



# Imagine yourself being healthy: The mental simulation effect of advertisements on healthy menu promotion



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of mental simulation on customers' attitudes in the context of healthy restaurant menu promotions. This is a widely used tactic to promote products or brands by encouraging customers to imagine themselves using the advertised products or services. To identify effective ways to promote healthy menu items in restaurants, the study examined the influences of mental simulation (encouraged vs. not encouraged), nutrition information strength (strong vs. weak) and restaurant brand image regarding menu healthiness (healthy vs. less healthy) on customers' attitudes toward the advertisement and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the study investigated whether the effect of mental simulation varies depending on the healthy brand image of the restaurant. The results indicated that mental simulation, nutrition information strength and healthy restaurant brand image positively influenced attitudes and purchasing intentions. Further, the mental simulation effect diminished the influence of nutrition information strength on attitudes and purchase intentions. Finally, the moderating effect of mental simulation varied based on the healthy brand image of the restaurant. The study also included practical implications for effective marketing communication in the context of healthy menu item promotions in restaurants.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 66% of American adults 20 years or older is overweight or obese (CDCP, 2013). This obesity crisis has become a leading public health problem in the U.S. (FRAC, 2014) and consumers are beginning to realize its seriousness. This increased awareness has led consumers to become more interested in healthy eating and healthy lifestyles; consequently, they are demanding healthier menu options in restaurants (NRA, 2010). To help consumers make better decisions about their food intake, Congress passed a national law in 2010 requiring chain restaurants with 20 or more outlets to list calories and other nutrition information on menus (CSPI, 2011). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has also proposed menu labeling regulations, including nutrition labeling, for standard menu items in restaurants (FDA, 2013). To help promote healthy menu options, researchers have conducted studies demonstrating how calorie information, nutrition information, and health claims influence consumers' healthy food consumption

(Hwang and Lorenzen, 2008; Kozup et al., 2003; Yoon and George, 2012). The findings showed that when nutrition information or health claims is presented, consumers have more favorable attitudes toward the product and nutrition as well as more favorable purchase intentions.

However, even with this salient evidence, restaurant industry professionals still seem reluctant to embrace healthy menu options or even publicize their dishes' nutritional value (ABC News, 2007). They worry that healthy menu items have limited appeal for their customers. According to a consumer insight report released by Catalina Marketing in 2011, 4 out of 10 consumers believe that healthy foods do not taste good (Weingarten, 2011) and consumers assume the phrase "low calorie" is interchangeable with "bad tasting" (Mariani, 2011). Due to these negative predispositions toward healthy menu items, managers worry that a clear indication of healthiness might discourage customers from trying the dishes in the first place. Industry professionals acknowledge that customers' negative predispositions toward healthy menu items compel them not to label their meals as "healthy" or "diet food." Therefore, emphasizing the healthiness of a menu item solely by providing health claims or nutrition information may have the opposite effect in terms of restaurant customers' healthy consumption behaviors. Given these issues, what is the best way to promote healthy menu

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items? How can restaurants promote healthy menu items while minimizing consumers' potentially negative predispositions?

This study attempted to find an effective way to promote healthy menu items that can alleviate these issues by adopting mental simulation. This is a widely used advertising strategy that encourages consumers to imagine themselves in positive scenarios involving the advertised products. This mental simulation tactic is unique because, unlike typical commercials, it instructs or forces consumers to visualize themselves in a positive scenario, thereby creating an environment that encourages a higher degree of self-engagement with the advertisement. Advertisements using mental simulation are readily evident in daily life. For example, companies selling luxury cars promote them by encouraging consumers to imagine themselves driving one; companies selling lottery tickets encourage consumers to picture themselves winning.

Research on social psychology and advertising has suggested that mental simulation has a positive effect on customers' attitudes toward a product or brand evaluation (Escalas, 2004, 2007; Green and Brock, 2000; Praxmarer, 2011). The basic idea is that mentally simulating oneself in a positive scenario evokes a positive effect and thereby boosts the perceived realism of the experience, which leads to persuasion (Escalas, 2004; Green and Brock, 2000). The literature on mental simulation has also shown its unique effect on consumers' information processing. Successfully visualizing using a product and receiving its benefits leads to a positive affect, which makes a customer more likely to use affective judgment and less likely to be critical when analyzing ad arguments. Ultimately, regardless of the quality of the information about a product's attributes, consumers using mental simulation are more likely to have positive attitudes and purchase intentions (Escalas, 2004; Praxmarer, 2011).

Applied to healthy menu promotions, restaurant customers mentally simulating being healthy and well-nourished evokes positive feelings, thereby leading to increased positive attitudes and purchase intentions toward the healthy menu items. Furthermore, the positive affect evoked by customers' successfully visualizing being healthy increases their tendency to use affective judgment. Thus, analysis of the nutrition information or health claims, which could potentially backfire in terms of restaurant customers' healthy menu consumption behaviors, becomes less critical.

This study further considers the potential moderating effect of a restaurant brand's image regarding its menu healthiness. A previous study of healthy menu consumption demonstrated that consumers tend to use heuristic cues, such as the image of a brand, when evaluating a menu item's healthiness (Chandon and Wansink, 2007). In other words, customers form stronger positive attitudes and purchase intentions toward a restaurant brand that appears to offer healthier menu options than competitors, which can influence mental simulation. When a brand with a healthy image promotes a healthy menu item, congruity exists between the brand image and the advertised product. Thus, consumers find it easier to imagine the benefits of consuming the healthy menu item.

On the other hand, when consumers perceive a brand's image as unhealthy, which indicates incongruity between the brand image and the product, they might struggle to fully imagine themselves benefiting from the healthy menu item. More specifically, this incongruity might distract consumers from fully engaging with the ad's positive scenario, which would not elicit a positive affect. Consequently, the chance that consumers will rely on affective judgment to evaluate the healthy menu items decreases, while their tendency to critically analyze nutrition information or healthy claims remains salient.

In summary, this study (1) investigates whether the effect of mental simulation influences restaurant customers' attitudes toward healthy menu item advertisements and purchasing intentions and (2) examines the moderating effect of mental simulation

in the relationship between nutrition information strength and customers' attitudes toward the ads/purchasing intentions. Furthermore, this study (3) verifies whether the moderating effect of mental simulation on customers' attitudes toward ads and purchasing intentions differs depending on whether the restaurant's brand image is healthy.

By examining the effect of mental simulation on a restaurant's healthy menu promotions, this study provides important practical implications for effectively communicating about healthy menu promotions that might help alleviate concerns of industry professionals about emphasizing the health value of menu items. Furthermore, by examining the moderating effect of a restaurant's (un)healthy brand image on mental simulation, this study provides detailed guidelines for effective communication strategies to promote healthy menu items for different restaurant segments (e.g., healthy vs. less healthy).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Mental simulation effect and advertisements

Mental simulation is defined as an imitative mental demonstration of an event or series of events (Taylor and Schneider, 1989; Escalas, 2004). In studies of advertisements, the term *mental simulation* refers to a widely used advertising tactic that promotes products or brands by encouraging consumers to imagine themselves using them (Escalas, 2004; Praxmarer, 2011). According to Escalas (2004), mental simulation includes various cognitive hypothetical scenario constructs, such as fantasizing about likely or less likely future events and re-experiencing or reconstructing past events. A number of social psychological studies have concluded that mental simulation can affect consumers' brand evaluations and behavioral intentions (Escalas, 2004; Phillips et al., 1995; Sujan et al., 1993).

The effects of mental simulation on attitudes and behavioral intentions have been explained both cognitively and affectively. According to Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) availability heuristic, individuals estimate the likelihood of an event based on the "ease with which instances or associations come to mind" (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973, p. 208). In the context of mental simulation, imagining a scenario involving a certain event increases the cognitive availability of that event, thereby leading individuals believe it is more likely for the event to occur. Based on this cognitive approach, Phillips et al. (1995) asserted that self-constructed mental simulations of future consumption situations motivate consumption behaviors. This is because mental simulation involves self-enacting and detailed product-related behaviors.

Pham and Taylor (1999) demonstrated successful simulation of the process for reaching a goal. They concluded that encouraging individuals to think about how they would feel as a result of successfully completing the suggested activity positively influences their behavioral intentions. More specifically, the researchers asserted that process-focused simulations encourage individuals to imagine the step-by-step process of engaging in a specific activity. This process of planning how to achieve a goal based on accurate and actionable details can increase the likelihood of enacting the plan and thereby affect behavioral intentions. Furthermore, Escalas and Luce (2003) found that successfully simulating a process results in significantly higher behavioral intentions when advertisement arguments are strong.

In 1993, Sujan et al. explained the effect of mental simulation using positive affect. They asserted that consumers who envision a positive scenario can elicit a higher level of affect; this positive state can then transfer to the advertisement's evaluation (Sujan et al., 1993). Escalas (2004) elaborated on this explanation. She

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