



Light and Pale Colors in Food Packaging: When Does This Package Cue Signal Superior Healthiness or Inferior Tastiness?

Robert Mai^{a,*}, Claudia Symmank^{a,b}, Berenike Seeberg-Elverfeldt^a

^a Kiel University, Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences, Department of Marketing, 24118 Kiel, Germany

^b Technical University of Dresden, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Chair of Food Engineering, Bergstraße 120, 01069 Dresden, Germany

Abstract

In food packaging, light and pale colors are often used to highlight product healthiness. What has been largely overlooked is that this seemingly positive health cue may also convey another crucial piece of information. It is this paper's premise that light-colored packages evoke two opposing effects: They stimulate favorable health impressions (health effect) and they activate detrimental taste inferences (taste effect) which jointly guide the purchase decision. To contribute to a better understanding of when this package cue is an asset or a liability, this research elucidates the boundary conditions under which the opposing effects operate. The unfavorable color-induced taste effect should be particularly dominant when (i) consumers have a strong need to make heuristic taste inferences (i.e., when tasting is not possible) and (ii) when health is not the overarching goal (e.g., for less health-conscious consumers). A series of experiments manipulating actual food packages confirms that the package health cue can indeed trigger negative taste associations in the consumer's mind that backfire. Marketers therefore are advised to consider the identified contingencies carefully.

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Introduction

With the steady rise of diet-related diseases (Ng et al. 2014) and the growing emphasis on healthy nutrition, health-concerned consumers have become a sought-after market segment (Prasad, Strijnev, and Zhang 2008; Trivedi, Sridhar, and Kumar 2016). To highlight the healthiness of their products, marketers can use a variety of package elements (e.g., labeling, brand names), but also more subtle cues, such as package shape (Folkes and Matta 2004; Wansink and Van Ittersum 2003), size (Argo and White 2012; Scott et al. 2008), or images placed on the package (Deng and Kahn 2009; Madzharov and Block 2010). Particularly visual design elements seem to be effective tools to convey symbolic meaning in a subtle manner. One such trend that has emerged is

to use package color strategically. As colors differ in their associated weight (Karnal et al. 2016; Pinkerton and Humphrey 1974), lighter tones may signal that a product is less heavy (less fatty or sugar-laden) and, thus, healthier. Possibly with such associations in mind, some companies use pale packages to promote healthier options (e.g., diet products). Intuitively, this seems a reasonable strategy because color is known to shape consumer judgment (Labrecque, Patrick, and Milne 2013). This research posits that light-colored packaging is not always an asset because, ironically, this supposedly positive health cue may spark doubts about other valued product characteristics.

This paradoxical package color effect builds on recent research showing that humans hold diverse (and sometimes opposing) lay theories about certain market phenomena (Deval et al. 2013). It is for this reason that consumers may draw different and even contradicting conclusions about the very same visual package cue. While aiming for healthiness perceptions, companies may unwillingly transport a different crucial

* Corresponding author. Fax: +49 431 880 3349.

E-mail addresses: robert.mai@bwl.uni-kiel.de (R. Mai),
claudia.symmank@tu-dresden.de (C. Symmank).

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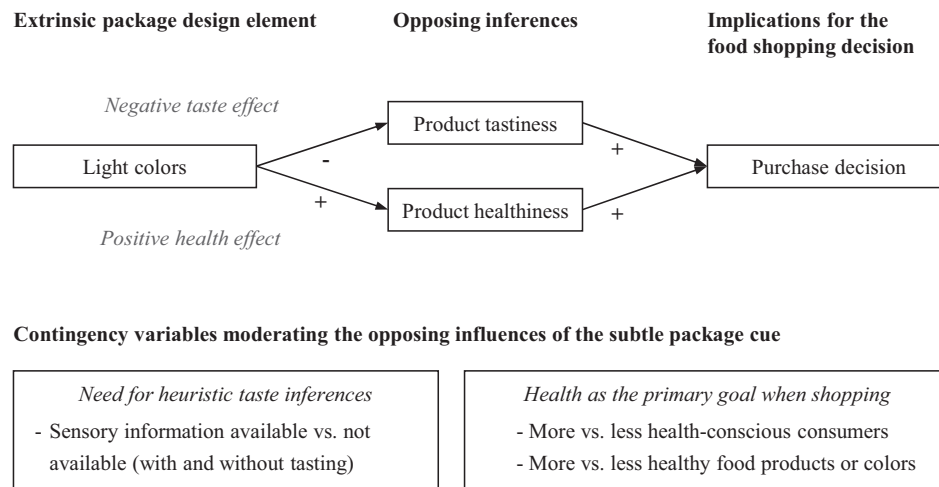


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

piece of information. Food shoppers might link colors to sensory characteristics, so that pale packages trigger less favorable taste associations (less intense taste or flavor). In consideration of the dominant role of tastiness in food decision making (Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer 2006), such intuitive taste impressions potentially undermine the effectiveness of the package health cue (and thus sales). This challenges conventional wisdom and raises the seemingly simple question of whether light-colored packaging helps or hurts.

The paper's framework outlined in Fig. 1 suggests that the color intensity effects are not unidirectional. The package cue is expected to generate both positive health impressions and negative taste impressions. From a retailing perspective, it is particularly important to understand when the taste inferences counteract superior health expectations. We expect that circumstances exist in which light tones indicate health ("health effect"), but signal a loss in taste ("taste effect") under other conditions. From a theoretical perspective, this research provides new insights into the moderating mechanisms that strengthen (and weaken) the two opposing color effects. The paper suggests that consumers differentially rely on color intensity of food packages, depending on (i) the need to make heuristic inferences about taste (i.e., accessibility of sensory properties) and (ii) the pursuit of a health goal at the time of judgment (i.e., health consciousness). First, light-colored packages should be particularly likely to evoke the detrimental taste effect when consumers are unable to assess ("taste") the food's sensory properties directly, such as in typical in-store purchase decisions. To fill in this gap in their knowledge, food shoppers have to refer to package color as a visual taste cue. By contrast, when having already tasted the actual product, consumers have a much weaker need to rely on (over-)simplifying heuristics about inferior tastiness. Secondly, the shopper's goal may further moderate the color effects. As consumers pursue different goals when shopping for food (indulgence vs. health goals), health-conscious consumers are expected to rely on the package health cue differently than their less health-conscious counterparts.

In the following sections, we present our theory and conceptual framework. A series of six studies employing diverse

methods (e.g., reaction time measurement, choice experiments) systematically examines the boundary conditions under which the package cue's health and taste effects are likely to occur. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and directives for marketing managers. As this research will show, pale packaging is a double-edged sword for retailers and food providers because this pervasive package cue has different meanings to different shoppers in different food retail environments. Depending on the suggested contingencies, light colors can be an asset or a liability. Such knowledge is essential to develop successful packaging strategies and to promote (healthier) food products more effectively.

Theoretical Background

Role of Product Packaging

Product packaging fulfills vital logistic purposes (e.g., protection, transportation, storage of the product), but it also has two important functions in the decision making of consumers (Sara 1993). First, the packaging is a lever to attract attention and to differentiate products visually (Ampuero and Vila 2006). Secondly, packaging conveys information, abstract images, and symbolic meaning (metaphors, associations, esthetics, etc.) (Silayoi and Speece 2004; Sundar and Noseworthy 2014). Shoppers apply such mental shortcuts to draw conclusions about products or brands, especially when they have to bypass gaps in their knowledge as information is often incomplete (Deval et al. 2013). Several package elements (e.g., shape, labeling, brand names or product images) serve as symbolic cues that affect in-store purchase decisions, post-purchase evaluations, and even the consumed quantity (Argo and White 2012; Deng and Kahn 2009; Deng and Srinivasan 2013; Krishna 2006; Madzharov and Block 2010; Scott et al. 2008; Wansink and Van Ittersum 2003; White et al. 2016; Yang and Raghuram 2005). With color intensity, this research focuses on a crucial visual design element. As it is perceptually salient, package color primes perceptions even from a distance (e.g., when approaching a shelf in a store) and color is

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