



It's a match when green meets healthy in sustainability labeling

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ABSTRACT

The environmental conscientiousness food trend is only expected to increase as consumers demand more information on the environmental and social impacts of their food purchases. Drawing from consumers' lay theories and the match-up hypothesis, this study examines the influence of the interaction between healthiness and sustainability levels on consumer product evaluations. In particular, it argues that the fit between healthiness and sustainability (both high or both low) drives consumer buying preferences as well as product perceptions. However, a general skepticism in sustainability claims moderates this effect.

1. Introduction

As consumers seek to integrate sustainable practices into their food consumption habits, providing information through sustainability labels on food packaging has become an important priority for policy-makers and consumer advocates (Consumer Reports National Research Center, 2014). Consumers' food choices may have a significant impact on the environment, such as the distortion of ecosystem services and biodiversity (World Wildlife Fund, 2014). Further, the sustainability of meals can vary greatly, independent of the nutritional content of the meals; in fact, some foods can contribute up to nine times more to greenhouse gas emissions than others based on their production process (Carlsson-Kanyama, 1998). Thus, governmental agencies, retailers, and manufacturers are actively engaged in creating novel ways to provide product sustainability information to consumers in an attempt to shift their preferences and create a more sustainable environment (Sustainability Consortium, 2018).

While enhancing the purchase of sustainable products through the use of labeling is a laudable goal, consumer perceptions of the labeling and its subsequent impact on purchase behavior can vary. Consumers formulate inferences based on food packaging information (e.g., Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994) and the inferences they form may be biased by other contextual factors (Frederick, Lee, & Baskin, 2014; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). These biases can often lead consumers to incorrect conclusions. For instance, consumers inferred a lower environmental impact from purchases that included an organic item than from those without such an item, even though the organic item created a health halo and allowed the inclusion of other non-green products into the consumer's basket (Gorissen & Weijters, 2016).

Consumers also frequently categorize products as either healthy or unhealthy (Rozin, Ashmore, & Markwith, 1996) based on the product's attributes. These labels also often reinforce consumers' own biases. For example, unhealthy food has been associated with pleasure and taste (Roininen et al., 2001), whereas healthy food has generally associated with not being tasty (Ragunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006).

Previous research has also focused on the role of sustainability in consumer perceptions and buying behavior. Altruistic, other-focused claims such as environmental, sustainability claims can increase consumer purchases of organic foods suggesting a link between sustainability and healthiness (Kareklas, Carlson, & Muehling, 2014). In addition, the impact of sustainability labeling differs depending on the consumer segment to which one belongs (Verain, Sijtsema, & Antonides, 2016). However, this research has not investigated how the sustainability level of a product and its perceived healthiness interact. Therefore, the present research focuses on the interaction of sustainability level and healthiness perceptions as well as their downstream consequences. We posit that consumers expect a positive correlation between health and sustainability and, when they do not find this correlation; their willingness to purchase the product in question is negatively affected. Past research has suggested that consumers often encounter health and sustainability together in products, such as with vegetarian meals (which are both healthy and sustainable) as compared to non-vegetarian meals (which are generally considered to be unhealthy and unsustainable; Kareklas et al., 2014). If consumers encounter various product attributes together over time, the associations between them may become automatic (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) such that, given one attribute, a positive correlation on the other may be predicted. In prior research, Verain et al. (2016) found that

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sustainability had a positive effect on perceived health, especially for highly sustainability-conscious consumers. That being said, prior literature on the match-up hypothesis (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990) has also suggested that consumers prefer products which match their expectations. We contribute to the literature on the match-up hypothesis by examining how the interaction of health perceptions and sustainability information processing affect food purchasing. This hypothesis, sometimes referred to as *fit*, has been applied in a number of contexts including spokesperson and celebrity influence on consumer responses (Kahle & Homer, 1985), brand extensions (Aaker & Keller, 1990), and product creation (Smith & Andrews, 1995) among others. We posit that fit may also capture the interplay between other variables that consumers have previously encountered together such as the relationship between health and sustainability. In particular, while the previous literature shows a general positive relationship between sustainability and health, our work explicitly considers the implications to consumers of what happens when this relationship is broken. Specifically, we study various “levels” of sustainability labels and their interactions with healthiness.

Thus, when sustainability labeling does not match up to the consumers' preconceived notions (i.e. not both high and not both low), there is a mismatch of expectations. Expectation mismatches have been shown to lead to decreased satisfaction with a product (Cardozo, 1965). As such, given that healthiness perceptions act as an expectation for the product, a mismatch between such perceptions and sustainability labeling may lead to lowered consumer satisfaction. This may lead consumers to question the veracity of either the sustainability or of the health information. However, this will be moderated based on the consumer's level of sustainability skepticism. Specifically, if consumers have a high level of sustainability skepticism, they may pay less attention to the fit between the product's healthiness and its sustainability label. As a result, the effect of sustainability information may be mitigated for highly skeptical individuals, whereas their counterparts will evaluate less favorably the product that has a low fit. While prior literature suggests that consumers generally perceive a high or moderate fit more favorably than a low fit in the areas of brand extension (Dens & De Pelsmacker, 2010), celebrity endorsements (Misra & Beatty, 1990), and corporate social responsibility (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), the influence of perceived fit in healthiness and sustainability on evaluations has not been previously examined.

We aim to contribute to the literature in a number of ways. First, we analyze how sustainability information interacts with product healthiness with regards to consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions for the product. We look at the match-up hypothesis and the underlying skepticism towards products which do not match our intuitions as the underlying process. In addition, given that consumers are increasingly concerned with the environmental impact associated with their food purchases (Cone Communications, 2015), this research offers opportunities to better understand how the provision of sustainability labeling can influence food purchasing decisions by consumers. We also provide insights into the current initial sustainability labeling initiatives by non-governmental organizations, policy makers, and the food industry to reveal the potential efficacy of environmental impact-related information on product packaging.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Sustainability attributes in product evaluations

While various NGOs have suggested the importance of making food consumption choices that minimize environmental impact (World Wildlife Fund, 2014), prior research on the effects of sustainability labels on packaged food products has been limited and largely fragmented. Studies related to the environmental impacts associated with food consumption have been restricted to certain product categories and labels, and conducted mostly in European countries (Grunert,

Hieke, & Wills, 2014). Most research in this area has previously examined the provision of environmental related information with vague claims, such as *all natural* and *ozone-friendly* (Kangun, Carlson, & Grove, 1991). Few studies have examined the various levels of quantitative sustainability labels and their effects. As such, it is difficult to generalize the effectiveness of these sustainability labels. Prior studies have focused on consumers' preferences for different labeling formats and suggest that consumers generally prefer concrete, specific information rather than information that is subject to multiple interpretations (e.g., Cho, 2015; Engels, Hansmann, & Scholz, 2010). Thus, to communicate environmental impact information objectively, this paper examines the influence of various levels of quantitative sustainability labels on consumers' attitudes and intentions.

2.2. Match-up hypothesis

Derived from Rossiter and Percy (1980), the match-up hypothesis is based on the principle that matching the advertising appeal with product function (i.e. fit; Kamins, 1990; Lavine & Snyder, 1996) produces an effective advertisement. The memory-based expectations of the attributes embodied by brands and product categories have been found to influence consumer responses to advertising (Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Misra & Beatty, 1990). The literature has focused on different product categories and contexts, such as celebrity endorsers (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Knoll & Matthes, 2017), sponsorships (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), brand alliances (Alcañiz, Cáceres, & Pérez, 2010), and brand extensions (Lynch & Schuler, 1994). To our knowledge, the matching effect has not been demonstrated in integrating the effect of sustainability labeling and the healthiness valence. The match-up effect occurs when there is a perceived label fit between an advertised product and the information provided in the advertisement, consistent with individuals' expectations regarding the product. Prior literature describes fit as the perceived link between two attributes or objects (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). A high fit between perceived health and health-related information has a crucial role in influencing consumers' responses (Carrillo, Varela, & Fiszman, 2012). In addition, product attributes are generally evaluated positively if matched with relevant products (Lynch & Schuler, 1994). In a similar vein, we propose that perceived label fit, the match between healthiness and sustainability levels, is expected to play a significant role in understanding the mechanism underlying information processing.

To support this hypothesis in the context of food advertisements, Choi, Paek, and Whitehill King (2012) suggest that a match between healthiness (healthy vs. unhealthy) and claim type (nutrient vs. taste) enhances perceived taste and health. Consistent with an unhealthy = tasty intuition (Raghunathan et al., 2006), ads that use taste claims for food that is perceived as unhealthy are evaluated as tastier but less healthy. In contrast, for ads that use nutrient-content claims with food perceived to be healthy, evaluations of the food are healthier but less tasty. Similarly, prior studies indicate that for healthy foods, health and nutrition claims are more effective than taste claims when it comes to product evaluations (Choi & Springston, 2014). The opposite pattern of results emerged for unhealthy foods, in that taste claims are evaluated more favorably than health and nutrition claims.

In a study of adolescents, Adams and Geuens (2007) demonstrate a match-up effect in which product attitudes and purchase intentions are evaluated more positively for healthy foods that have been paired with health slogans (e.g., “Munchies, the healthy, fiber rich snack!”), whereas unhealthy slogans (e.g., “Munchies, the sweet snack, full of taste!”) are more effective with unhealthy foods. The authors suggest that consumers' perception of the healthiness of food products determines the appropriateness of slogans. Based on prior research, a parallel mechanism in consumer attitudes is anticipated for the association between food healthiness and sustainability. Consumers' expected degree of fit between healthiness and sustainability levels may influence product evaluations. Thus, we propose an interaction effect

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