Appetite ■■ (2014) ■■–■■

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Appetite

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/appet

Research report

Ignorance is bliss. How parents of preschool children make sense of front-of-package visuals and claims on food ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 July 2014
Received in revised form 4 December 2014
Accepted 8 December 2014
Available online

Keywords:
Marketing
Young children
Snack
Packaged food
Qualitative research, food label

ABSTRACT

With increasing scrutiny over how the food industry advertises products aimed toward children and fewer consumers using nutrition facts panels and ingredient lists, the fronts of food packages have become an increasingly important marketing tool to understand. Front-of-package (FOP) visual and verbal claims play a critical role in capturing consumers' attention and helping them choose foods that fit their goals. Due to only possessing emergent literacy skills, preschool children are attuned to FOP visuals while parents are able to use the visuals in combination with verbal claims to make food choices for their children. The purpose of this focus group study was to explore how parents of preschool children make sense of FOP visual and verbal claims on packaged food products that are intended for their children. Thematic analysis revealed that parents associated aspects that most appeal to their preschool children – the characters and other playful visuals – with higher sugar content and artificial ingredients. However, parents were also easily led to believe the product was healthier based on visuals of fruit, more realistic pictures, health claims, cross-branding with healthier foods, and visuals suggesting the product is more natural. While parents recognized that the health claims and some visuals may not truly mean the food is healthier, they agreed that they rarely think beyond their initial impression. The food industry needs better regulatory guidance on how to communicate flavors and ingredients on package fronts in a way that helps consumers – particularly parents wanting to encourage healthy eating habits for their young children – better match their nutrition goals.

Introduction

Front-of-package (FOP) claims and other marketing characteristics on food products have commanded a lot of attention in the scholarly community recently. Much of this attention has been placed on FOP nutrition labeling in the interest of overcoming the shortfalls of the nutrition facts label mandated in the United States in 1990. Nutrition facts panels are typically on the back or side of a package and provide a standardized detailed overview of calories and various nutrient levels (e.g., sodium, fat, protein). These facts are communicated only as text. FOP nutrition labels highlight a few key nutrients but often do so using more than text. Research on FOP nutrition labels has shown that nearly all labels use pictorial or symbolic elements to convey meaning because they are recognized more readily than words (Van Kleef & Dagevos, 2013) and that labels that combine short text claims, graphics, and color are the most effective. Designed this way, these labels are more likely to receive attention when the consumer is under time pressure (Van Herpen & Van Trijp, 2011). All of these efforts are designed to help consumers make efficient, smart food decisions in attempts to reduce the obesity rate among U.S. adults and children (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2013). However, despite the attention, standardized FOP nutrition labels like the U.S. Grocery Manufacturers Association "Facts Up Front" or others that may be governmentally mandated only constitute one potential source of consumer information about a product on a package front.

Packaging claims, or marketing claims made by manufacturers on product packaging, are an important part of product communication strategy (Couste, Martos-Partal, & Martinez-Rios, 2012). Marketers use verbal claims on package fronts in combination with visual aspects, such as graphics/pictures, color, shapes, and typography that may imply healthiness or taste and advertise the product. Interestingly, nutrition claims such as claims in relation to products being "made from real fruit," "made from fruit juice," "naturally flavored," and graphics representing fruit and vegetables are prevalent on unhealthy (e.g., high in sugar, sodium, and/or fat) packaged snacks for children (Elliott, 2008; Wirtz, Ahn, Song, & Wang, 2013). However, FOP visual elements combined with verbal claims have not been extensively examined in terms of the consumer

☆ Acknowledgements: Research was funded in-part by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Campus Research Board.
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2014.12.100
0195-6663/

interpretation of the claims, in particular, how parents of young, preliterate children perceive package claims of products aimed toward their children.

Although the global food and beverage industry has claimed it is self-regulating unhealthy food advertising to children via television advertising, this self-regulation does not apply to product labeling and packaging, making this medium critical to examine (Galbraith-Emami & Lobstein, 2013; Hawkes, 2010). A recent United States Supreme Court hearing regarding a dispute between Pom Wonderful and Coca-Cola over false advertising on labeling drew attention to the significance of FOP visuals as both a consumer welfare issue and commercial competition issue. Pom Wonderful led the market in pomegranate based juices for several years until other companies started releasing similar products to capitalize on the pomegranate health craze (Bobelian, 2014). Coca-Cola released a juice called "Pomegranate Blueberry" containing less than 0.5% blueberry and pomegranate juices (Bobelian, 2014, para. 5). Pom Wonderful contended Coca-Cola misled consumers "through false representation of its product" (Tao & Tomioka, n.d., para. 3), pointing to the FOP visuals as a primary problem. The visuals prominently depicted blueberries and a pomegranate. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allows companies to label a product by flavor rather than ingredients; however, the Lanham Act regulates commercial competition and prohibits false advertising. Thus, the Lanham Act was used as the legal basis under which Pom contends Coca-Cola misled consumers on nutrition and ingredients (Tao & Tomioka, n.d.). The FDA "has noted the food labeling issues that Pom has raised" (Tao & Tomioka, n.d., para. 9), but consumer advocacy groups contend that the FDA has difficulty enforcing misleading label policies (Tao & Tomioka, n.d.).

Front-of-package (FOP) visuals could clearly impact children's product perceptions. Preschool children, aged 3–5, are acutely persuaded by visual aspects because their reading ability consists primarily of emergent literacy skills, which include recognition of letters and word-based logos, that words are read left to right, and words can share a story or instructions (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). Regarding FOP food marketing geared toward children, character use has often been the focal point in the literature (e.g. Hebden, King, Kelly, Chapman, & Innes-Hughes, 2011; Lumeng, 2011; Maubach, Hoek, & McCreanor, 2009; Musicus, Tal, & Wansink, 2014). Only a few studies have examined additional visual characteristics, finding that packaged food products marketed primarily for children often rely on visual-based FOP design, using bright colors, cartoon or childlike script typeface, fruit and vegetable graphics, and/or characters like an anthropomorphized animal or object, child, or licensed character (Elliott, 2008, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013).

Research on children's response to these visuals has shown preschoolers choose foods based on characters, colors, pictures of the food, and fun appearance on package fronts (Carruth, Skinner, Moran, & Coletta, 2000). Similarly, Elliott's (2009) findings showed children of 6–12 years old were strongly influenced by package designs featuring particular colors, characters (more so for 6–8 year olds), fun fonts, and pictures of the product in unique shapes or in ways that demonstrated interactivity. The research concluded that the children associated healthier food with more serious looking FOP design; however, their understanding of healthiness was limited. Another study looking at how 3–5 year old children associate food and healthiness found they were able to identify healthy foods but did not understand why they should not eat unhealthy foods (Tatlow-Golden, Hennessy, Dean, & Hollywood, 2013).

However, it is the parents of preschool children (aged 3–5) that are ultimately making food purchasing decisions, which is why many products have FOP health and nutrition appeals, both verbal and visual, designed for both children and their parents. For example, one study found that 62.7% of fun foods designed with cartoonish font and graphics and largely consisting of cereal, fruit snacks, and drinks marketed toward children had one or more FOP nutrition claim and some had a magnifying glass to supplement a "contains hidden vegetables" claim for parents (Elliott, 2008, p. 265). Another marketing strategy is to create multiple FOP designs of a single product to appear on a shelf as if they are, in fact, different products with different attributes. The visual and verbal FOP aspects can make a product packaged as 'fun' look like a more serious and perhaps healthier option to parents as demonstrated by the sample products analyzed by Elliott (2009).

In examining parents' views of their preschool children's diets, Peters, Parletta, Lynch, and Campbell (2014) found media and advertising to be one barrier to healthy eating. Interestingly, in making comparisons between parents of children with healthy and unhealthy diets, they revealed that only half of the parents in the healthy-diet group discussed reading labels. Conceivably, then, even the healthier parents may be relying on the FOP information to make choices. However, those in the unhealthy group were more likely to use "energy dense, nutritionally poor foods for rewards and contingencies" (p. 135), and those foods are more likely to be packaged. In a similar study that interviewed parents of 5–12 year-old children on factors influencing their food purchases, FOP information did come up (Maubach et al., 2009): "some reported using the Heart Foundation Tick to identify healthier choices" while others "were skeptical of health-related claims" (p. 299). To simplify their search, parents seemed to pre-classify food categories as healthy or unhealthy to create a heuristic for food purchases. For fun foods and relatively unhealthy foods to fit this heuristic, FOP visual and verbal cues such as graphics of fruit and/or vegetables, "made with real fruit juice," or "100% vitamin C" may lead parents to associate healthiness with these products. Because parents face practical pressures (appeasing children, shopping quickly, and routines) in deciding what type of food to buy, "price, marketing, and pressure from children" (Maubach et al., 2009, p. 301) can weaken their desire to let nutritional values be the primary deciding factor.

When purchasing packaged foods for preschool children, parents likely use both the FOP visual and verbal aspects of food packages to make decisions. If their children are with them while shopping or will interact with the package at home, the parent may be influenced by child pestering or preference (Maubach et al., 2009; O'Dougherty, Story, & Stang, 2006) and choose a product with fun visual aspects to appease the child. The 'fun' packages may also contain a FOP verbal claim meant to appeal to parents (Elliott, 2008). Even when pestering or preference is not an issue, parents might still unknowingly choose what is actually the same or very similar product (same ingredients as the 'fun' product) that is positioned as a more healthy option via package elements. It is important then to understand the interplay of visual and verbal claims as they occur in combination, with variations sometimes occurring even for different packages of a single brand. Visual and verbal aspects of communications can interactively influence consumer perceptions (e.g., Edell & Staelin, 1983).

Few qualitative studies have examined how parents interpret both verbal and visual FOP information for making decisions about what to buy and feed their preliterate children. This study begins to address that gap through its exploration of how parents of preschool children make sense of visual and verbal package claims on a food product marketed toward children.

Methodology

Design and procedure

The exploratory nature of the research purpose warranted a qualitative approach as it allows for more open-ended inquiry and reveals the multiple facets of a topic in rich detail (Richards & Morse, 2012). Focus groups can offer unique insights because their format

Please cite this article in press as: Katie M. Abrams, Caitlin Evans, Brittany R.L. Duff, Ignorance is bliss. How parents of preschool children make sense of front-of-package visuals and claims on food, Appetite (2014), doi: 10.1016/j.appet.2014.12.100