



Consumer wants and use of ingredient and nutrition information for alcoholic drinks: A cross-cultural study in six EU countries



Klaus G. Grunert^{a,*}, Sophie Hieke^b, Hans Jørn Juhl^c

^a MAPP Centre, Department of Management, Aarhus University, Fuglesangsalle 4, 8210 Aarhus V, Denmark

^b European Food Information Council, Rue Joseph Stevens 7, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

^c Department of Economics and Business Economics, Aarhus University, Fuglesangsallé 4, 8210 Aarhus V, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

In the EU, alcoholic beverages are exempt from Regulation 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers (FIC) that requires food labels to contain both ingredient information and information on key nutrients. We investigate to which extent consumers want and use information on ingredients and nutritional characteristics of alcoholic drinks from a range of off-label information sources. We also investigate how wants and use are affected by product involvement, health interest, and previous knowledge on ingredients and nutritional characteristics of alcoholic drinks. Data are collected by means of an online survey in six European countries (Denmark, $n = 787$; Germany, $n = 993$; Netherlands, $n = 934$; Poland, $n = 1003$; Spain, $n = 810$; UK, $n = 868$). Results of a Partial Least Squares analysis indicate that both information wants and information use are mainly determined by product involvement and to a lesser extent by health interest. Previous ingredient knowledge lowers information wants and use, whereas previous nutrition knowledge increases it. Average levels of information wants and use differ between the six countries, with the highest levels in Spain and the lowest in Denmark and the Netherlands. The results have implications for both marketers of alcoholic drinks and for policies regarding information provision.

1. Introduction

A substantial body of research has investigated how consumers react to nutrition and ingredient information on food labels. Studies have focussed on consumer interest in getting this information, their motivation and ability to process it, and their actual use of this information in making choices (for reviews, see Hersey, Wohlgenant, Arsenault, Kosa, & Muth, 2013; Miller & Cassady, 2015; van Kleef & Dagevos, 2015). Most studies show that consumers are *interested* in getting this type of information (Grunert & Wills, 2007). As for *motivation*, research has concentrated on consumers' motivation for healthy eating, in line with the policy focus of making such information available, which is supporting informed choice and facilitating healthy dietary choices (Hieke & Harris, 2016). Consequently, in terms of *ability*, a focus has been on measuring consumers' nutrition knowledge and how this impacts on the ability to understand and use the information on the food label (Grunert, Fernández-Celemin, Wills, Storcksdiek genannt Bonsmann, & Nureeva, 2010; Grunert et al., 2012).

However, nutrition and ingredient information can be found not only on food labels, and consumers may be interested in using it for

reasons that go beyond the health motive. Ingredient information can also be used by consumers in order to judge the authenticity of a product (Youn & Kim, 2017), to make inferences about the expected taste (Lähteenmäki et al., 2010), to infer its naturalness (Cheung et al., 2016), or to categorise a product as a member of a particular food or drink category. Information about ingredients and nutritional properties may be found in many places apart from the food label, including product-related websites, public or health-related websites, books, magazines and other print and social media.

Alcoholic beverages are a good case to study in this respect. In the EU, alcoholic beverages are exempt from Regulation 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers (FIC) that requires food labels to contain both ingredient information and information on key nutrients. As a result, neither ingredient information nor nutrition information is usually available on labels of alcoholic beverages in the EU. This may or may not reflect a lack of interest of consumers in getting this type of information for alcoholic beverages. With the possible exception of red wine (Chang, Thach, & Olsen, 2016; Kozup, Burton, & Creyer, 2001), alcoholic beverages are not usually linked to nutritional benefits, but are widely regarded as indulgence products

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: klg@mgmt.au.dk (K.G. Grunert).

often consumed in a social setting (Silva et al., 2017), even though beer can be linked to health benefits as well and has sometimes been seen as part of a healthy diet (e.g., Marcos, López, & Pascual, 2015). Also, product categories like beer and wine may be regarded as transparent in terms of their main ingredients, thus obliterating a felt need for ingredient information. However, the debate around the German 'Reinheitsgebot' (a German law regulating the possible ingredients in beer dating from 1516 that had to go when Germany became part of the Common Market) can be seen as evidence that at least some consumers feel uncertainty about the ingredients of, in this case, beer (Speckle, 1998). For spirits like bitters and liqueurs, a lack of transparency about the ingredients is sometimes part of the product positioning, often coupled with some storytelling about the origins and the secrecy of the recipe. Indeed, Wright, Bruhn, Heymann, and Bamforth (2008b) showed for a sample of US consumers that their knowledge about the ingredients of alcoholic beverages was low.

Nevertheless, to the extent that some consumers indeed are interested in getting this type of information about alcoholic beverages, they may be able to find it by consulting information sources other than the food label. Many alcoholic drink categories have dedicated followers, and their information needs are served by books, magazines, newspaper articles, club meetings and specialised websites. As has been amply demonstrated in research on consumer information search (e.g., Beatty & Smith, 1987), this type of search presupposes a relatively high degree of consumer motivation. This motivation may be health-related, but with an indulgence product category like alcoholic drinks, we would expect that general product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985) serves as a bigger motivator when consumers engage in external search regarding product information.

In this paper, we present a study on consumer wants and use of ingredient and nutrition information on alcoholic beverages, based on an online survey carried out in six European countries (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK). We also study determinants of information wants and use, concentrating on motivational and ability factors. The study provides insights into the information search behaviour of consumers regarding alcoholic beverages, and it extends our knowledge on consumer response to ingredient and nutrition information that is not on the product label. It also casts light on motivational determinants of information search that are not health-related.

2. Theoretical background and conceptual framework

Two existing streams of research are of relevance for the current study: information search and its determinants, and use of nutrition and ingredients information on food. In addition, there is a limited body of research on consumer response to information regarding alcoholic drinks.

Information search is commonly regarded as a main element of the consumer decision-making process, and numerous studies have been conducted over the years (for overviews see Beatty & Smith, 1987; Guo, 2001). Inspired by economic theory, a major line of reasoning has been that the extent of consumer search is determined by the costs and benefits of the information search (Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar, 1997). Since both costs and benefits of searching for information are typically unknown before the search is completed, research on consumer information search has mostly concentrated on factors related to the expected benefits and the expected costs. Much of the research conducted is on durable goods where consumer involvement levels are relatively high and where, therefore, also the benefits of search can be expected to be higher. Generally, the amount of search with regard to non-durable goods appears to be low, in line with the generally lower levels of consumer involvement with these purchases (Chaudhuri, 2000), and the assumption that purchases of non-durable goods like food and drink are often habit-based or governed by intuitive judgement and heuristic decision-making (Thøgersen,

Jørgensen, & Sandager, 2012). Alcoholic drinks, while non-durable goods, may be different though, as there can be large differences in consumer product involvement (see, e.g., Brunner & Siegrist, 2011, on the wine market). While buying beer or wine may be a low involvement purchase for some comparable to the purchase of water or soft drinks, others are engaged in clubs or communities where they regularly exchange information and, over time, accumulate considerable knowledge and expertise.

A huge number of determinants of information search have been investigated, covering factors concerning the market environment, situational variables, product importance, knowledge and experience, individual differences, and costs of search (Guo, 2001). Among the results established for non-durable goods, it has been shown that information accessibility and availability increase search (Russo, 1977; Russo & Leclerc, 1994), time pressure reduces search (Moore & Lehmann, 1980), pre-search brand or store preferences decrease search (Bucklin, 1966), and costs of search decrease search, all in line with the general benefit-costs approach. Results on the effects of previous knowledge and experience, on the other hand, have been mixed, with both positive (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Fisher, 1978) and negative (Russo & Leclerc, 1994) effects being reported. Indeed, a higher level of knowledge and experience can facilitate the processing of new information, decreasing information costs and leading to increased information search (Brucks, 1985), but an already high level of knowledge can also decrease the felt information need, leading to lower perceived benefits of the search and hence a lower level of information search (Jiang & Rosenbloom, 2014). Indeed, it has been shown that a higher level of nutrition knowledge can involve less use of health claim information on food labels (Hung, Grunert, Hoefkens, Hieke, & Verbeke, 2017). Newer studies have mostly concentrated on internet-based information search, but have investigated the same type of determinants and have likewise focused on either durable goods purchases or purchases of complex services (like travel) that are likely to lead to extended problem-solving and hence higher levels of information search (e.g., Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004; Kulviwat, Guo, & Engchanil, 2004). Schmidt and Spreng (1996) have summarized much of the earlier research on determinants of information search in a model where all known determinants of information search are mediated by either motivation to search or perceived ability to search.

Regarding information search specifically for food and drink, there is a comprehensive body of research on search for nutrition information and a smaller body of research on search for ingredient information. Several reviews are available summarizing research on search for nutrition information (Grunert & Wills, 2007; Hersey et al., 2013; Miller & Cassady, 2015; van Kleef & Dagevos, 2015). The dominant conceptual framework governing much of this research has been a hierarchy of effects approach (Grunert & Wills, 2007), which analyses the way in which nutrition information can affect consumer choices by following stages from exposure via perception, understanding and inference-making to choice. The approach is therefore different from the first stream of research addressed above, where information search is treated as a distinguishable element in the buying process characterized by some degree of intentionality and effort. Research on the use of nutrition information on food has a stronger focus on on-going search (Bloch, Sherrell, & Ridgway, 1986) that comes about by exposure to information, and bottom-up processes play an important role. A major result from this body of research is that the salience of a health goal at the time of exposure and decision-making plays a major role in the use of this information (e.g., Van Herpen & Van Trijp, 2011). Also, while it has been shown that consumers generally have little difficulty in understanding nutrition-related information (Hodgkins et al., 2015), different levels of nutrition knowledge are related to different levels of understanding (Grunert et al., 2010).

Research on information search regarding alcoholic drinks is considerably more sparse. There is limited evidence on consumer interest in nutrition and ingredient information on alcoholic drinks (Kypri et al.,

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