



## Atypical food packaging affects the persuasive impact of product claims



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### ABSTRACT

Atypical food packaging draws attention in the retail environment, and therefore increases product salience. However, until now, no research has focused on how atypical packaging affects the persuasive impact of other food information. In the present study, we propose that atypical packaging enhances processing of product information, affecting product claim recall and product evaluation in turn. Specifically, we argue that atypical packaging may have detrimental consequences for the evaluation of food products that are presented with so-called weak product claims. Participants ( $N = 102$ ) were presented with an online shopping environment, showing a food product with either a typical or an atypical package, and product claims that were either weak or strong. Results showed that atypical shaped packaging design enhanced cognitive processing, which in turn decreased the persuasive impact of weak claims on willingness to pay, and increased the persuasive impact of strong product claims on quality judgment. Furthermore, product knowledge improved when packaging design was atypical, through increased processing.

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Product packaging is an important means of communication about food products, and is often used to convey product attributes as well as brand image (Becker, Van Rompay, Schifferstein, & Galetzka, 2011; Celhay, Boyselle, & Cohen, 2015). It has been argued that packaging has replaced the role of salespersons in the communication with consumers at the point of purchase (e.g., Rundh, 2009). This is especially relevant, because consumers increasingly postpone their food purchase decisions to the moment that they are in the store (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009). However, communication through packaging has become more challenging, since the number of products that is offered in a supermarket has doubled every ten years (Cross, 2000). This has resulted in a cluttered store environment, where an abundance of products is offered. In such an environment, purchase decisions are often not based on systematic and critical evaluation of product features, but rather on heuristic, “fast and frugal” processing of packaging cues (Dijksterhuis, Smith, Van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Grunert, 2005). Marketers respond to this development by using various visual techniques to increase the consumer’s atten-

tion, such as the use of original materials, shapes, and colors in their packaging (Piqueras-Fizman, Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, & Spence, 2013; Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Examples include P&G’s Pringles potato chips packaged in a tube instead of a bag and Toblerone’s triangle-shaped chocolate bar.

In the present study, we propose that atypical food packaging, rather than being a persuasive cue itself, affects the persuasive impact of other information that is available on or around the product. Specifically, we argue that atypical packaging serves as a cue that increases consumer motivation to scrutinize other information that is presented on or alongside the product, such as claims about nutritional value, quality or hedonic attributes. As a result, atypical packaging will motivate consumers to distinguish high quality information, such as strong or informative product claims, from low quality information, such as weak or unimportant product claims that are visible on or around the product package (c.f., Verlegh, Steenkamp, & Meulenberg, 2005). Therefore, we argue that product claims (e.g., “new formula”) may have a stronger effect on purchase related outcomes when packaging is atypical, compared to typical packaging. Specifically, atypical packaging enhances the positive effects of strong claims as well as the negative effects of weak claims. We investigate this notion by showing participants a typical or atypical product packaging with either weak or strong product claims and measure the processing of product information as well as consumers’ product evaluations.

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## 1. Background

### 1.1. (A)typicality and product evaluation

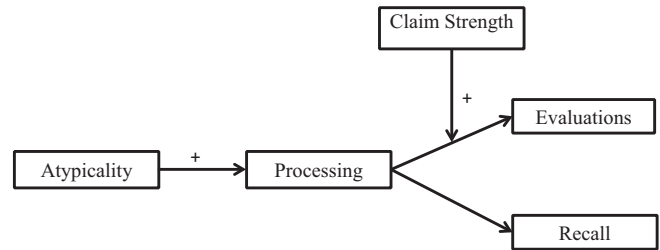
Typicality is the degree to which an object is representative of a category (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). While there are a number of studies that have examined how typicality (or atypicality) in packaging and design influences product evaluations, there is no clear consensus on whether atypical packaging has either positive or negative effects on product evaluation.

On the one hand, the categorization literature suggests that typical objects are generally preferred to atypical objects. For instance, Winkelman, Halberstadt, Fazendeiro, and Catty (2006) demonstrate the 'beauty-in-average effect': geometric shapes are found to be more attractive when they resemble a prototypical shape (e.g., a square), and this effect is mediated by an increased processing fluency. Similarly, Loken and Ward (1990) show that the degree of typicality in product design is positively related to packaging evaluations and overall product evaluations. These authors analyzed existing brands over eight product categories, and found a positive relationship between the degree of category resemblance of the packaging and product evaluation. As an explanation for these findings, Loken and Ward suggest that typical items are perceived to have more value for fulfilling a goal, since they share more attributes that serve that goal (c.f., Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). Similarly, Nedungadi (1990) argued that consumers have the tendency to consider brands that look typical for a product category, because they expect that those brands perform well.

On the other hand, research on product design suggests that atypicality may increase product preference in some circumstances. For instance, people associate atypical, novel products with exclusiveness, expensiveness, and therefore with high quality (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Also, atypical looking products are more likely to draw attention (i.e., the allocation of information processing capacity to a stimulus; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995), which enables the product to become part of the consumer's consideration set. This is especially the case for food products in highly competitive categories, where many alternatives are offered (Garber, 1995). As argued by Clement (2007), attention-drawing ability is by far the most important factor for products in the in-store buying process. Along the same lines, Schoormans and Robben (1997) showed that atypical packaging characteristics such as a different color, size or shape within the assortment, increase the attention that is directed towards the product by the consumer. As a result, atypical packaging increases the likelihood that consumers change their existing behavioral patterns or routines at the point of purchase.

### 1.2. Atypicality effects on information processing

The previously discussed literature has largely focused on effects of typicality on product evaluations, but – to the best of our knowledge – has paid limited attention to the implications that atypicality may have for the processing of other available product information. This is unfortunate, because food packaging generally contains lots of information that is aimed to inform or persuade consumers. In this section, we argue that, if atypical packaging leads to an increased amount of attention towards the product, it is likely that typicality affects the way in which product information is processed by consumers (Grunert, 1996). More specifically, we propose that atypical packaging enhances processing of the product, and therefore results in enhanced retention of product claims (see Fig. 1):



**Fig. 1.** The hypothesized relationships between atypicality, processing, claim strength, product evaluations, and recall. Note: when product claims are strong (weak), increased processing has a positive (negative) effect on evaluations.

**H1.** Atypical packaging (vs. typical packaging) results in increased processing of the product.

**H2.** Atypical packaging (vs. typical packaging) results in increased recall of product information via increased processing of the product.

#### 1.2.1. Persuasive impact of product claims

Food packaging often contains several claims that communicate product attributes that are thought to be persuasive. But not all claims are equally informative and sometimes even misleading ("green washing" being a specific example; Chen & Chang, 2013; Dahl, 2010). More generally, frequently used claims like "best choice" and "new formula" may seem valuable claims at first sight, but are in fact weak and subjective arguments for product quality (see also Nancarrow, Tiu Wright, & Brace, 1998; cf. Ford, Smith, & Swasy, 1990). However, when consumers engage in heuristic, fast and frugal processing, the mere presence of such claims may impact product evaluation. If consumers engage in more critical processing of such claims though, information about the meaning of these claims (a systematic cue) may override effectiveness of the heuristic cue (e.g., the presence of any claims at all), and thus reduce their impact on product evaluations (Verlegh et al., 2005).

In the present study, we propose that atypical packaging might affect product evaluation indirectly, via increased and therefore more critical processing of product claims. We argue that when packaging is atypical, weak (heuristic) claims decrease product evaluations compared to when packaging is typical, because of increased processing. Similarly, when packaging is atypical, strong claims increase product evaluations compared to when packaging is typical. Some support for this notion may be found in a study on heuristic processing of product reviews (Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley, & Eyre, 2007). This study showed that attention-grabbing fonts decrease susceptibility to persuasive, heuristic messages. Specifically, participants were presented with a review of an mp3-player, for which the masthead was printed in either an easy- or a difficult-to-read (attention-grabbing) font. The authors demonstrated that participants in the difficult-to-read font condition preferred the mp3-player when the information was convincing (but the person presenting it looked less competent), while participants in the easy-to-read font condition preferred the mp3-player when the person looked competent (but the information was less convincing). In other words, Alter and colleagues showed that participants in the attention-grabbing font condition pay more attention to the content of the arguments (and less to heuristic cues), while participants in the normal font condition pay more attention to heuristic cues (and less to the content of the arguments).

In line with these results, we expect that attention-grabbing (atypical) packaging increases attention towards the product as a

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