



# The role of nutrition labels and advertising claims in altering consumers' evaluation and choice



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## ABSTRACT

Despite policy efforts, consumers' well-informed healthful choice is a challenge. Due to increasing number of benefit claims advertising taste or health front of pack (FOP), consumers face the dilemma to trade taste for health. To understand the mechanisms underlying food evaluation, this study investigates the health-pleasure trade-off and its effect on consumers' choice. 240 EU consumers took part in a taste experiment, after being presented with the product FOP. Half of the products carried a nutrition label FOP, respectively, reduced fat for potato chips, reduced sugar for cereal bars. Further, one third of the products carried health benefit claim, one third taste benefit claim, and one third no additional claim FOP. Attention to information and its effect on experienced taste, health perception and the buying intention were measured. The results show that the message displayed FOP altered consumers evaluation and choice. The effectiveness of the FOP message further depended on consumers' health motivation and the healthfulness perception of carrier products. The outcomes are summarized in a framework of health-pleasure trade-off. Current findings call for the establishment of standards to avoid the use of misleading information FOP.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumers' well-informed healthful choice is still a challenge as often the actual experience after consuming the product does not meet prior product-related expectations (e.g., on taste, health, quality). To comply with the needs of today's market, increasing number of labels and claims has been introduced promoting health and taste benefits of (new) products. As a result, consumers are often confronted with the dilemma to trade off health and taste benefits offered.

The health-pleasure trade-off effect (e.g., Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2009; Lähteenmäki et al., 2010) seems to be very pronounced, as consumers believe that food could not be made healthier without sacrificing on taste (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006). Taste is often related with hedonic food experiences (Bowen, Tomoyasu, Andersen, Carney, & Kristal, 1992; Engell, Bordini, Borja, Lambert, & Rolls, 1998), which may explain why products advertised with hedonic benefit have been perceived as less healthy than products advertised with health or diet benefit (Gravel et al., 2012). By

contrast, health claims front-of pack (FOP) appear to significantly reduce the hedonic appraisal when food products are perceived to have overall unhealthy image (Bialkova, Sasse, & Fenko, 2014).

The above findings seriously question the effectiveness of nutrition labels and advertising (hedonic vs. health) claims in facilitating consumers to make a well-informed and healthful food choice. To avoid the use of unjustified and potentially misleading information displayed on the front of food packages further policy efforts are needed. Yet, the question is how nutrition information could be best communicated by means of nutrition labels and package-based claims advertising hedonic or health benefits in order to foster well-informed healthful food choices among consumers.

In an attempt to understand the mechanisms underlying food evaluation and choice, the current study investigates how prospective label formats (e.g., claiming health and/or hedonic benefits) may alter health-pleasure trade-off and thus impact consumers' taste experience and buying intentions.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Consumers' expectations and health-pleasure trade-off

Expectations about food properties have been found to enhance

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product evaluation (Bowen et al., 1992; Cardello, 1995), choice (Urala & Lähteenmäki, 2003) and consumption (Wansink & Chandon, 2014). The less healthy the product is portrayed to be, the better its taste is perceived to be, suggesting an inverse relationship between healthfulness and tastefulness, an effect known as ‘unhealthy = tasty intuition’ (Raghunathan et al., 2006). Often consumers consider tastefulness and healthfulness as incompatible attributes (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002), and thus are confronted with the trade-off between health and pleasure when selecting food (Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2009).

The present study investigates the health-pleasure trade-off and its effect on consumers' choice by offering further understanding of mechanisms underlying food evaluation. A summary of the conceptual framework is shown on Fig. 1, and details are provided below.

Although consumers' willingness to compromise on taste for health was claimed to be speculative and risky (Verbeke, 2006), many marketing efforts are aimed at altering the trade-off between health and taste benefits offered. These marketing efforts include the launch of attractive packages and/or label formats advertising health or hedonic benefits. Given that packaging represents a potentially rich source of persuasion (Steenkamp, 1990), package design (including labels and advertising claims) is employed to affect the dynamics of multisensory and emotional food experience (Schifferstein, Fenko, Desmet, Labbe, & Martin, 2013).

## 2.2. The role of nutrition labels and advertising (health/hedonic benefit) claims

It becomes increasingly important to implement label policy enhancing well-informed food choice, as saliency of (nutrition) labels plays a significant role in attracting consumers' attention (Bialkova & Van Trijp, 2010; Bialkova, Grunert, & Van Trijp, 2013) and in determining product choice (Bialkova, Grunert, et al., 2014). However, the omnipresence of health labels on the front of food packages makes it difficult for many brands to break the clutter on a design level. Therefore, competing brands started to introduce hedonic benefit claims (e.g., 100% tastefulness) next to the health and composition labels (e.g., reduced fat/sugar), assuming to better attract consumers attention.

Although attention was identified as a catalyst for further information processing and decision making (Bialkova & Van Trijp, 2011), and thus having a serious impact on consumers' choice (Bialkova, Grunert et al., 2014), marketers should be cautious when designing (food) packages exclusively aiming at attracting consumers' attention. This caution is needed given that outstanding design stimuli might influence consumers' product experiences in an unexpected way (Cardello, 1995) or may encourage consumers' scepticism towards food labels (Fenko, Kersten, & Bialkova, 2015).

While health labels have been found to be often ignored or paid minimal attention when shopping for everyday food products (Grunert, Wills, & Fernández-Celemin, 2010), emphasizing the healthfulness of the food product has been reported to foster more positive consumer evaluations of the overall nutrition content of

the food product compared to the control condition in which no nutrition claim appears (Andrews, Burton, & Kees, 2012; Andrews, Netemeyer, & Burton, 1998).

It has been further demonstrated that a product is evaluated as tastier when taste rather than health claims are displayed (Grabenhorst, Schulte, Maderwald, & Brand, 2013). Respectively, a product is perceived as more healthy when claims emphasizing health rather than taste-related food properties are shown.

Note however, taste and health are not mutually exclusive. The current study explores whether and how consumers' perception of product tastefulness and healthfulness, and consequent buying behaviour could be influenced when both, health and taste benefit are advertised front of pack. Taken that health label information is used by consumers to infer product-specific expectations (Carrillo, Varela, & Fiszman, 2012), we assume that combining nutrition labels (e.g., reduced fat/sugar) with advertising (health/taste benefits) claims is important in guiding these expectations and actual food experiences. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H1.** Consumers exposed to package-based health benefit claims (e.g., “100% Healthful Pleasure”) will perceive the product as more healthful than consumers exposed to taste benefit claims (e.g., “100% Tasty Pleasure”), or the control package (e.g., no claim) for the same product. This effect will be stronger when nutrition label (e.g., reduced fat/sugar) than no label appears FOP.

**H2.** Consumers exposed to package-based taste benefit claims (e.g., “100% Tasty Pleasure”) will experience the product as tastier than consumers exposed to health benefit claims (e.g., “100% Healthful Pleasure”), or the control package (e.g., no claim) for the same product. This effect will be stronger when no label than nutrition label (e.g., reduced fat/sugar) appears FOP.

The phenomenon that consumers actually anticipate a decrease in the food product's tastefulness when informed of its health benefit has been described as “health-pleasure trade-off” (Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2009, p. 598). These tendencies seem to hold especially true for product categories in which the pleasant sensory experiences are the main motivator for buying the product compared to the healthfulness of the food (Bialkova, Sasse, & Fenko, 2014).

## 2.3. The role of product category

The proper fit between health information and the perceived healthfulness of the actual product has been predicted to play a crucial role in determining consumer responses to the information communicated (Carrillo et al., 2012; Lähteenmäki, 2013). As consumers often categorize products as being healthful or unhealthy (Carels, Harper, & Konrad, 2006; Oakes & Slotterback, 2001), one may argue that beliefs about the healthfulness of food products may affect consumer's evaluation and choice. It was further assumed that the use and the impact of labels promoting certain health benefits (such as a reduction in fat, sugar or salt) is biased by the product category under consideration (Carels, Konrad, & Harper, 2007).

Consumers' attention to nutrition information was also found to depend on the perception of the food category's healthfulness and pleasantness (Balasubramaniam & Cole, 2002). More precisely, consumers tend to ignore health label information when this information is presented with rather unhealthy food products, compared to consumers actively searching for health label information when the product is believed to be healthful. This phenomenon could reflect the notion that consumers perceive healthful food products as credible carriers of health label information. Whether this is the case we explore in the current study.



Fig. 1. Health-pleasure trade-off and its effect on consumers' choice.

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