

**SILLY RABBIT, MANIPULATIVE MARKETING TACTICS
ARE FOR KIDS! – EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF ETHICAL CHILDREN’S CEREAL PACKAGING**

Honors Thesis

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Erin Melin

Professor Key, Professor Malloy, and Professor Alves
Faculty Advisors
Department of Art and Design

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ABSTRACT

Through packaging design, designers visually communicate the personality, feel, and quality of a product to potential consumers. When analyzing packaging in the cereal industry, there is a clear line drawn between the playful visual style of cereal targeted at children, and the mature visual style of cereal targeted at adults. Although children's cereal products are being advertised successfully, the majority of products themselves are often high in sugar, contain artificial flavoring, and include other non-beneficial ingredients. Healthy children's cereal products rarely receive the same level of engaging and story driven branding that competing unhealthy brands receive. Thus, unethical design standards are used to capitalize off of young children who are unable to fully comprehend advertising efforts.

Rather than using design to persuade children into becoming consumers of unhealthy cereal products, the author explored the effects of these tactics when applied to a healthier alternative. She hypothesized that if influential design tactics from unhealthy cereal brands were applied to the packaging of a healthier cereal product, then children may feel visually influenced to try better-for-you options. The author gathered research related to children's marketing tactics, used her findings to redesign a healthy cereal product, and conducted in person mini-interviews with elementary aged children to test her design against competing brands. Her primary hypothesis was supported, suggesting that children find healthier options with engaging packaging more appetizing and interesting than traditional healthy options. As a result of her study, the author hopes to highlight the importance of ethical design application, and in doing so, encourage positive change within the graphic design and children's consumer goods industries.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INFLUENCE OF THE PACKAGING DESIGN INDUSTRY

When you pick up a product at the grocery store to examine it further, why do you gravitate towards it in the first place? What makes one brand stand out from the next? Maybe you preferred the color of the box, the imagery on the label, or the feel of the material. Because of this physical and visual interaction, packaging design is a persuasive, familiar, and personable form of advertising.

The success of a packaged item relies on those who interact with it. As a result, a brand's goal is to successfully address their target audience, which is the consumer demographic most likely to purchase their products. In order for designers to effectively establish a connection with the target audience, "elements such as color, structure, graphics, text, and characters, are combined to give the consumer a visual 'sales talk' while shopping and using the product."¹ To exemplify the importance of the multibillion dollar packaging industry, according to a "national study conducted by the Paper and Packaging Board and IPSOS ... [research] shows that 7 in 10 (72%) of consumers agree that packaging design can influence their purchasing decision."² Thus, a well branded label or package plays a crucial role in the product's monetary success.

¹ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji. "Children's Visual Memory of Packaging." *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 2003. 20 (4): 402

² Paper and Packaging Board. "New Survey Unveils 7 in 10 Consumers Agree Packaging Design Can Influence Purchasing Decisions." GlobeNewswire News Room. Paper and Packaging Board, May 4, 2018. <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/05/04/1496881/0/en/New-Survey-Unveils-7-in-10-Consumers-Agree-Packaging-Design-Can-Influence-Purchasing-Decisions.html>.

Within the packaging design industry, cereal products are one of the top categories that benefit most from this form of advertising. In “2019, the revenue for breakfast cereals in the U.S. was \$15.6 million.”³ Because the potential to earn a high profit is present, some companies unfortunately value profit over morals when advertising to vulnerable target audiences.

1.2 ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ADVERTISING CEREAL TO CHILDREN

Today, it is nearly impossible to avoid seeing an advertisement on one’s phone, laptop, television screen, or in the physical world. While most teenagers and adults are capable of understanding the purpose of an advertisement, “most children younger than 7–8 years of age do not recognize the persuasive intent of commercial appeals.”⁴ As a result, children are considered a vulnerable and impressionable group to the messages that advertisements are sending.

Specifically, within the packaging industry, “children are considered to be the demographic most influenced by product packaging and investment in child-oriented product packaging has been put at \$US 3 billion annually.”⁵ When combining children, the largest demographic influenced by product packaging, with an industry as popular as cereal products, it opens the potential for unethical manipulative marketing. As a result, there seems to be a clear line drawn between the visual style of cereal targeted at

³ Digital Media Solutions. “Cereal Wars: General Mills and Kellogg's Use Marketing Innovations to Stay Competitive.” DMS Insights, May 26, 2021.

<https://insights.digitalmediasolutions.com/articles/cereal-wars-general-mills-kelloggs>.

⁴ “Advertising and Children.” American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association, 2004. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/advertising-children>.

⁵ Kaye Mehta, et. al, 1763

children, and the visual style of cereal targeted at adults. Children's cereal products often appear colorful, engaging, and playful. Packaging for adult cereal products have a more mature, simplified, and modernized look. Although the act of appealing to children through visually engaging design is not unethical in itself, it becomes unethical when the product being advertised is not beneficial for the intended audience. Children's cereal products look exciting, but they are often the unhealthiest options. Popular brands such as Froot Loops, Captain Crunch, and Honey Smacks are heavily processed, high in added sugar, and contain artificial ingredients and dyes that do not give growing children the nutrients they need.

Given that "a number of international studies on product packaging aimed at children have found more child-oriented marketing techniques on unhealthy products than on healthy products,"⁶ this is an unethical instance where the child, someone with less awareness about marketing persuasion, is being taken advantage of for profit. Because "children relate to cereal at such a young age, and since they regularly interact with its packages when they eat it for breakfast and as a snack during the day, they build up an intimate relationship with the product, its brands, and package features."⁷ When parents are trying to purchase more nutritious cereals or vegan alternatives for their family, it can be difficult to compete with their child's requests for popular unhealthy options with captivating characters. As a result, marketers can make more money by appealing to the eyes of impressionable children, who in turn, often have persuasion over

⁶ Kaye Mehta, et. al, 1763

⁷ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 401

their parents' grocery store purchases.⁸ The ability to appeal to children early on through visual bonding appears to be a priority with sugary cereal brands.

During an interview Dr. Rebecca Hains, an author, professor, and speaker who specializes in children's media culture, media literacy, and media criticism, the author asked Hains if there were overall ethical implications associated with marketing cereal to children, despite if the marketing were for a healthy or unhealthy product. She replied that this was a tricky area to analyze and raised the question, "Is it really ever ethical to advertise directly to kids? Especially, children who are really young, like preschoolers, who don't understand that television isn't reality and are being pitched products they don't comprehend." Dr. Hains suggested that the answer to this question may rely on geographic location. She stated that various countries have different restrictions on advertising to children.⁹ For example, in 2017 London implemented new rules "banning the advertising of high fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) food or drink products in children's media. The rules [apply] across all non-broadcast media including in print, cinema and, crucially, online and in social media."¹⁰ Similarly, Mexico also has "laws [that] prohibit food companies from using marketing tactics that might appeal to children, like cartoons or mascots."¹¹ Thus, because the majority of the United States allows advertising to be

⁸ Shelly Reese. "KIDMONEY: Children as Big Business." *Arts Education Policy Review* 99, no. 3. 37

⁹ Rebecca Hains (Media and Communication Professor at Salem State University), in discussion with the author, May 2021.

¹⁰ Advertising Standards Authority | Committee of Advertising Practice, "New Rules Ban the Advertising of High Fat, Salt and Sugar Food and Drink Products in Children's Media," accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/new-rules-ban-the-advertising-of-high-fat-salt-and-sugar-food-and-drink-products-in-childrens-media.html>.

¹¹ The Associated Press, "Mexico Seizes 380,000 Boxes of Kellogg's Cereal," *The Seattle Times* (The Seattle Times Company, January 19, 2022), <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/mexico-seizes-380000-boxes-of-kelloggs-cereal/>.

aimed at children, using those methods to promote something better for them would inherently be a more ethical approach to the subject.

1.3 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The overall purpose of this study is to establish that ethical design should be considered when marketing cereal products to young children, who are a vulnerable population. This study is also intended for the author to gain professional experience in the packaging design industry through creating something that will positively impact consumers. Rather than using design to persuade children into becoming dedicated consumers of unhealthy cereal products, the author re-designed the packaging of an existing healthy cereal product using engaging design tactics typically found on unhealthy cereal packaging. Then, she studied the influence of her redesigned packaging through interviewing the target demographic.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Unfortunately, masking the unhealthy aspects of a cereal product with a fun façade is an advertising tactic utilized by a number of leading cereal companies to appeal to children. Why aren't these same design tactics being used on healthier brands that have the power to benefit children more? If bridging an exciting design concept with a healthy cereal brand through the author's project can produce promising results, these findings can benefit the lives of future designers, companies, customers, and children.

1.5 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

When the author was conducting mini-interviews with first and third graders to test the effectiveness of her packaging design, a few limitations were present. The Author designed her own cereal product, Cosmic Crunch, and compared her product to three existing cereal brands (The Forager Project's Strawberry Grain-free Os, Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms, and Trix). Bias was associated with Annie's and Trix cereals due to the fact that they are well known cereal brands. Bias was also present for children who have tasted these cereals before and were basing their preference on taste rather than appearance. Cosmic Crunch is not an existing cereal product they have tried before, so that seemed to have made an impact on some children's responses. The author was also intending to purchase a lesser-known healthier children's cereal product instead of Annie's but was unable to find it in stock due to supply chain shortages during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

The author explored the following questions: can traditional marketing and design tactics for children's unhealthy cereal packaging be applied to healthier options to achieve ethical advertising? Can color theory, semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), and character association persuade children into preferring one healthy product over another? And finally, as more of a secondary question, can exciting packaging for a healthy cereal possibly compete with popular unhealthy brands?

The author hypothesized that if influential design tactics from unhealthy cereal brands were applied to the packaging of a healthier cereal product (ex: brighter colors,

characters, games, catchy slogans, and more creative foods), then children may feel visually influenced to try better-for-you options.

To approach these questions, she began by gathering research related to children's marketing tactics, ethical marketing issues, packaging design, and graphic design. Research was collected through a literature review and interviews with professionals in the design and children's marketing industries. This process allowed her to determine the most important design and advertising tactics used to persuade children into choosing unhealthy brands. In turn, this information was used to inform her personal design choices when redesigning The Forager Project's Organic Grain-free Os to better appeal to children.

The design process began with a visual analysis of existing healthy and unhealthy cereal brands. The author created a variety of mood boards to determine the direction for her designs. Rounds of sketches, digital drafts, and copy were reviewed while creating the finished project. After multiple rounds of critique with a design team, the finished design was printed professionally at a local print shop. The author photographed her cereal box, created 3D mockups, and created supporting branding efforts to further reinforce brand identity.

To test the effectiveness of her design against competing brands, the author conducted mini-interviews with first and third grade students. To test her primary hypothesis, (if influential design tactics from unhealthy cereal brands were applied to the packaging of a healthier cereal product, then children may feel visually influenced to try better-for-you options) she compared her design, Cosmic Crunch, against the healthy product she redesigned (The Forager Project's Organic Grain-free Os). She also tested

her design against one of the more popular healthy cereal options for kids (Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms) to further test the effectiveness of her design. To test her secondary question (can exciting packaging for a healthy cereal possibly compete with popular unhealthy brands?), she compared Cosmic Crunch to Trix cereal.

CHAPTER THREE: CHILDREN'S MARKETING TACTICS ANALYSIS

3.1 CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ADVERTISING CHILDREN'S TOYS AND FOOD

Before designing a product for children, it's important to research the success of existing children's products and analyze how they address young target audiences. To persuade children into becoming lifelong dedicated consumers of products, how do popular brands speak to them? What features of their packaging draw children in, and how does that leave a lasting impression on them?

Gaining a wider understanding of other products within the children's industry before analyzing the characteristics of unhealthy children's cereal packaging provides contextual information on the target demographic and the products they tend to enjoy. While interviewing Dr. Rebecca Hains, the author learned about some of the ways popular products are marketed within the children's toy industry. Specifically, Dr. Hains referenced a 1986 essay written by Tom Engelhardt called "The Shortcake Strategy." Within this essay, he "examines the peculiar history of television marketing to children" through the lens of the Strawberry Shortcake television show.¹² He highlights that

¹² Brent Staples, "Just a Toaster with Pictures," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, February 8, 1987), <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/08/books/just-a-toaster-with-pictures.html>.

because a Strawberry Shortcake doll was created as a result of the show, it essentially commercialized the show itself to market this new popular product that “quickly became America's "number-one baby doll, starring in special after special [and selling] more than \$1 billion worth.”¹³ Since then, children have continuously been exposed to television shows that personify and promote toy products – further strengthening their emotional connection to these characters and the products they’re associated with.

Similarly, marketers appear to advertise children’s food products through borrowing some of the successful tactics associated with promoting children’s toys. For example, Dr. Hains further informed the author that “a lot of people really object to the use of licensed characters to market other products, like food, because they are intended to persuade children to prefer one particular product over another.”¹⁴ Thus, this suggests that the use of recognizable characters does not only help children’s toys sales but can be used within the food industry to achieve a similar goal.

To further examine the connection between promoting children’s toys and children’s food, referencing a study by Mehta, et, al, which explored “the nature and extent of marketing via packaging, on child-oriented food and beverage products, sold through a major supermarket chain in Adelaide, South Australia, in October 2009,”¹⁵ can be helpful. In this study, the researchers conducted a content analysis on children’s products in order to discover the most universally used advertising elements. One of the major features that can be manipulated in children’s packaging is the use of signs and symbols. Thus, semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation, is

¹³ Brent Staples.

¹⁴ Rebecca Hains (Media and Communication Professor at Salem State University), in discussion with the author, May 2021.

¹⁵ Kaye Mehta, et. al, 1764

helpful in understanding how children's products speak to their target audience. With semiotics being the top marketing category, they decided to sub-categorize it into the following groups:

1. Child-oriented graphics: bright colours; images of children or animals; childish script; references to play, education, flavours, colour or shapes; captions exaggerating attributes, e.g. 'bliss bombs', 'dangerously cheesy'.
2. Child-oriented cartoons and celebrities: images of licensed cartoon characters, e.g. Simpsons; images of unlicensed cartoon characters, e.g. generic cartoons; images of sporting or entertainment celebrities.
3. Claims about health and nutrition.¹⁶

After conducting their analysis, they found that semiotics “was used as a marketing technique on 99% of products. Cross-promotion (comprising television, movies and websites) was used on 77% of products, and packaging design (comprising lunch box-size packaging, novelty packaging) was used on 55% of products.”¹⁷ As a result, it can be inferred that products marketed with memorable characters, colors, and catchphrases is a common strategy to use on children's food products. The parallels between these marketing strategies and “The Shortcake Strategy” highlight the idea that children's food products are marketed less as “food” oriented and more as play oriented.

3.2 SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS IN CHILDREN'S CEREAL PACKAGING

¹⁶ Kaye Mehta, et. al, 1765

¹⁷ Kaye Mehta, et. al, 1766

Although the previous examples were not specific to children's cereal, similarities can be seen in these products as well. When considering how toys are personified through television shows in order to sell the product, unhealthy children's cereal products are also marketed to children through playful commercials and games with engaging spokes characters. Seeing a lively character on the packaging of a popular cereal brand, then seeing that character promoting the product on a television commercial increases the potential for an emotional connection to form between the child and the product. With symbols and cross-promotion tactics being some of the major advertising elements used to sell children's unhealthy cereal products, it's important for the author to further analyze these efforts to gather context for her redesign.

3.3 SEMIOTICS IN CHILDREN'S CEREAL PACKAGING

To better contextualize the extent of these universal marketing tactics on children's cereal products, a study conducted by James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji titled "Children's Visual Memory of Packaging" highlights how impressionable the symbols discussed above are on the minds of children.

The goal of the study was to reveal the accuracy of children's visual memory of cereal packaging through analyzing their hand-drawn interpretations. To accomplish their goals, researchers first content analyzed children's cereal boxes and took note of their features. Then, they asked 125 first, third, and fifth-grade children to draw a cereal box from memory without specifying a particular brand. Finally, researchers analyzed the

children's drawings alongside their hypotheses, and compared the results of the two studies.¹⁸

Analyzing drawings is a credible way to research and “assess the nature and extent of visual memory.”¹⁹ Thus, when recalling cereal box features, it was expected that children would draw what they found to be most impactful.²⁰ Because this idea was reflected in the study's results, it provides useful insight into the design features that children find most important on popular cereal packaging.

Although the study explored every panel of the cereal box, the front panel is most relevant to the author's study. The content analysis for the front panel of their cereal box study was categorized into “dominant background color, product attributes (brand name, name of cereal maker, picture of actual product, eating utensils, nutritional text, net weight statement, and references to ingredients), promotional information (games, premiums, events, rebates), and product spokespersons/characters.”²¹ While all aspects of cereal packaging work together to create an persuasive product, the results revealed the top five features that children included in their drawings were brand name, picture of cereal, a bowl and spoon, spokes character, and slogan. Because this study provides insight into the effectiveness of child-oriented cereal advertising, and these five features were the most prominent to children, they are important to prioritize in the author's redesign.

However, these five attributes are not the only important features of cereal packaging and branding. For example, “even if the same product package is shown to

¹⁸ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 400

¹⁹ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 408

²⁰ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 402

²¹ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 411

various consumers, they could each have different interpretations during the comprehension stage.”²² A study by Wang and Chou highlights this through stating that “when consumers see the ‘Coca-Cola’ package design, some would register the product by its brand: ‘Coca-Cola’; while some would register ‘the red color and the shape of the bottle’. Designers thus combine different design elements to convey messages through product packaging.”²³ Due to the possibility of multiple comprehension methods, researchers used focus groups to test the most helpful ways consumers comprehend packaging design. They found that

‘Brand Name + Product Picture’ is the best combination for focus group members to comprehend product messages; ‘Brand Name’, ‘Product Name’, ‘Product Picture’, ‘Package Shape’ and ‘Color Association’ are the package design elements that focus group members found helpful in comprehending product information; [while] package design elements such as ‘Trademark’, ‘Size’ and ‘Texture’ do not facilitate the comprehension of product information.²⁴

Because this study found brand name and product picture the most valuable in brand comprehension, it supports the top findings found in McNeal and Ji’s study.

Furthermore, Wang and Chou’s work also explains how a variety of packaging elements work together to create a recognizable brand identity. What if Honey Nut Cheerios replaced their signature yellow box with a blue one? To consumers, that would feel off brand and less recognizable. The yellow background color is considered a staple of the brand that acts as an instant identifier. So, although the five top elements from

²² Regina W. Y. Wang, and Mu-Chien Chou. 2011. “Types of Comprehension Obtained from Visual Communication: Package Designs.” *Design Principles & Practice: An International Journal* 5 (1):98.

²³ Regina W. Y. Wang, and Mu-Chien Chou, 98

²⁴ Regina W. Y. Wang, and Mu-Chien Chou, 97

McNeal and Ji's study are important features to include, other aspects work together to produce this memorable experience that can fuel future purchasing decisions. For example, box color did not appear in the top five categories, yet McNeal and Ji note

in a series of three experimental studies from Macklin (1996) [they] demonstrated that a certain amount of picture cues and color cues enhance children's memorizing of a brand name. Using the notion of associative memory (Anderson, 1995), Macklin (1996) explained that a picture or color may serve as an effective cue by increasing the probability that nodes activate one another in mental processing.²⁵

Thus, the five findings from McNeal and Ji's study are important to prioritize, but supporting elements are valuable in reinforcing the memorability of the major symbols.

3.4 IN-STORE AND MULTIMEDIA ADVERTISING

In addition to physical box attributes, strategic grocery store placement is another advertising strategy that reinforces the success and memorability of a brand. Due to the eye-catching attributes discussed prior, the cereal aisle is one of the most engaging in grocery stores and occupies "some of the most expensive real estate-averaging 80 linear feet."²⁶ Similar to the decision to market various toys through dedicated children's shows, strategic thinking is also used to determine ways that will increase the chances of children interacting with cereal box characters in supermarkets. Marketers maximize the physical potential of the cereal aisle by placing these products lower on the shelves to be within

²⁵ James U. McNeal and Mindy F. Ji, 403

²⁶ Tom Vanderbilt, 52

eye level of children.²⁷ The target audience is guaranteed to have a more personable interaction with the product on the shelf, allowing a stronger bond to form between the product and consumer.

As children and parents walk through the cereal aisle, this bond continues to grow with each new product that falls within the child's view. Vanderbilt, author of the article titled "Sugar Rush," quotes the book *Cerealizing America* in stating that, 'when people buy cereal, they aren't buying a nutritional commodity. They are buying a dream.'²⁸ He supports this quote through noting that, "after decades of complaints from health experts and government investigations and challenges from new breakfast foods, cereal is still occupying entire aisles of supermarkets...the top sellers remain those whose dreamscapes-the friendly cartoon characters, the activities on the back of the box, [and] the food drawn more from fantasy than from nature."²⁹ Thus, the most successful packaging in the entire aisle relies on engaging graphics that pull children into another world (a type of storytelling rarely seen on healthy cereal packaging). As a result, placing these captivating products strategically further fuels sales and the narrative.

When a child's gaze meets that of a familiar cartoon character in a cereal aisle, their brand recognition extends beyond personal experience with the box and is influenced by ads they have seen on television, online, or heard on the radio. Because children have seen these figures come to life on their screens at home, the character on the box gains a level of relatable sentience. Children can associate Tony the Tiger's picture with his voice and catchy slogan, "They're Great!" The same association is made

²⁷ Tom Vanderbilt, 52

²⁸ Tom Vanderbilt 52

²⁹ Tom Vanderbilt 52

between other catchy slogans such as “Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs,” or “Silly Rabbit, Trix are for Kids!” and their corresponding characters.

Vanderbilt states, “As the trade magazine *Selling to Kids* notes, while toddlers ‘may not influence purchasing decisions until the ripe old age of five or six, they do begin to recognize various brands and their colorful packaging and friendly characters peeking out from all over the box.’”³⁰ Due to the strong connection children feel with these characters, their catchy slogans, recognizable narratives, and the fantasy worlds they live in, “advertising to children and teenagers via various forms of media has occurred for decades, [with] expenditures of \$3.2 billion for nondigital and \$900 million for digital advertising in the United States in 2018.”³¹ The playful attitude of these commercials aligns with the aesthetic of children’s toy commercials, and thus, increases a child’s desire to prefer unhealthy cereals over healthier alternatives.

3.5 IMPLICATIONS WITH MULTIMEDIA ADVERTISING

Although multimedia advertising is clearly effective in targeting children, ethical implications discussed in the introduction can also apply to this form of advertising. Despite cereal brands, such as General Mills who claim they “will not engage in any product advertising on programming or media primarily directed to children under six

³⁰ Tom Vanderbilt, 50

³¹ Jenny Radesky, Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos, Nusheen Ameenuddin, Dipesh Navsaria, and Council on Communication and Media. “Digital Advertising to Children.” American Academy of Pediatrics. American Academy of Pediatrics, July 1, 2020. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/146/1/e20201681.full>.

years of age,”³² a year-long natural setting study by Edmond et. al., highlights how cautionary efforts are not always effective. Within their study, they examined the correlation between preschoolers seeing television ads for high-sugar cereal, and their intake of those cereals.³³ Results demonstrated

that child-directed high-sugar breakfast cereal TV advertising was prospectively associated with brand-specific high-sugar breakfast cereal intake among preschoolers. Findings [also] indicate that child-directed advertising influences begin earlier and last longer than previously demonstrated, highlighting limitations of current industry guidelines regarding the marketing of high-sugar foods to children under age 6 years.³⁴

Thus, despite not directly advertising “engaging” commercials and ads to kids under six, there is still a chance they will see those efforts while watching tv commercials or on the internet. The ads themselves still increase children’s desire for the product, despite if they’re younger than the targeted age group. When viewing this study on a more objective level, it highlights how impactful supplementary advertising for sugary or unhealthy products can be in reinforcing a child’s desire for or brand recognition of a product. Thus, expanding the branding for healthy children’s cereal products in this way may possibly increase desirability, and is a more ethical marketing approach.

³² “Marketing and Advertising.” General Mills, 2021.

<https://www.generalmills.com/en/Responsibility/marketing-advertising>.

³³ Jennifer A. Emond, Meghan R. Longacre, Keith M. Drake, Linda J. Titus, Kristy Hendricks, Todd MacKenzie, Jennifer L. Harris, Jennifer E. Carroll, Lauren P. Cleveland, Gail Langeloh, Madeline A. Dalton, “Exposure to Child-Directed TV Advertising and Preschoolers’ Intake of Advertised Cereals,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 56, Issue 2, 2019, Para. 1

³⁴ Jennifer A. et. al, para. 4

CHAPTER FOUR: DESIGNING THE PRODUCT

4.1 RESEARCH INFORMED DESIGN

After reviewing initial research, it is evident that brand name, picture of cereal, a bowl and spoon, spokes character, and slogan are the most influential visual aspects that children remember about cereal boxes. Supporting characteristics, such as color, are also important attributes that reinforce brand recognition. To further capture children's attention, strategic placement and multimedia advertisements are used to enhance a child's connection to a spokes character and the brand itself.

To expand on these initial findings and establish a direction for her design, the author conducted visual research on popular cereal products and current children's interests. She analyzed the existing themes used in unhealthy children's cereal products, television shows, and popular toys. Through creating a variety of mood boards, she discovered that chunky, imperfect typography was commonly used to target children. She also found that children's products and media typically incorporate alliteration into their titles to sound catchier and more appealing, as highlighted earlier in Mehta, et. al's study. Finally, the author noticed that space seemed to be an emerging interest for children when conducting her visual research, so she wanted to use a similar theme for her cereal box design.

Rather than completely inventing a corporate and product brand herself, the author decided to redesign a cereal product from an established, health-conscious brand known as The Forager Project. The Forager Project is an organic, dairy free company that offers a variety of vegan, gluten free, and low sugar products – making them the perfect option for anyone looking for a healthier breakfast, or for those with dietary restrictions.

Their products are popular with adults who appreciate healthy or vegan alternatives, so including their corporate logo within her hypothetical design helped to establish a sense of credibility for her product.

The author used their plant-based cereal, Organic Grain-free Os, as the basis for her redesign. Instead of maintaining their minimalistic appearance and targeting adults (as the original product does), she reimagined the product and has introduced Cosmic Crunch as the first line of children's cereal within The Forager Project brand.





Through a friendly alien mascot named Astro, star-shaped cereal pieces, playful typography, saturated colors, and narrative-driven advertising, Cosmic Crunch’s Organic Fruity Stars differs from their traditional branding to show younger audiences that eating healthy is fun. Astro supports The Forager Project’s values by foraging healthy ingredients from Earth to make his galaxy-famous Cosmic Crunch recipe. Cosmic Crunch also offers a fun look for kids who may need more plant protein in their diet, or who need to turn to vegan options because of certain dietary restrictions or allergies.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERVIEWS

5.1 INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

To test the effectiveness of Cosmic Crunch, the author received approval to conduct mini-interviews with ten first grade and nine third grade students. Through

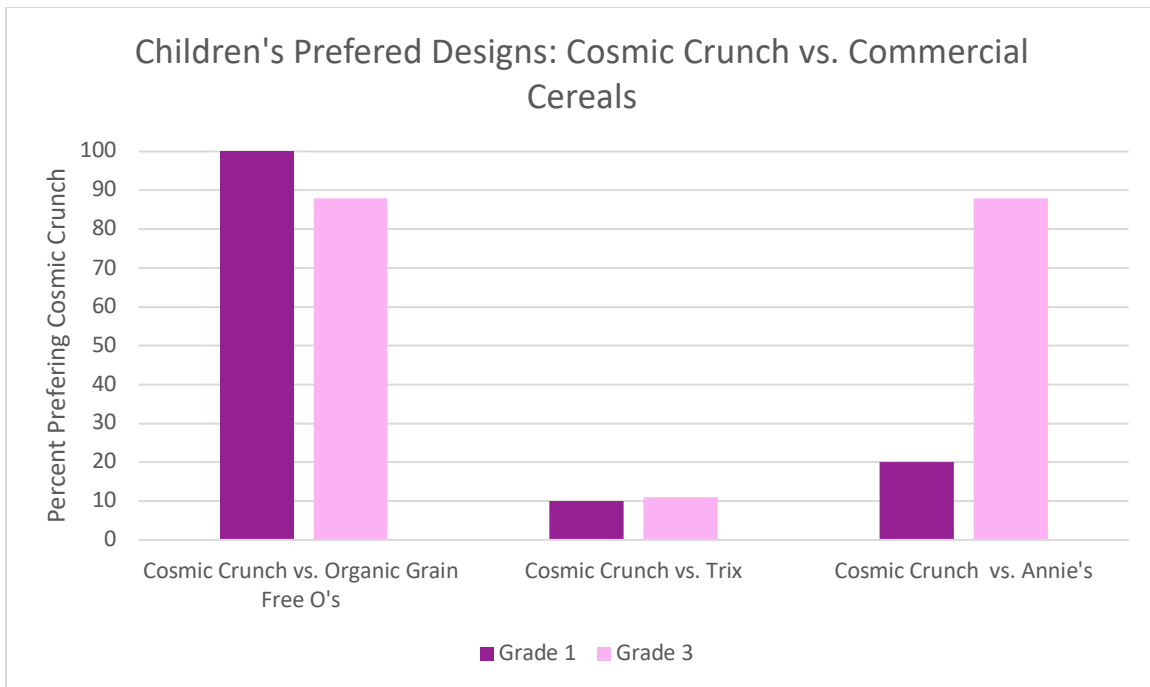
conducting short 2-3 minute individual meetings with each student, the author compared Cosmic Crunch to three competing cereal brands by showing them side by side. She compared Cosmic Crunch against the original healthy cereal she redesigned (The Forager Project's Strawberry Organic Grain-free Os), an existing healthy cereal targeted at children (Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms), and an existing unhealthy cereal targeted at children (Trix). The Forager Project cereal was used to test her main hypothesis, while Annie's and Trix were used to test secondary research questions.

The author determined the order in which she would show the cereal boxes to each student by using a random number generator. The order went as follows: Cosmic Crunch vs. The Forager Project, Cosmic Crunch vs. Annie's, Cosmic Crunch vs. Trix. Because the author would be showing Cosmic Crunch every time within the experiment, she switched the placement of the box each time to help reduce bias.

For each set of cereal boxes, she asked the following question: "Imagine you're at the grocery store and you can choose any cereal you want. You see these two boxes next to each other. You don't want to pick one based on the flavor; you just want to pick one based on the look of the box. Which box do you like more?" After each student selected a box, the author would then ask, "Can you tell me why you like that box better?" After repeating this for each set of boxes, students were rewarded with a Cosmic Crunch sticker of their choice for participation.

5.2 REPORT

The author analyzed the data through both a quantitative lens, as well as a qualitative lens as seen in the charts below.

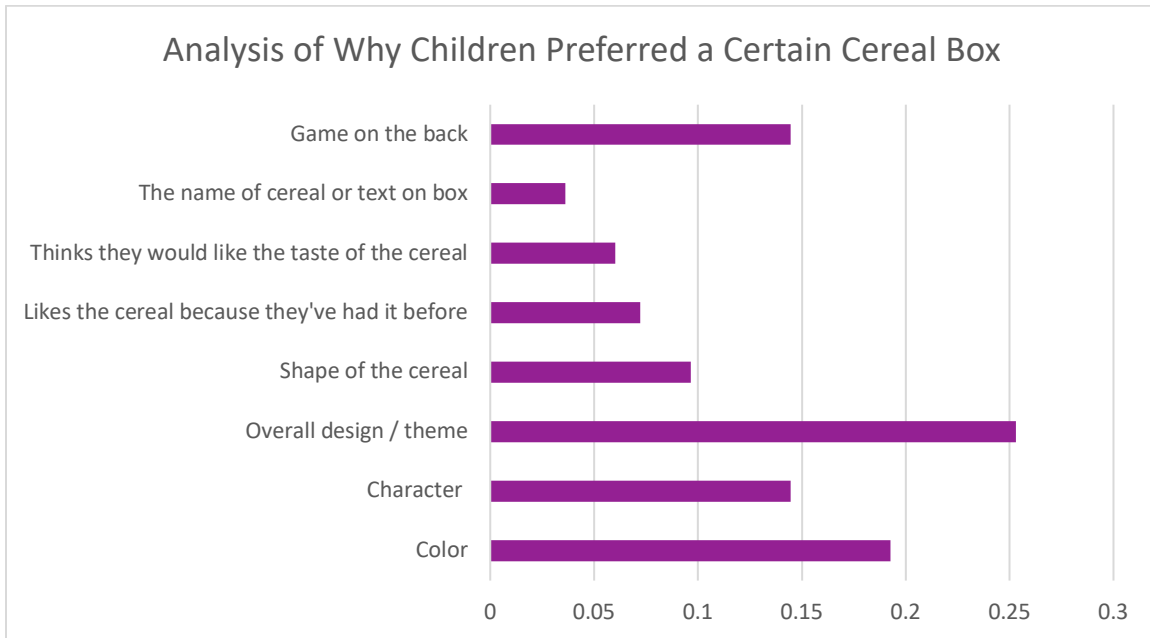


The first chart reflects quantitative data to highlight how many students in each grade level preferred Cosmic Crunch over the competing commercial cereals. Cosmic Crunch was strongly preferred over The Forager Project's Strawberry Organic Grain-free Os, with an overall success rate of 95% between both classrooms. In the first grade classroom, 100% of students preferred Cosmic Crunch. In the third grade classroom, every student except for one preferred Cosmic Crunch, resulting in an 88% success rate.

When compared to an existing healthy kids' cereal, Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms, Cosmic Crunch had an overall success rate of 52% between both classrooms. In the first grade classroom, Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 20% of students. In the third grade classroom, Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 88% of students.

Finally, when compared to Trix, Cosmic Crunch had an overall success rate of 22% between both classrooms. In the first grade classroom, Cosmic Crunch was

preferred by 10% of students. In the third grade classroom, Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 11% of students.



To better understand why students preferred one cereal box over another, the author analyzed the data through the qualitative chart above as well. The qualitative chart reports on the different features students liked about any of the three boxes. The most common responses were divided into eight categories as follows; they like the game on the back of the box, they like the name of the cereal or text on the box, they think they would like the taste of the cereal, they like the taste of the cereal because they've had it before, they like the shape of the cereal, they like the overall design or theme on the box, they like the character on the box, and they like the colors on the box.

The top three categories were theme (25.3%), color (19.3%), and a tie for third place between character and game (14.5%). The rest of the categories were ranked as

follows; shape of cereal (9.6%), like it because they've had it before (7.2%), haven't had it before but think they would like the taste (6.0%), and the name of the cereal / text on the box (3.6%).

5.3 DISCUSSION

The author's primary hypothesis was supported by the results of the study. As mentioned earlier, she hypothesized that if influential design tactics from unhealthy cereal brands were applied to the packaging of a healthier cereal product, then children may feel visually influenced to try better-for-you options. By comparing Cosmic Crunch to The Forager Project's Organic Grain-free Os, her hypothesis was supported with an overall success rate of 95%.

Cosmic Crunch is essentially the same product as the Forager Project's Organic Grain-free Os with a different visual appearance. The author redesigned the visual branding of the product but used the same ingredients and nutritional information from the original box. A few students noted that Cosmic Crunch looks or sounds like it would taste good, which highlights the effectiveness of the final packaging. Because Cosmic Crunch looks more engaging, students believed it would taste better – when in reality, they would taste exactly the same.

The most common reasons why students preferred Cosmic Crunch over The Forager Project was because the box had more words on it, the box had a maze on the back, it was more colorful, it was space themed, and they liked the alien character.

Next, the author decided to test how well her product could compete with an existing healthy children's cereal brand. Originally, her goal was to select a lesser-known

healthy children's brand with engaging graphics. She was planning to use Love Grown's Polar Puffs but was unable to find it in stores due to supply chain shortages as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. She used Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms in place of Polar Puffs. A limitation of this unintended switch is that Annie's is a fairly recognizable brand, so students may have been more familiar with the product. Rather than competing against a lesser-known brand, Cosmic Crunch was compared against one of the stronger competitors within the children's healthy cereal category.

The results show that Cosmic Crunch had a slightly higher overall success rate than Annie's at 52%. The author found it interesting how Cosmic Crunch had a notably larger success rate with the older students in third grade (88%), compared to the younger students in first grade (20%). After analyzing the qualitative data, it appears that this difference is mainly related to a preference in theme and character. The younger children appeared to be more interested in familiar animal theming, whereas the older children were more intrigued by the fantasy-like space theme and alien character.

The younger students also seemed to prefer Annie's because the box had more colors on it. The author tried to keep Cosmic Crunch within a limited color palette to subtly echo the minimal style of adult cereals and possibly appeal to parents. Knowing that children prefer to see more colors on cereal boxes, she will use this information to improve the design of Cosmic Crunch in the future.

Finally, the author found that her additional secondary research question, "can exciting packaging for a healthy cereal possibly compete with popular unhealthy brands?" was not supported by the results when compared to Trix. She predicted this would be the case but wanted to test the chances of her design's success to evaluate ways

to improve her product. Two students total preferred Cosmic Crunch over Trix, granting it a 21% overall success rate. The students who preferred Cosmic Crunch liked that the maze on the back seemed more difficult, while the other student liked that it was a healthier cereal.

One of the most influential factors for Trix's success was that the students were either very familiar with the product due to its popularity, or they have had the cereal before. Aside from this limitation, many students listed that the variety in cereal shape and additional colors were why they liked Trix more than Cosmic Crunch. As a result, the author will keep this in mind when updating the product in the future and will incorporate more colors and a variety of cereal shapes to make it more appealing to the target audience.

Overall, it's interesting to see how the author's study relates to similar studies listed earlier. For example, McNeal and Ji's study that relied on what children find most memorable in cereal packaging aligned with some data in the author's study. Children in McNeal and Ji's study found characters to be one of the most memorable qualities of cereal packaging, while the presence of characters seemed to strongly sway children's preferences in the author's study. However, the strong influence of the game on the back of the box was highlighted in the author's study but was not listed in the most memorable qualities in McNeal and Ji's Study. In Wang and Chou's study, color was an influential factor in brand comprehension. Children found a variety in color to be impactful in the author's study as well.

This information can be used to further the author's personal design knowledge if she were to revisit the study in the future. This data can also be useful to any company

looking to better target children, but ideally, for companies making healthy or plant-based children's food products. Anyone looking to study children's reactions to advertising and marketing, or their psychological response to it may find this information of use as well.

5.4 FURTHER BRAND DEVELOPMENT

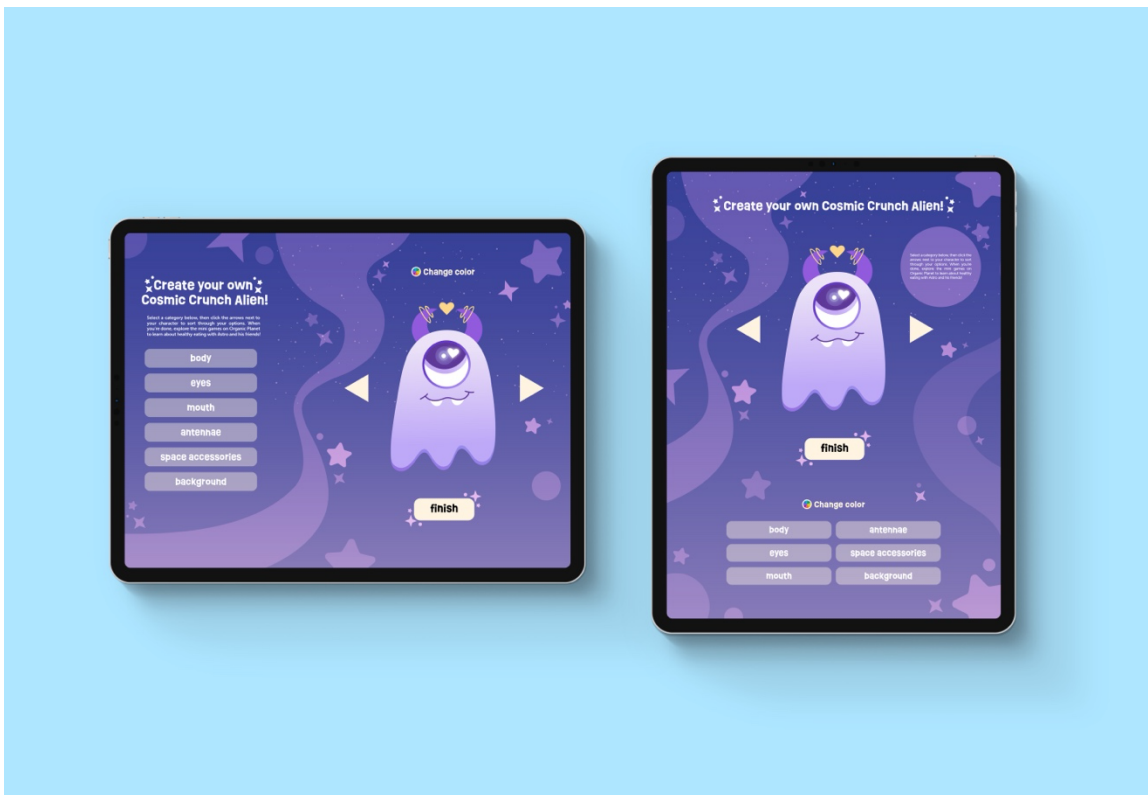
While the original fruity stars flavor was the box used in the mini-interviews with first and third graders, the author also decided to expand the visual identity of the brand. She created two additional flavors and brand characters to represent them: Luna's Organic Blueberry Stars, and Nova's Organic Cinnamon Apple Stars.







To further visualize how Cosmic Crunch could hypothetically compete with popular sugary competitors, she designed additional branding efforts. The author created stickers that could be used to promote the brand on social media or could be included within the boxes themselves to increase children's desire for the healthy product. She also created a prototype for an online game where children can create their own Cosmic Crunch alien characters. Kids would be able to use the characters they create to explore Organic Planet with Astro and his friends, which would be a website where they can play educational mini-games that teach them about eating healthy and benefiting the planet.



Finally, she created an Instagram page and informative Instagram story to cater to parents. Parents would be most likely to visit the brand's social media page, so the author designed the content to better cater to adults looking to learn about the organic, vegan, and moral values of the Cosmic Crunch brand.



While there were limitations involved with existing brand recognition, the author hopes that if Cosmic Crunch were to become a real product and marketed on a similar level to popular unhealthy brands such as Trix, then Cosmic Crunch would be able to have a stronger connection with children. As a result, using design in a more ethical way to promote healthier products could be achieved to make further positive change within the industry.

To view the author's creative project in full detail and experience animated components, please click this link to visit her online portfolio: <https://www.erinmelin.design/cosmic-crunch> Or, view the additional images at the end of this document.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This study has multiple purposes. One purpose was to analyze the design elements commonly found on unhealthy children's cereal packaging and apply those elements in a more ethical way to promote a healthier alternative for children. The second purpose was to test the effectiveness of the author's ethical packaging design against a competing healthy cereal to see if students would be more interested in the product if it looked more exciting. The third purpose was to compare the author's design against an existing popular unhealthy cereal brand, and popular healthy children's cereal brand to examine ways in which her design can become stronger.

The purpose of this study was developed from the following problem: the majority of children's cereal products that are marketed to them through engaging graphics, bright colors, and fun characters are not beneficial for their health. Some companies are taking advantage of the fact that children aren't fully able to comprehend the intentions of advertising efforts, and as a result, they're able to use captivating graphics to sell unhealthy products and make profit. In this case, graphic design is being used to speak to the target audience successfully, but it is being applied in an immoral way.

In chapter three, the author better educated themselves on the ethical implications associated with marketing to children, the visual qualities that children find most impactful in unhealthy cereal packaging, and the additional advertising efforts that strengthen brand identity for these popular unhealthy cereal products.

The author used the knowledge she learned from chapter three paired with additional visual research related to current children's products to design Cosmic Crunch. The design process allowed the author to gain experience in packaging design, an area she had little experience with before starting this project. She focused primarily on character development, typography, copy, product photography, and color for the original packaging design. She received rounds of creative feedback from professors and revised her design accordingly.

In addition to her initial flavor, Cosmic Crunch Fruity Stars, she decided to expand the brand by introducing two additional flavors: Blueberry Stars and Cinnamon Apple Stars. Astro, Luna, and Nova are the three alien friends that represent the Cosmic Crunch Brand. The three of them work together to forage the healthy ingredients they need to make their galaxy-famous Cosmic Crunch recipes. After researching how important multimedia branding efforts are in developing a child's interest in a brand, the author also designed additional efforts to better encompass the identity of Cosmic Crunch. For children, she designed promotional stickers and an online game. For parents, she created an Instagram page for the brand to better connect with them.

The author then conducted mini-interviews with first and third grade students to test the effectiveness of her ethical redesign. For the interviews, she only used her initial design – Cosmic Crunch Fruity Stars. When compared against The Forager Project's

Organic Grain-free Os, Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 98% of students. This data supports her main hypothesis.

However, when testing her secondary questions, Cosmic Crunch did not perform as strongly against the other two cereal products in the study. Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 52% of students when compared to Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms. When compared to Trix, Cosmic Crunch was preferred by 20% of students. Aside from brand recognition, these two cereals were often preferred because the cereal shapes had more of a variety, and the box itself included more colors. This information can be used to revise the author's original design to better compete with existing cereal brands. It can be also used for any companies looking to create effective children's consumer goods products.

Annie's Fruity Bunnies and Blossoms features their signature bunny mascot, but the bunny's influence is not as prominent or memorable as some of the competing sugary brands (Frosted Flakes' Tony the Tiger, the Trix Rabbit, or Froot Loops' Toucan Sam for example). The author's goal for Cosmic Crunch is to elevate a healthy cereal product to the same level as competing sugary brands and treat Astro and his friends as if they were one of those influential cartoon characters. Astro and his alien friends would be seen in commercials for kids, various in-store advertisements, and online in order to visually connect a healthy product with a fun and deeply narrative story line. Cosmic Crunch would differ from existing healthy children's cereals through this form of advertising.

As a result of this project, the author highlights how graphic design has the power to shape people's opinions and preferences. It's a large aspect within our visually saturated society, so recognizing ways where it can be applied more ethically can

positively impact our world – even through something as mundane as a cereal box. The data from this study can be used to benefit those who are interested in studying children’s marketing habits, ethical design, packaging design, or children’s psychological responses to packaging.

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COSMIC CRUNCH

The best stuff on the planet, for the planet!

Captivating colors, fun characters, and catchy ad campaigns are iconic characteristics of unhealthy children's cereal brands. So, why do healthier options for kids rarely receive the same engaging treatment? If the packaging for healthier alternatives looked as exciting as these sugary competitors, would kids feel a stronger inclination to try them?

Rather than using playful design to persuade children into becoming consumers of unhealthy cereal products, I've designed Cosmic Crunch in an effort to advertise to children in a more ethical way. Through an honors in art thesis project, I collaborated with faculty in various departments, researched children's marketing tactics, redesigned an existing organic and plant based cereal into an engaging concept for children, and tested the effectiveness of my design by interviewing first and third graders. Pairing healthy habits with a captivating narrative has proven to be a success, as the results from my study supported my primary hypothesis with a 95% success rate.

With the help of friendly alien characters, star shaped cereal pieces, and narrative driven advertising, Cosmic Crunch has successfully shown kids that eating healthy can be fun too. As a result, this project highlights how graphic design has the power to shape people's opinions and preferences. It's a large aspect within our visually saturated society, so recognizing ways where it can be applied more ethically can positively impact our world – even through something as mundane as a cereal box.

Original Organic Fruity Stars





COSMIC CRUNCH

It's out of this world!

Forager Project



COSMIC CRUNCH

Organic Fruity Stars

Plant Based

- 4g Fiber
- 4g Protein
- 4g Sugar



Cassava Cereal with Plant Protein
Net Wt 7 oz (198g)

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH



PLEASE RECYCLE

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

The best stuff on the planet, for the planet!

Astro the alien travels to Earth to gather the healthy ingredients he needs to make his galaxy-famous Cosmic Crunch recipe. He loves sharing his cereal with friends back home on Organic Planet, and with us on Earth too.

Using a blend of fruits and organic plants, he's created a nutritious cereal loaded with protein, fiber, and minimal sugar that your little astronauts will love. Not to mention, it tastes out of this world!

Fresh Fruit



Sugar Cane



Cassava Root



Help Astro travel to Earth!

Your Galactic Mission:

Use a marker to guide Astro and his UFO through the maze so he can travel to Earth and find his Cosmic Crunch ingredients!



start

finish

Forager Project

Nutrition Facts

6 servings per container	
Serving size	1 cup (32g)
Amount Per Serving	
Calories	110
<small>% Daily Value</small>	
Total Fat 1g	1%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 0mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 24g	9%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 4g	6%
Includes 3g Added Sugars	14%
Protein 7g	14%
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 12mg	0%
Iron 0mg	0%
Potassium 72mg	2%

*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Ingredients: Cassava Root*, Navy Beans*, Cane Sugar*, Pea Protein*, Sunflower Oil* and/or Safflower Oil*, Vegetable Juice (for Color), Strawberry Puree*, Natural Flavor*, Organic Fruit.*

Store in a cool, dry place.
This product is sold by weight, not by volume. Some settling of cereal may have occurred during handling and shipping.

This product is not a low-calorie food. See Nutritional Facts for calorie, fat, and total sugar content.



foragerproject.com 090220

Come forage with Astro!
www.foragerproject.com

COSMIC CRUNCH
It's out of this world!

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

Organic Blueberry Stars

Plant Based

4g Fiber

4g Protein

4g Sugar

Cassava Cereal with Plant Protein
Net Wt 7 oz (198g)

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

PLEASE RECYCLE



Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

The best stuff on the planet, for the planet!

Astro can't gather all of the healthy ingredients for his galaxy-famous Cosmic Crunch recipe alone! Luna is here to help create a new Cosmic Crunch Flavor. She loves sharing this new blueberry recipe with alien friends back home on Organic Planet, and with us on Earth too.

Using a blend of fruits and organic plants, Luna's created a nutritious cereal loaded with protein, fiber, and minimal sugar that your little astronauts will love. Not to mention, it tastes out of this world!

Fresh Fruit



Sugar Cane



Cassava Root



Forager Project

Help Luna travel to Earth!

Your Galactic Mission:

Use a marker to guide Luna and her UFO through the maze so she can travel to Earth and find her Cosmic Crunch ingredients!

start



finish



Forager Project

Nutrition Facts

6 servings per container
Serving size 1 cup (32g)
Amount Per Serving
Calories 110

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 1g	1%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 0mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 24g	9%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 4g	
Includes 3g Added Sugars	6%
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Ingredients: Cassava Root*, Navy Beans*, Cane Sugar*, Pea Protein*, Sunflower Oil* and/or Safflower Oil*, Vegetable Juice (for Color), Blueberry Puree*, Natural Flavor*, Organic Fruit.*

Store in a cool, dry place.
This product is sold by weight, not by volume. Some settling of cereal may have occurred during handling and shipping.

This product is not a low-calorie food. See Nutritional Facts for calorie, fat, and total sugar content.

Distributed by Forager Project, LLC
San Francisco
CA 94104
Certified Organic by CCOF

foragerproject.com 090220

Come forage with Luna!
www.foragerproject.com

Organic Cinnamon Apple Stars



COSMIC CRUNCH
It's out of this world!

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

USDA ORGANIC

Plant Based Organic Cinnamon Apple Stars

4g Fiber
4g Protein
4g Sugar

Cassava Cereal with Plant Protein
Net Wt 7 oz (198g)

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

PLEASE RECYCLE

Forager Project

COSMIC CRUNCH

The best stuff on the planet, for the planet!

Astro can't gather all of the healthy ingredients for his galaxy-famous Cosmic Crunch recipe alone! Nova is here to help create a new Cosmic Crunch Flavor. They love sharing this new cinnamon apple recipe with alien friends back home on Organic Planet, and with us on Earth too.

Using a blend of fruits and organic plants, Nova's created a nutritious cereal loaded with protein, fiber, and minimal sugar that your little astronauts will love. Not to mention, it tastes out of this world!

Fresh Fruit

Sugar Cane

Cassava Root

Forager Project

Help Nova travel to Earth!

Your Galactic Mission: Help Nova gather ingredients by finding the correct path to Earth. Try not to crash into any shooting stars along the way!

start

finish

Forager Project

Nutrition Facts

6 servings per container

Serving size 1 cup (32g)

Amount Per Serving

Calories 110

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 1g	1%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	0%
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 0mg	0%
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Store in a cool, dry place.

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CA 94104

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foragerproject.com 090220

Come forage with Nova!
www.foragerproject.com

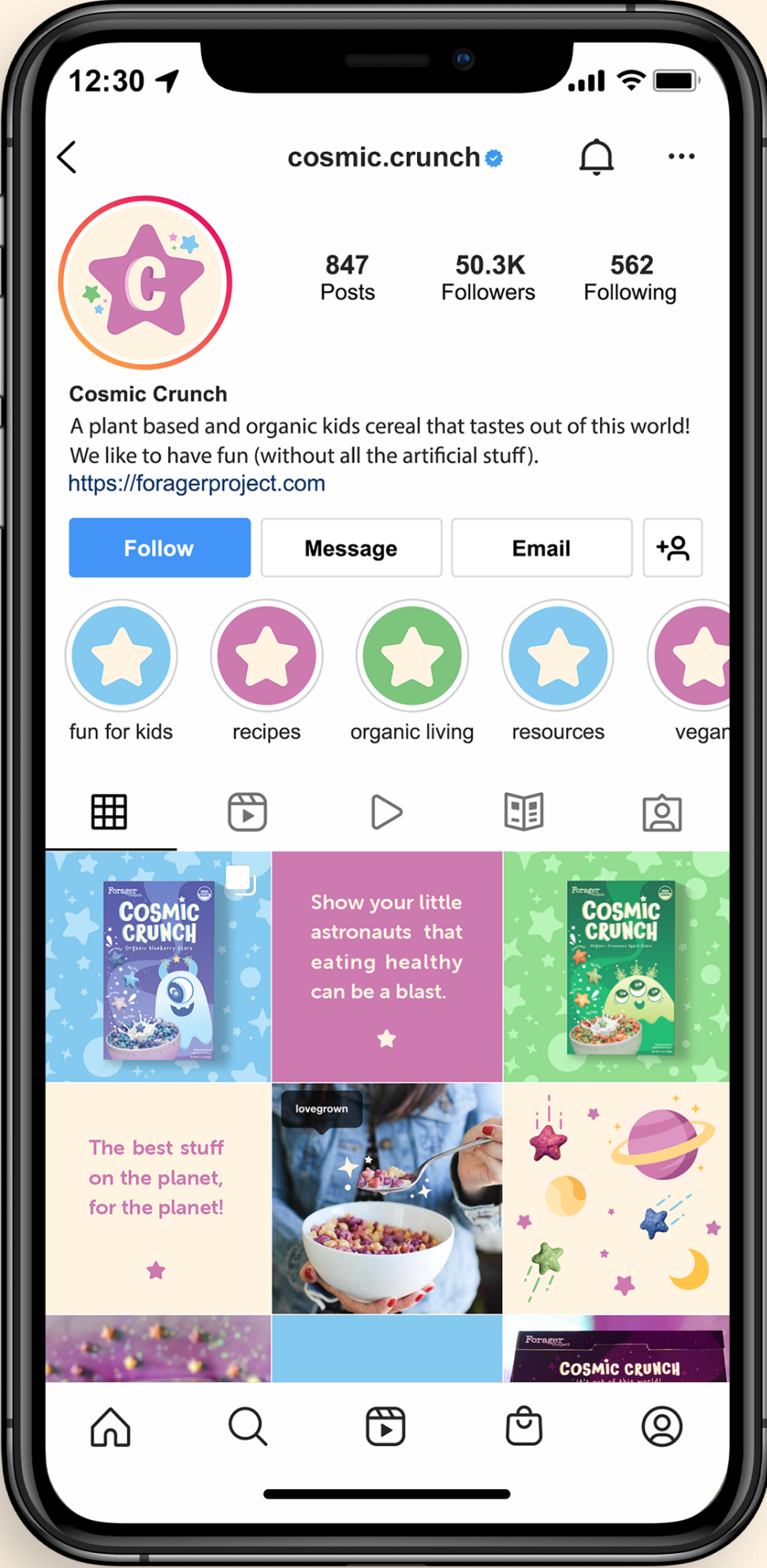
Cosmic Crunch flavors



Promotional stickers



Instagram page and story



Instagram page and story



✧ Create your own ✧ Cosmic Crunch Alien!

Select a category below, then click the arrows next to your character to sort through your options. When you're done, explore the mini games on Organic Planet to learn about healthy eating with Astro and his friends!

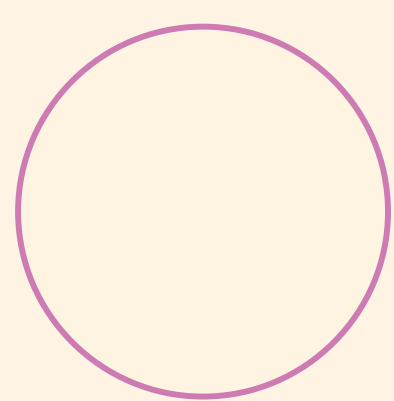
- body
- eyes
- mouth
- antennae
- space accessories
- background

Change color

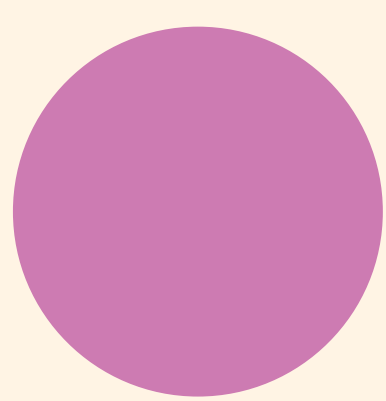
finish

COSMIC CRUNCH

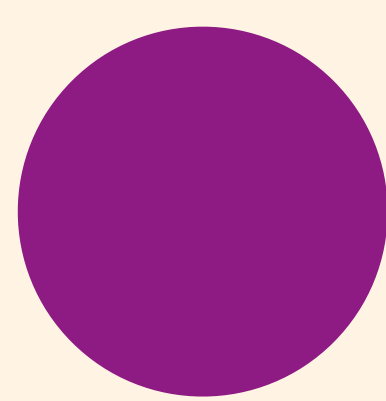
★ Color Palette



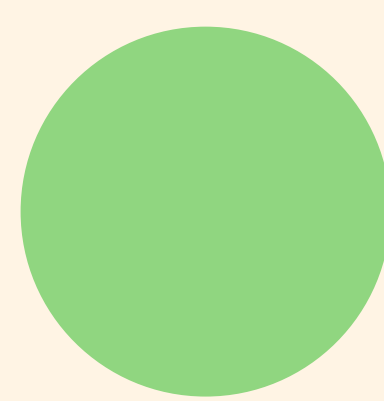
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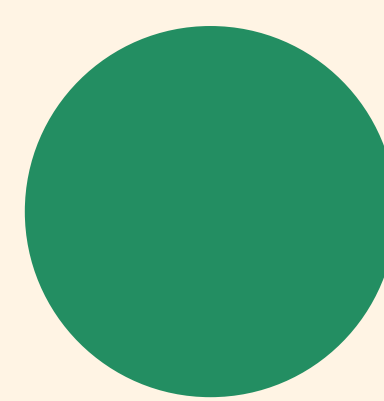
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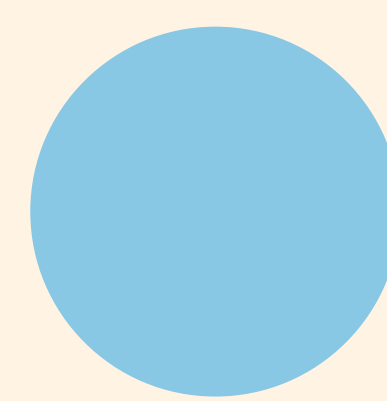
#8E1A83



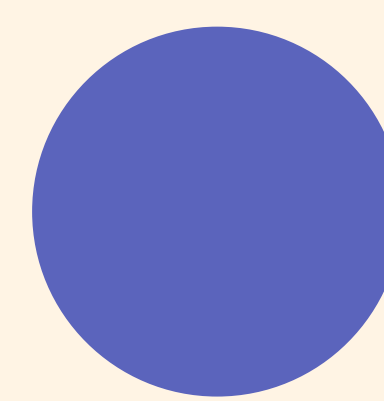
#90D680



#238E62



#88C8E5



#5B64BC

★ Secondary Logos

COSMIC CRUNCH



★ Packaging Typography

Chalooks Font Family

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ

0123456789

Metallophile Font Family

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ

0123456789

★ Design Elements



Design credits

- Illustrations for the Earth, Saturn, UFOs, square and rectangular mazes, and hand prints were downloaded for free from vecteezy.com and modified by the author for use in her design work.
- The star shaped cereal used for the hypothetical Cosmic Crunch redesign is borrowed from Love Grown's Truly Fruity Sea Stars. The cereal pieces were photographed and used in the design to suggest a more exciting cereal shape for the product.
- An image of a person holding a bowl of Love Grown's Sea Stars, borrowed from Love Grown's Instagram page, is used and tagged in the Cosmic Crunch Instagram page mock-up.