



## Delicious words – Assessing the impact of short storytelling messages on consumer preferences for variations of a new processed meat product



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### ABSTRACT

Continuous food product improvements require communication that induces consumers to test the new products. The paper presents an experiment that investigated the characteristics of consumers who reacted positively to variations of a new meat product, and explores the effect of short storytelling messages on choice. 1087 Danish consumers were presented with binary choice sets consisting of conventional and new variations of a cubed ham product; half of the respondents in addition saw short storytelling messages. It was found that while some consumers – especially those characterized by values related to stimulation seeking and hedonism and with a tendency towards variety seeking – reacted positively to the new product, others were less interested. The introduction of elements of storytelling, however, had a favorable effect on choice for the segment previously less interested. Thus, the results suggest that consumers who otherwise were not open for the new food product became more positive when storytelling was introduced.

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### 1. Introduction

New food products launched on the market are increasingly positioned in terms of origin, ingredients and characteristics of the production process. This can be viewed as a response to consumer interest in food products that are perceived as natural, authentic, healthy and tasty (e.g., [Chrysochoidis, Krystallis, & Perreas, 2007](#); [Gilmore & Pine, 2007](#); [Kuznesof, Tregear, & Moxey, 1997](#)). In many parts of the world, local movements have developed that promote the use of local and seasonal ingredients and the use of traditional recipes while often combining these inputs with innovative approaches to combining them into meals. The New Nordic Food movement in the Scandinavian countries, which promotes the use of local, traditional and seasonal ingredients taking into account climatic and geographical idiosyncrasies of the North ([Byrkjeflot, Pedersen, & Svejenova, 2013](#)) is a well-known example of this.

Naturalness, authenticity and healthfulness are abstract product characteristics that cannot be seen or tasted by the consumer, i.e., they are credence qualities ([Fernqvist & Ekelund, 2014](#)), and if they are to be used for positioning of a new food product they need to be communicated to the consumer in a credible way ([Grunert, 2006](#)). Providing information on origin, ingredients

and characteristics of the production process is one way in which food manufacturers attempt to provide credible information that consumers may view as evidence of desirable abstract product characteristics. For example, information on lack of additives may be given to indicate naturalness, information on a reduced salt content to indicate healthfulness, and information on local origin to indicate authenticity.

As a result, when such information is provided on a food label, some consumers will process this information, will draw inferences about desirable characteristics of the product, and will as a result be more inclined to buy this particular product. Other consumers will be unaffected by the information, i.e., such information will have no impact on their purchase likelihood. This may be because they are genuinely uninterested in products that are positioned as more natural, authentic and healthy. However, it may also be due to the situational context. During food shopping, where a selection between products is usually made in a matter of seconds ([Grunert et al., 2010](#)), these consumers are neither motivated nor able to expend the cognitive effort necessary to process this type of product information and make inferences from it. A greater part of food choices is habitual ([Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996](#); [Verplanken, Aarts, van Knippenberg, & Moonen, 1996](#)) and characterized by low involvement ([Knox & Walker, 2003](#); [Zaichkowsky, 1985](#)).

In order to overcome such consumer inertia, storytelling is one possible tool ([Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008](#)). Storytelling in the

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context of marketing communication involves linking the product to a narrative that is indexed in terms of time and place and often involves real or fictitious people (Woodside, 2010). These stories, when communicated in a TV commercial or a company website, can be rather involving and contain all ingredients of a 'real' story like "locations, decisions, actions, attitudes, quandaries, decisions or conclusions" (Woodside, 2010). On a food label, where space is critical, stories will be short and may not provide more than linking the product to a specific event or class of events.

Storytelling can overcome consumer inertia and consumer unwillingness to process information about origin, ingredients and production because of its ability to raise consumer arousal. Informational stimuli can result in arousal with little or no conscious processing. If the story is appealing, and it leads to consumer arousal, this in turn facilitates information processing, making it more likely that the information on origin, ingredients and process indeed will be processed, which then may have an impact on choice probability. In addition, to the extent that the story elicits positive affect, this may have a positive influence on purchase intention, even when information processing otherwise is still shallow (Groepel-Klein, 2005).

In this paper, we present an experiment that tests the possible effect of adding the short type of 'story' that is possible on a food label to variations of a product that is differentiated by its ingredients and way of production in a way consistent with the New Nordic Food movement. We conduct an experiment where consumers have to firstly, choose from products consisting of new product variations versus conventional products. We predict that some consumers – especially those involved with New Nordic Food and with a tendency towards variety seeking, and consumers where the underlying values of seeking stimulation and hedonism are high – will favor the new product, while others will remain uninterested. Secondly, we then test whether the introduction of an additional element of storytelling, on top of the information on ingredients and process, has an effect on choice. Our expectations is that it will have no effect on those consumers already favorable to this type of product, whereas it will result in more positive reactions to the new product among those that would otherwise be less interested.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

The abundance of information in a shopping situation and the limited capacity of consumers for conscious information processing results in that much of the label information that consumers are exposed to receive little or no processing. The extent to which information actually is processed will depend both on consumer characteristics and on characteristics of the label information.

A well-known determinant of consumer information processing is the consumer's involvement. Involvement is defined as "... a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). Involvement with food products is often regarded as low, because the risks involved in purchasing food or choosing one brand or the other is perceived as little, and not for all consumers does food play a major role in contributing to one's identity and social status (Grunert, Brunso, Bredahl, & Bech, 2001). However, as indicated above, today foods are often positioned in terms of other attributes than their basic functionality, often credence attributes such as naturalness, environmental friendliness, authenticity, tradition or health. Those interested in these issues are more likely to be more highly involved with the product and hence also more likely to process issue-related information on the food label. In our case, consumers with an interest in the New Nordic Food movement are expected to have a higher degree of involvement and hence a

higher likelihood of reading and reacting positively to the new product information even when elements of storytelling are not present.

Even when consumers are not particularly involved with either the product or some of the issues drawn upon in the positioning of the product, some consumers may still be apt to read and react to the information because of their interest in variety. Variety seeking has been established as a consumer trait that affects consumer behavior across different product categories (Kahn, 1995) and has been frequently documented with regard to food (van Trijp & Steenkamp, 1992), for example when designating a typical food consumer segment as 'adventurous' when measuring food-related lifestyle (Grunert et al., 2001). We therefore expect consumers with a high tendency towards variety seeking to have a higher likelihood of reading and reacting positively to the new product information.

It has been found that "... low involvement goods may be high involvement products for consumers associating values to them" (Paladino, 2005, p. 76; similarly in Alexander & Nicholls, 2006). Both involvement with specific issues like New Nordic Food and a strong interest in variety seeking can be linked to underlying values. Drawing on Schwartz' theory of human values (Schwartz, 1992), we expect that consumers scoring high on the value domains of stimulation, self-direction and hedonism will have a higher likelihood of reading and reacting positively to the new product information, whereas the opposite will be the case for consumers scoring high on the value domains of security, conformity and tradition.

The above considerations refer to consumer reactions to the proposed product differentiation when this is communicated in factual terms, without any use of storytelling elements. We suggest that the introduction of storytelling elements – which we define as short text passages that create reference to a broader 'story' the consumer are expected to possess knowledge about – can have two possible effects, both of which would lead to a more positive reaction to the new product. First, the storytelling elements can generate a positive reaction to the new product because of peripheral processing of the storytelling elements. When involvement is low, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) predicts that consumers will engage in peripheral processing of the stimuli presented, i.e., engage in shallow processing of message elements to which they already have some positive attitude, such that the ensuing positive or negative reactions to the product will be based more on an evaluation of message characteristics than an evaluation of product characteristics (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). In our case, consumers with little involvement with the New Nordic Food movement and a low tendency to variety seeking will engage in peripheral processing of the information provided. If this information is extended with elements of storytelling, these consumers may develop a liking for the way the message is presented, generating positive affect, which in turn may lead to a more favorable reaction to the product. Secondly, to the extent that the provision of storytelling elements indeed results in the generation of positive affect, the ensuing arousal may increase the consumer's capacity for information processing, encouraging more central processing of the information provided (Groepel-Klein, 2005), which also may result in a more favorable reaction to the new product. We summarize our reasoning in the following hypotheses:

**H1.** Some consumers will react positively in their choice to new meat product variations, while others will not. Consumers with higher choice probabilities are characterized by higher levels of involvement with New Nordic Food, a stronger tendency for variety seeking, and by innovation-oriented values.

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