



Credence and the effect on consumer liking of food – A review



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ABSTRACT

Credence characteristics play an important role in the modern food marketing system. Consumers' food choices are increasingly influenced by credence cues, as other links of trust and direct relations with the producers have vanished within the globalised food system. Labels and information signalling credence are thus important search attributes.

While credence cues cannot be accurately evaluated by consumers, the expectations they generate have an effect on consumers' perceived quality and sensory experiences. This paper reviews relevant literature from the period 2003–2012 and summarises research concerning the effect of credence cues on consumers' hedonic liking of food. A conceptual model based on a framework of consumers' quality perception process is presented and applied. Seven main categories of credence characteristics can be identified in the literature: (a) health; (b) organic food; (c) origin; (d) brand; (e) production methods; (f) ethics; and (g) descriptive food names and ingredients. Theoretical and practical limitations and possible trajectories to future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The direct link between producers and consumers vanished with the introduction of modern food distribution systems, so consumers today have to rely on other sources of information to gain trust in the food they purchase and eat. In determining the quality of a product, a distinction can be made between search qualities, which can be ascertained before consumption, and experience qualities, which can only be ascertained after consumption (Nelson, 1970). Credence, which cannot be evaluated in normal use, has been suggested as a third class of quality properties (Darby & Karni, 1973). It may involve labels or other kinds of information signalling, e.g. nutritional value, food safety, ethics or trust. Credence refers to the credibility of the seller in relation to the buyer (Grunert, 1997), but even after using a product, credence claims cannot be verified by the consumer due to lack of technical expertise or practical possibilities (Ford, Smith, & Swasy, 1988). The inability of consumers to evaluate certain intrinsic qualities, for instance taste, before purchasing increases the importance of credence characteristics (Lobb & Mazzocchi, 2007). These characteristics are thus transformed into search attributes, often in the form of labels (Caswell & Mojduszka, 1996; Caswell & Padberg, 1992). The role of credence in the marketing of food is most probably increasing in importance in relation to other search and experience characteristics, as pointed out by Grunert, Bech-Larsen, and Bredahl (2000).

Credence regarding food products is suggested to cover categories related to health, production methods, environmental and

social orientation, local production and origin, certification systems and other labels (Moser, Raffaelli, & Thilmany-McFadden, 2011). Brands, which are identified as significant extrinsic signals (Deliza & MacFie, 1996), fall within the definition of credence characteristics as they are built upon consumer trust and relationships (Kapferer, 2004).

1.1. Consumers' quality perception of food

External cues generate expectations about food products and influence consumer choice, sensory perception and hedonic liking of food, according to 'expectation theory' (Deliza & MacFie, 1996). The food quality perception process and choice behaviour of consumers have been studied and discussed based on several theoretical approaches (see e.g. Bernués, Olaizola, & Corcoran, 2003; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk 1996; Grunert, Larsen, Madsen, & Baadsgaard, 1995; Shepherd, 1989; Steenkamp, 1990). Using essential elements from these approaches, the conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 1 illustrates how experienced food quality is influenced by: (1) intrinsic quality attributes of the physical product, which can only be ascertained through consumption (i.e. sensory properties, such as taste, leanness, tenderness) (Steenkamp & van Trijp, 1996); and (2) quality expectations. Expectations are formed by quality cues (Steenkamp, 1990), which in turn can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic cues (Olson, 1977). Intrinsic cues are part of the physical product and can be assessed before consumption (e.g. colour, size, damage), while extrinsic cues are associated with the physical product, but not

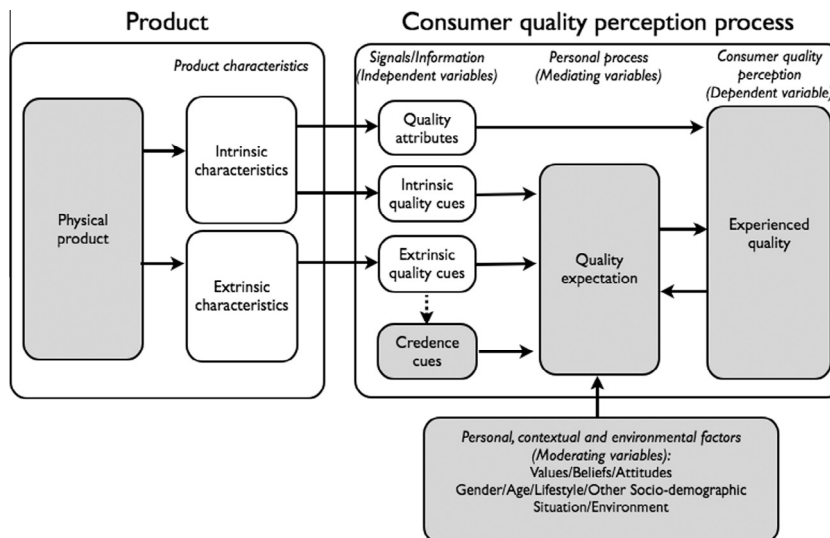


Fig. 1. Effect of credence on consumers' experienced sensory quality of food. Grey areas represent factors covered by the studies reviewed here.

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