I'm going to let you play with the toy. See if you can figure out how this toy works. Let me know when you're done!" The session ended when children said they were done or after 5 minutes.

METHODS (continued)

Character Image

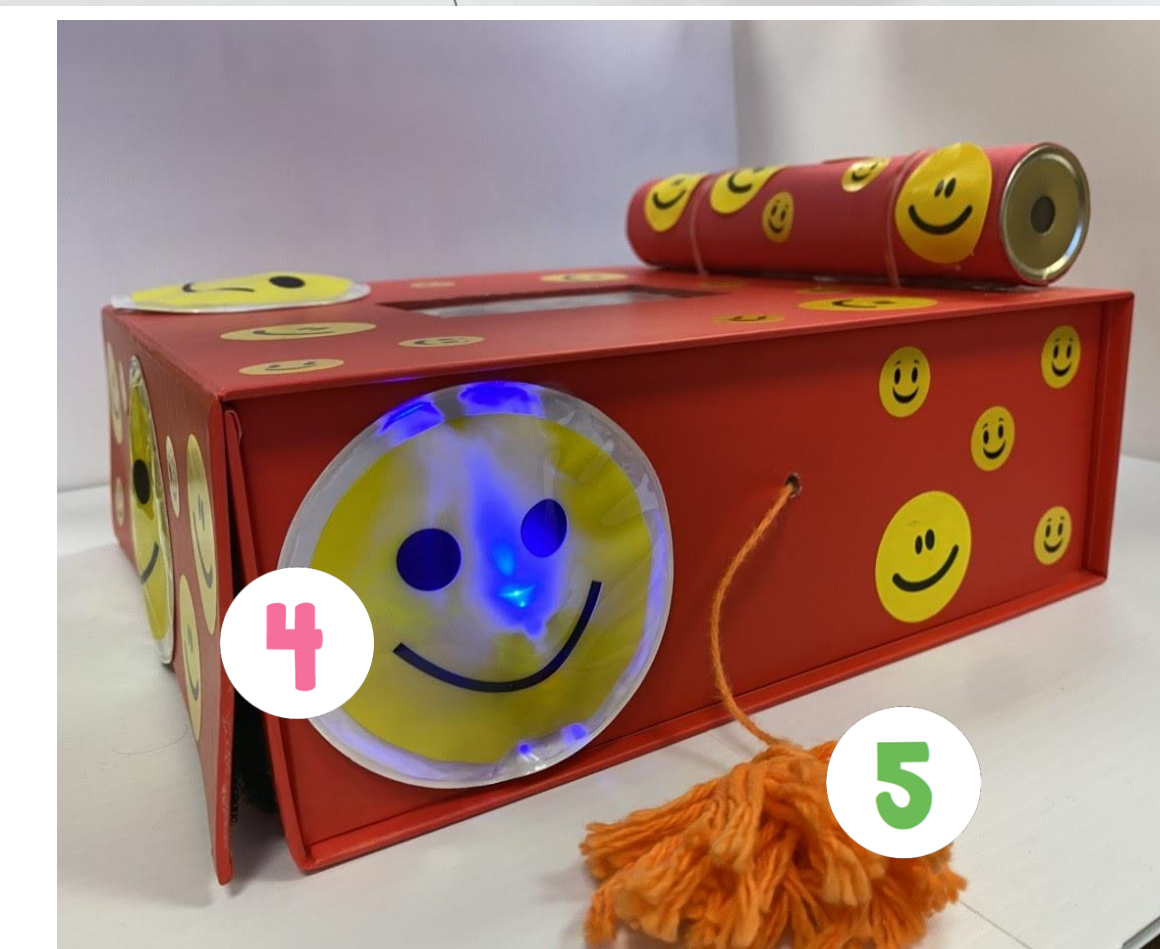


Color Control

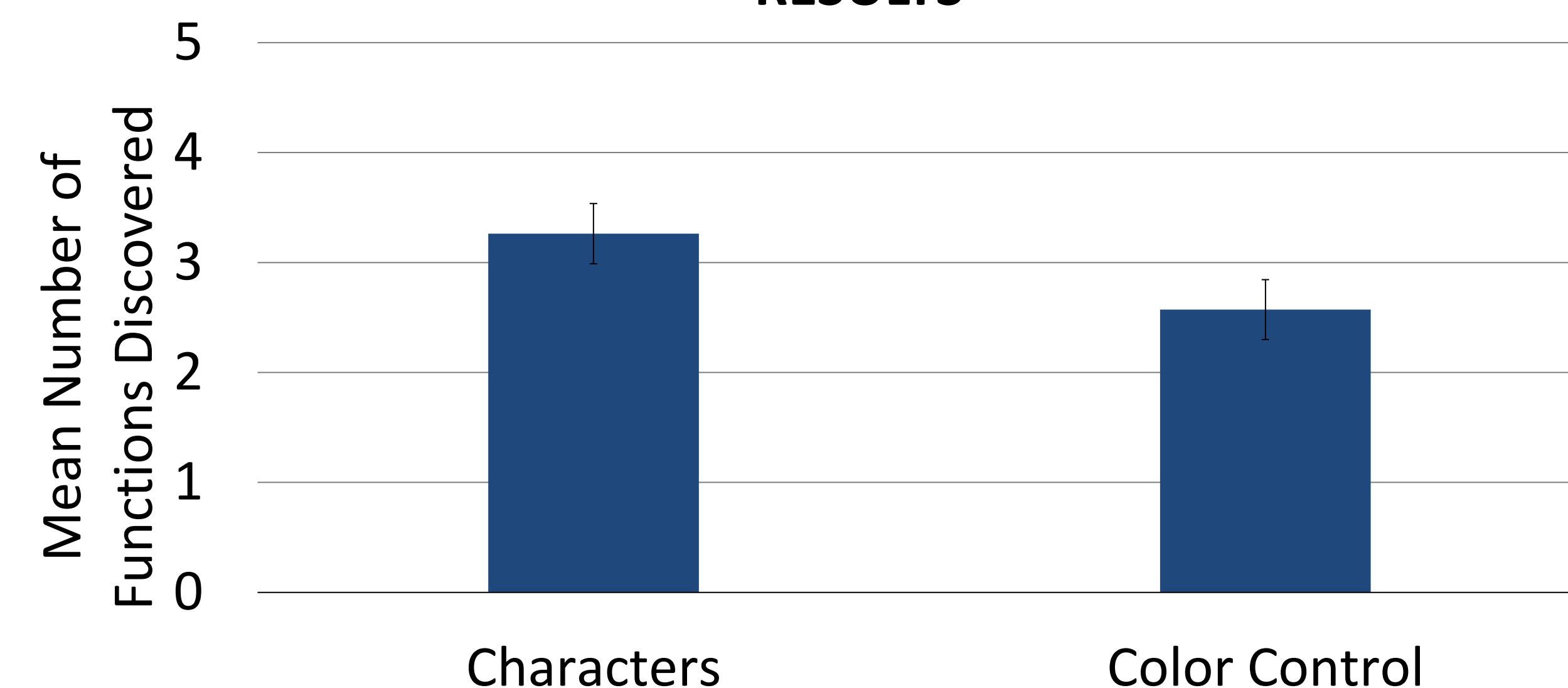


Two raters coded the children's play for the number of functions (out of 5 maximum) they discovered and the amount of time (in seconds) they played with the toy.

	Function
1	Kaleidoscope
2	Squeaker
3	Crank toy
4	Light-up sticker
5	String

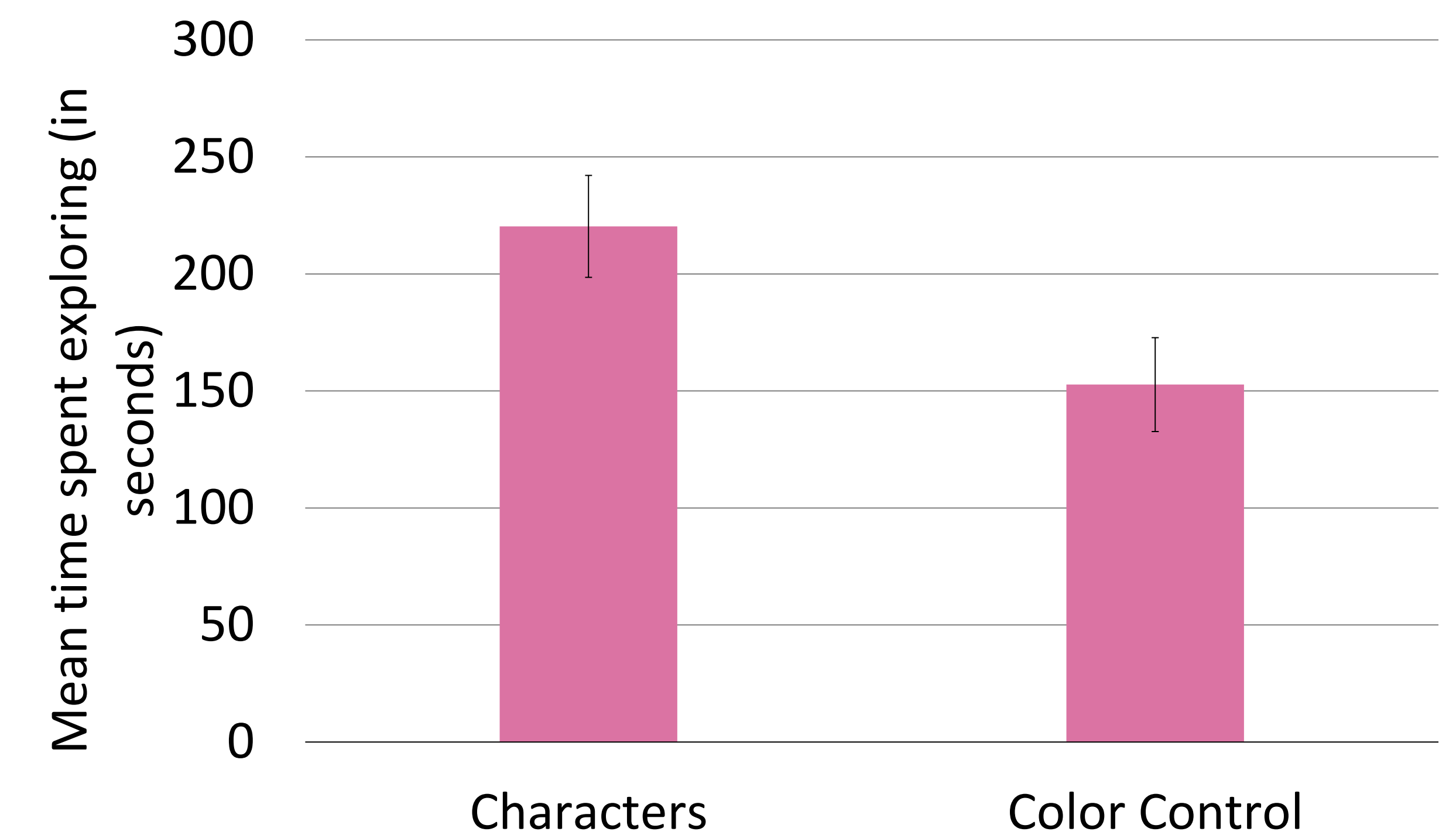


RESULTS



There was no significant difference between the number of functions discovered between character ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.19$) and color control ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.24$) conditions, $t(38) = 1.79$, $p = .082$.

RESULTS (continued)



There was a significant difference between mean time spent exploring in the character ($M = 220.3$, $SD = 94.9$) and color control ($M = 152.7$, $SD = 91.9$) conditions, $t(38) = 2.29$, $p = .028$.

DISCUSSION

- These findings suggest that having a familiar character on a novel toy increases the time spent playing but not the number of functions found.
- One explanation for these findings could be the children found the product more enjoyable when there was a familiar character on it, and therefore spent more time playing with it.
- It is possible that the yellow smiley faces were a distraction that pulled children's attention away from the character, reducing the effect of the character's image.
- Future research should consider other ways of using children's preference for familiar characters to increase exploration.

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