



French consumers' perceptions of nutrition and health claims: A psychosocial-anthropological approach



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ABSTRACT

French consumers' perceptions of nutrition and health claims (NHC) are studied using both qualitative (n = 89) and quantitative (n = 1000) methods. We analyse the participants' unprompted associations between nutrients and foods and construct a "lay food composition table". We find evidence for a degree of familiarity, in most cases in name only, with macronutrients and a small number of micronutrients. We then turn to assessing how compatible nutritional claims are with the « lay food composition table » and with pre-existing, culture-based representations of the fate of foods in the body. We thus identify some principles predicting for positive or negative response in relation to types of claims. We also assess the credibility of types of claims according to the function cited and the carrier food. Finally, we test perception of hypothetical fortifications according to origin of nutrient and type of carrier food (e.g. omega 3 from fish oil in ham).

Results and conclusions: we find (1) that the very principle of fortification disrupts culture-based representations French consumers have of the link between food and health, which they consider to essentially reside in a "varied and balanced diet". And that (2), in spite of a general disposition against NHC, some types of claims are deemed more acceptable and credible than others. The questions raised by these findings are whether and to what extent nutrition can, does and should replace food cultures.

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1. Introduction: health/nutrition claims and the cultural context

A growing part of the information found on food packaging nowadays refers to health (van Herpen & van Trijp, 2011; Chandon, 2013). References to health can be either implicit, as is the case when the presence or absence of certain compounds is mentioned, or explicit with specific nutrition and health claims (NHC). Most of the data available on consumers' perceptions and use of products with NHC come from studies carried out in the United States, the United Kingdom and Northern European countries: comparatively few data are available about Southern European countries and especially France. Yet there is no immediate evidence that results from the former countries and cultures can legitimately be

transposed in the latter. If anything, research carried out in the last twenty years consistently show notable differences in attitudes and perceptions regarding the food/health relation in France compared to other Western, similarly developed countries. Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, and Wrzesniewski (1999), in a comparative study of « the way food functions in the minds and lives of people from four cultures » (US, France, Flemish Belgium, Japan), found that, while the belief about the importance of diet for health was quasi unanimous, there were substantial country differences in perception of the role of food and attitudes about it. Generally, the group associating food most with medical nutrition and health and least with pleasure is the Americans, and the group most food-cuisine–pleasure-oriented (and least food–health) is the French", while Americans, who do the most to alter their diet in the service of health, are the least likely to classify themselves as healthy eaters. The authors conclude that there are substantial cross-cultural differences in the extent to which food functions as a stressor vs a pleasure.

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Cross-cultural comparisons of perceptions of health claims consistently found that American consumers attach significantly more credibility to fortified foods (particularly fortified milk and yogurt) than their European counterparts (especially the French and the Italians) and that they consider the health benefits of fortified foods to be superior to those of their standard equivalents (Bech-Larsen & Grunert, 2003; Van Trijp & Van der Lans, 2007; see also a recent survey with American consumers, IFIC, 2013). Subsequent comparative research on similar issues confirmed such results and found a clear-cut difference between French and American representative samples with respect to the relation between foods and medicines: while Americans considered food and drugs as a continuum (a biochemical view, as it were), French subjects, on the contrary, saw them as not only different but even opposed and incompatible. Such results are in line with a lesser acceptance of both functional foods and health claims in France (Fischler & Masson, 2008).

In spite of such results, highlighting major differences in cultural perceptions, an analysis of the scientific literature shows that the importance of these factors is very often underestimated or even denied in the majority of studies relative to NHC, which can be classified into three broad types of approach.

The first can be characterised as psychological and developmental. It focusses, for instance, on learning processes or the role of early exposure in shaping familiarity with foods, including those with specific health claims (Frewer, Scholderer, & Lambert, 2003; Labrecque et al., 2005). The second type generally endeavours to predict behaviour towards such foods based on existing attitudes, for example, towards innovation or health consciousness (Bech-Larsen & Grunert, 2003; Choi, Yoo, Baek, Reid & Macias, 2013; Pferdekamper, 2003; Saher, Arvola, Lindeman, & Lähteenmäki, 2004; Sandmann et al., 2015; Vassallo et al. 2009; Verbeke, 2005; Verbeke, 2006). Our own, psycho-social, anthropological approach, in contrast, looks to analysing the impact of cultural factors. This paper is set to examine French consumers' perceptions of NHC in such a perspective.

Functional foods and NHC are a relatively novel category of foods. Even though products associated with certain effects on health had long been present on the market (eg yogurt, which, in France, was even initially sold in pharmacies), the “functional food” (“aliment fonctionnel”) category was not a household term before the end of the 1990s (Masson, 2001). The concept of functional food emerged in Japanese legislation in the 1980s, more than a decade before Europe (*Scientific Concepts of Functional Foods in Europe: Consensus Document*, (1999). *British Journal of Nutrition*, 81 (1):S1–S27).

When confronted with novel concepts and products, consumers are challenged to acquire, as it were, new cognitive structures and/or make long-term changes to pre-existing structures (Moreau, Arthur, & Lehmann et al., 2001). The study reported in this paper is set to carry out an in-depth examination of this perspective by analysing the categorial contexts that French consumers associate with food. We try to understand why NHC are finding it difficult to gain a foothold and make sense in French representations of food (Masson, 2015; Poulain, 2002a; Rozin, Fischler, Shield, & Masson, 2006) and culinary preparation (Kaufmann, 2005; Rozin & al., 1999, Poulain, 2002b). We elaborate the idea that NHC, by imposing the nutrient as a broken-down unit of what is edible, results in confusing lay food categories for French consumers and also, as a consequence, their culinary combinative rules. The article is organised in three parts: in the first, we define our research perspective; in the second, we explain our methodological choices; and in the third, we present results from an analysis of the data collected during two studies, one qualitative (n = 89), one quantitative (n = 1000).

2. Background and research perspective

2.1. Consumers' perception of claims

Most of the research on perceptions of NHC has approached the issue from the marketing point of view, by cross-tabulating different types of benefits (physiological and psychological) with different types of claim wording (content, structure–function, disease-risk reduction ... William, 2005; Choi et al., 2013). Typically, consumers were asked to rate each combination on the basis of credibility and acceptability. However, reliable comparisons prove difficult because of the large variety of foods carrying the claims and the diversity of countries considered. Moreover, as highlighted by the Central Office of Information's report for the British Food Standards Agency (FSA) in 2007 (COI, 2007), the predominantly quantitative approaches used were not effective to elucidate the general principles for acceptance or rejection of claims also taking into account cultural factors. To address this gap, Garrett (2007) recommended that future studies should take as their starting point not the claims themselves (their nature and wording) but rather the consumers' point of view, in other words common sense. This is the perspective we develop here by focussing, first, on French consumers' culture, lay knowledge, beliefs, and social representations about food and its effects on body and health; and secondly, on the relationship between these factors and the claims.

2.2. A new bottom-up approach: starting with lay knowledge and social representations

The connection between food and health is part of a set of social and cultural predispositions (Fischler & Masson, 2008; Rozin et al., 1999) or, in line with *Moscovici's approach* (1976, 2013) of social representations. We propose to study how culture-specific social representations influence the perception of claim-carrying foods, ie the capacity of the former to block or allow the assimilation of the latter (Jodelet, 1984, 2011) in a particular cultural context.

In the case of food, previous research on related issues such as functional foods has focussed mainly on assessing the social distribution of consumption: for example, it has been clearly established that women and older adults—mainly from more affluent social backgrounds—are the most receptive (Choi et al, 2013; Van der Zanden, van Kleef, de Wijk, & van Trijp, 2014; Verbeke, 2005). However, considering the issue from an anthropo-cultural perspective, it has been shown that food cultures parse the edible into a number of opposing categories, such as food vs ingredients, food on the plate vs tableware (Poulain, 2002b), plant foods vs animal foods (Erikson, 1997; Hugh-Jones, 1996). The issue is to understand whether and how breaking food down into its various nutrients—a prerequisite for any nutrition claim—can be integrated by consumers into pre-existing categories of knowledge.

Beardsworth (2008), analysing qualitative data, reported, in a group of English consumers, a feeling of “loss of competence”: selective and discriminating competences, culinary competences, convivial competences. This comes with a form of “nutritional unlearning”, whereby consumers are gradually dispossessed of their non-expert knowledge while only being able to partially and imperfectly access expert scientific knowledge. Cochoy (2008) showed that inclusion of a food composition table, imposed by European directives, on food packaging required “translating” or “transposing” nutritional data to a level that made sense to the consumer, eg suggestions for preparing a balanced breakfast on the side of a box of chocolate-flavoured powder. In the same vein, Niva (2007) showed how the nutritional breakdown on packaging

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