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## Trix Aren't For Kids

### **Introduction**

When discussing the repercussions and causes of obesity in America, rarely do we consider characters like Tony the Tiger, Lucky the Leprechaun, and Tricks the Trix Rabbit. However, these characters and other cereal mascots represent an ever-growing presence of junk food advertisements marketed toward young children. As of 2013, companies spend over \$1.5 billion annually to market unhealthy foods to children (Kovacic ES1). As this number climbs, so do the percentages of overweight and obese children and adults in America: 31.8% of children and adolescents and a staggering 68.5% of adults (Odgen 808). Not surprisingly, there is overwhelming data to show that obese children often become obese adults (Vanhala 319). Therefore, we must consider the factors that push children to become obese in order to combat the overall levels of obesity in America. There are many contributing factors to the increasing trends of childhood obesity. Among these include a non-active lifestyle due to the lack of Physical Education programs in schools; increased sedentary activity at home; race and socioeconomic status; and influence from the media to consume unhealthy foods (Brownback 220). In this paper, I will explore the impact that the exposure to junk food marketing has on children's health. To avoid confusion, I will refer to kids (both actors and animated characters) in the advertisements as "kids" and the young viewers of these advertisements as "children."

I will examine the effect that sugar cereal advertisements have on children, as the implications surrounding this food act as a microcosm for the other many foods in the junk food advertising industry. Overall, there are three important aspects to consider. First, cereal marketers use clever advertising techniques to appeal to children. Next, cereal advertisements deceive children and parents by implying that the cereals are more nutritious than they are. Finally, the modern lifestyle of American families bolsters cereal consumption. I will assess advertisements from several cereal brands—specifically Trix, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Cap'n Crunch, and Cookie Crisp—to demonstrate that common techniques and themes are used across the entire industry. This commonality and repetitiveness among junk food advertisements creates a massive and effective campaign for children to desire unhealthy foods. Unless we take action to combat the normality of such unhealthy foods in children's diets, children and parents alike will passively accept and consume sugary cereals, truly believing that nutritionally, "They're gr-r-reat!"

### **Advertising Techniques**

Cereal advertisements use a variety of techniques to appeal to children and make them desire their products. After viewing dozens of cereal commercials for my research, I have determined that these techniques most often include familiar themes, exciting language, and memorable catchphrases. Rather than reporting the number of occurrences of these techniques in commercials for various cereal brands, I will instead examine a few specific commercials that represent the tendencies of the majority.

Most cereal commercials present three main themes. The first is a notion of possessiveness; the cereal always belongs to the kids. Advertisers depict this concept through a struggle between kids and the cereal's mascot. This theme occurs throughout

numerous cereal advertisements, including Lucky Charms, Trix, and Cookie Crisp. For instance, in almost every commercial for Trix cereal, Tricks the Trix Rabbit tries to steal the cereal away from a group of kids, but they inevitably foil his plan, outsmarting the Rabbit and keeping the cereal for themselves. The kids then exclaim, “Silly rabbit! Trix are for kids!” (TheToyVideos). Because both the kids and the mascot go to extreme lengths to secure the cereal, this plot type portrays the cereal as a desirable food that is worth pursuing. Additionally, the slogan “Trix are for kids” defines kids as special and deserving of this highly sought cereal. The children watching this commercial therefore feel a sense of pride that something is made especially for them. The overall happy demeanor of the kids in the commercials, the bright colors, and the upbeat music all imply that it is good and fun to be a part of this distinct group, which then creates a desire in the children viewing the commercial to consume this cereal so that they can enjoy the benefits of their rightfully deserved treat. Using themes of possessiveness is so effective because possession evokes children’s desires for efficacy, or personal control, of their environment. This desire to manipulate one’s environment through possession is present from infancy and often grows stronger as a child develops (Furby 33-36). Since possession is one of the first social patterns children recognize in his or her development, advertisers can employ it as a theme to appeal to children—as young as two years old—while still capturing the interest of older children as well. Thus, advertisers use the easily recognizable theme of possession to create feelings of desire in children who view their commercials.

The second theme promotes a rebellious attitude to assure children that their desire for cereal outweighs their parents’ reluctance to buy it for them. One technique advertisers use to embody this theme is by showing adults who “just don’t understand” why children

love and deserve cereal so much. In commercials for General Mills' Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal, overbearing adult figures (lifeguards, school nurses, teachers, etc.) can see almost everything, but they can't see why kids love Cinnamon Toast Crunch. In one commercial, a young girl sarcastically introduces Lance the lifeguard, stretching out her words and rolling her eyes. Lance is shown frequently blowing his whistle at anyone who breaks the rules. She claims, "he sees *everything*" that happens in his pool, "but can he can see why kids love Cinnamon Toast Crunch?" Lance responds in a dumb tone with a silly one-liner: "It's got, uhh, tan lines?" The girl then mocks him for his ridiculous answer and explains that kids love the cinnamon sugar swirls they can see (when34567). The girl's sarcastic and taunting attitude toward Lance exemplifies a rejection of authority figures. The posse of kids surrounding her with happy faces also demonstrates the mentality that "everyone is doing it." Children take from this commercial an impression that rule enforcers don't understand why fun things are enjoyable, and therefore rule enforcers have no problem ruining the fun for everyone. They also learn that mocking authority figures is considered cool and acceptable amongst the kids in the commercial. This rejection of authority is so appealing to children because they "view positive emotions as resulting from desire fulfillment and negative emotions as caused by not getting what one wants." This leads to the conclusion that "rule breakers feel good" because children "fail to recognize that people can experience positive emotions after inhibiting desires to abide by rules or that people can feel negative emotions after breaking rules to get what they want" (Lagattuta 616). Because children inherently want to rebel against rules, the theme of disregarding authority in the commercials is remarkably appealing. This theme subliminally lingers in

children's minds as they embody these attitudes when they try to convince their parents to buy them this cereal.

The third theme is of kids being transported to a higher reality by consuming the advertised cereal. For example, in a commercial for Quaker Oats Company's Cap'n Crunch cereal, two kids wonder aloud whom their babysitter will be that night, only to be interrupted by the front door opening and revealing their babysitter, "Mrs. Winkler." With eerie music playing and a storm raging in the background, Mrs. Winkler extends her finger at the children and shouts her rules for the night: "No playing! No jumping on couches! No loud music!" (876toys). The kids are in a dire situation here that other children can certainly relate to. The scary music, howling wind, and ugly mole on Mrs. Winkler's face provide cues that the babysitter is a wicked manifestation. Most children have either experienced "evil" babysitters first-hand, have heard stories about them, or have seen them portrayed in the media enough to recognize that there is a serious threat to fun happening here. To escalate this threat even further, one of the kids whispers to the other, "What if she says 'No Cap'n Crunch'?!'" This provides children an association of Cap'n Crunch cereal with the other fun things that are at stake (playing, jumping on couches, and loud music). Just before Mrs. Winkler can ban the kids' favorite cereal, an animated Cap'n Crunch bursts through the wall of the house on his ship. He exclaims, "Crunchatize!" as the kids dissolve into pieces of Cap'n Crunch cereal and are transported into an animated world on Cap'n Crunch's ship. The now animated kids then enjoy a colorful dance party complete with jumping, disco balls, loud music, and a constant shower of Cap'n Crunch cereal. This commercial, along with many others for different cereals, implies that this sugary cereal has the ability to transport whoever eats it to a better world, far from fun-sucking

situations brought on by mean babysitters, detested chores, or homework. Even if some children are old enough to recognize that this situation is impossible, the overall impression of the commercial still resounds: Cap'n Crunch cereal will make your life better. Therefore, this theme of being transported to an exciting, animated world convinces children that the cereal should be associated with fun, encouraging them to want to consume it.

Beyond using enticing content to appeal to children's desires, cereal commercials use exciting language to make kids believe that the cereal is truly incredible. Many advertisements use made-up words like "abso-fruit-alicious" and "crispity crunchity" to explain the taste or texture of the cereal. These imagined words create a silly, happy tone that is amplified by the mascots' goofy voices. Children therefore associate the cereal with excitement and fun, and they begin to desire the cereal so that they, too, may experience what something called "grapity purple" might taste like.

Similarly, cereal advertisements incorporate catchphrases to ensure that children continue to think about the cereal after the advertisement has ended. This is a well-known advertising technique, but it is especially effective when used on children because of their heightened impressionability. In Harry Wolfe's study on brand preference, he found that slogans are extremely effective because they can be used in multiple methods of advertising and still be easily recognized (Wolfe 82). This is true for cereal advertising and children today; children may experience the same slogan via television commercial, radio commercial, online advertisement, magazine advertisement, and more. With repeated exposure to a slogan or brand, children are much more likely to prefer and desire that brand.

## **Deceptive Advertising for Healthfulness of Cereals**

After capturing children's interest in the cereal, marketers deceive them and their parents by implying the cereal is healthier than it is. They do so either directly or indirectly via advertisements or through misleading information on the actual cereal boxes.

For instance, commercials target both parents and children when directly claiming that their cereal has nutritious benefits. The most prominent way these advertisements do so is by including a phrase like "part of this nutritious breakfast" at the end of the commercial. A scene of the advertised cereal arranged neatly among much healthier breakfast items always accompanies this narration. This elaborate breakfast typically includes one or more of the following: a glass of milk, a glass of orange juice, a whole orange, a grapefruit, strawberries, and/or toast. No matter what the combination of these items is, they are always much healthier than the cereal itself. Even so, the advertisements imply that the cereal is the most essential part of the nutritional breakfast by making sure the cereal is the largest and most prominent item amongst the breakfast foods. Some commercials go so far as to completely lie about the nutritious benefits of their cereals. For example, in 2008 and 2009, Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats cereal advertised that it could improve children's attentiveness, memory, and other cognitive functions, even though there was no scientific evidence to support any of these claims. With the threat of a lawsuit in 2013, Kellogg's settled for \$4 million and continued to deny that they did anything wrong (Cerealsettlement.com). Evidently, cereal advertisers have no problem deceiving their target audience and will continue to test how much dishonesty they can legally maintain in their advertisements. These direct and false claims of nutritional value trick

children and parents into buying and consuming what is actually unhealthy, sugar-based cereal.

Some advertisers have found sneakier ways to indirectly promote a false notion of nutritional value. For example, in a commercial for General Mills' Cookie Crisp breakfast cereal, an excited mascot called Chip the Wolf exclaims, "It looks like chocolate chip cookies! Tastes like 'em too! But it's a breakfast cereal!" (petros63). This statement deceives kids into thinking Cookie Crisp is an acceptable and nutritious breakfast food. Even if kids have been taught by society that chocolate chip cookies are a dessert item and are therefore not meant for breakfast, this advertisement directly challenges that concept. Chip the Wolf's statement implies that something about this food is inherently different than an actual chocolate chip cookie, despite the fact that it looks and tastes like a cookie. Therefore, this advertisement establishes that the consumption of Cookie Crisp is a reasonable way for kids to break the "no dessert for breakfast" rule, even though it actually contains little nutrients and copious amounts of sugar.

Furthermore, even if parents are skeptical about what T.V. advertisements may insinuate, cereal boxes themselves are also designed to mislead shoppers. General Mills cereals now feature a blue band printed across the tops of cereal boxes with a check mark and the words "Whole Grain." While these cereals do include whole grain, and whole grain is indeed a healthy ingredient, this one nutritionally beneficial item does not make the entire cereal healthy. Many of these cereals still contain 10 or more grams of sugar per serving. To make matters worse, the serving sizes are quite deceptive as well. Every General Mills cereal with a "Whole Grain" check mark on it has a serving size of only  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup (General). This could account for as little as a half or a third of what a child would actually



consume at breakfast. Therefore, many consumers have to multiply the nutritional values by either two or three to get an accurate idea of what they are eating. The amount of whole grain in these cereals certainly does not eliminate the detrimental effects of 20 to 30 grams of sugar, even though the design of the cereal box implies that the whole grain makes the cereal healthy. Hence, even supposedly nutritionally conscious consumers can be fooled by the clever, indirect dishonesty of cereal marketers.

### **Consumer Lifestyle: Beyond Television Advertisements**

Cereal-marketing corporations avoid blame for the unhealthiness of their products by claiming that consumers are personally responsible for eating those unhealthy products in moderation. However, today's lifestyle makes it very difficult for consumers to choose healthily, especially with the strong presence of successful advertisements.

With the ever-growing presence of technology in the modern world, children now experience a daily bombardment of advertising due to their increased "screen time" spent in front of televisions, smartphones, and computers. As of 1999, "the average child in the United States watche[d] more than 1,250 hours of television and viewe[d] over 38,000 commercials each year—the majority are for food products" (Dalton 86). These numbers have likely climbed in the last decade and a half, especially with the invention of the smartphone. Additionally, children experience cereal marketing through the Internet via online games that involve the cereals' mascots. For example, the popular children's T.V. network Nickelodeon has a website that features games such as "Trix: Amp it Up," "Cocoa Puffs Crossword," and "Lucky Charms Lucky Bowling" (Nick.com). These games strengthen the association between the specific cereal and fun for children. When children play along with their favorite cereal mascot, their brand preference and desire for the cereal rises

significantly. With most of children's free time being occupied by activities that expose them to cereal advertisements, the cereal will inevitably hold a huge appeal to them.

Furthermore, children are extremely impressionable because of their young age. In a study by Simone Pettigrew, children aged eight to fourteen years were exposed to advertisements for well-known junk foods. After only one exposure to an Internet or television advertisement of the product, the children rated the products more favorably, had a greater desire to consume the products, and thought the products could be consumed more frequently (Pettigrew 2205). This study demonstrates that children as old as fourteen are easily influenced by persuasive advertisements. While the level of impressionability can be harmful enough at fourteen, junk food advertisements are also marketed toward children as young as two years old (Kolish 68). With such a high predisposition to believe everything they see or hear, these young children grow up learning that what they see in advertisements is completely acceptable. This effect can already be seen on adults who grew up watching deceptive cereal advertisements. For example, in the court case *Sugawara v. PepsiCo, Inc.*, a woman named Jane Sugawara tried to sue the makers of Cap'n Crunch with Crunchberries cereal for implying that there were real berries in the cereal. She argued that the inclusion of the word "berry" in the name of the cereal, along with the images on the front of the box and other marketing she had seen for the product, misleads consumers to believe that the sugary cereal "contains redeeming fruit." In fact, she herself believed this and purchased the cereal for four years based on that assumption. The judge deemed that such a notion was ridiculous and that Sugawara should've had enough common sense to know that a "crunchberry" is not a real fruit. (Sugawara 1-12). As unreasonable as it sounds, this kind of mindset may be the new norm for generations that

grow up with such deceitful advertising. As the target audience for cereal advertisers becomes younger, more kids will grow up believing that these cereals have substantial nutritional value.

To add to the pressure parents feel from children to buy sugary cereal, the modern American lifestyle promotes convenience over nutrition. For middle and lower class families to uphold a decent standard of living, both parents must now be income-earners (Scaliger 12). This lifestyle is busy, and parents do not have much time to dedicate to preparing meals. Therefore, the convenience of prepackaged foods is optimal for typical American families. Because convenient processed foods have become so normalized in American society, many parents do not consider the nutritional qualities of the food they buy, simply because it seems so acceptable.

## **Conclusion**

Between the pressures of modern American life and the overbearing presence of effectively deceptive advertising, it is perfectly understandable that children consume more junk food than ever before. Cereal marketers see the potential profit that lies in the high impressionability of children, so they take full advantage of this, spending billions of dollars on advertisements a year. One of the main problems this causes is a societal normalization of foods that should only be consumed in moderation. When parents and children constantly see advertisements for unhealthy foods, they begin to accept that these foods can and should be a frequent part of their diet. The big food corporations claim that consumers should know these foods are not meant to be the foundation of one's food intake, but their advertising strategies and profit motive say otherwise. As advertisers of junk food continue to expand their influence, more children will grow up in a toxic

environment where they have less of a chance to sustain a healthy lifestyle and body weight. The effects of overweight and obese children would be far-reaching and devastating. Obese children are at risk for severely debilitating diseases like diabetes, and those who become obese adults are at risk for deadly conditions such as heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, stroke, and even cancer (Mayo Clinic). These not only pose risks to those whose lives are directly at stake but also to the entire nation in the form of increased healthcare costs. In light of the numerous consequences that Americans will suffer if junk food marketing toward children goes unchecked, I propose that the government implement regulations on how much money companies can spend on such advertisements. Furthermore, the government should impose much stricter laws prohibiting false advertising, as the current laws allow advertisers to broadcast too many indirect lies to children. If we are to truly put an end to the fast-growing obesity epidemic, we need to cultivate a nation-wide skepticism that provokes people to question even the most seemingly innocent influential figures—even friendly Tony the Tiger—who are deteriorating the future of our children's eating habits.

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