

Retailers' communication on ugly fruits and vegetables: What are consumers' perceptions?

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates retailers' societal advertisements on ugly fruits and vegetables. A three (retailer's claim is focusing on consumers' health, on food taste, on food price) x 2 (the retailer studied is Intermarché, Biocoop) between subjects design has been conducted. Several paths that retailers can follow in order to build the credibility of their message and consumers' attitude toward the ad (the two explanatory variables relating to the message) as well as consumers' trust in the retailer and their attitude toward this retailer (two explained variables relating to the retailer) are indicated. The direct and indirect impacts of societal advertisements on ugly fruits and vegetables on consumers' relationship with retailers are thus pointed out.

1. Introduction

Roughly one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year (i.e., approximately 1.3 billion tons) gets lost or wasted, which represents US\$ 989 billion. Per capita waste by consumers is between 95 and 115 kg a year in Europe and North America and more than 40% of losses happen at consumer and retail levels. At the retailers' level, large quantities of food are wasted due to quality standards that over-emphasize appearance, even if official quality standards no longer exist (since 2009). Retailers assume that consumers will not buy products that deviate from a standard physical appearance (e.g., shape, size, color ...). Fruits and vegetables have the highest wastage rates (50%) of any food.¹

However, some retailers propose to consumers in their stores abnormal fruits and vegetables, with a discount of approximately 30% compared to normal fruits and vegetables (Loebnitz et al., 2015). They also communicate, in and outside their stores, on these imperfect products (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017). For instance, the French retailer Intermarché proposes to its consumers the “Inglorious fruits and vegetables”. The Dutch retailer Albert Heijn calls them the “Buitenbeentjes”. For the American Whole Foods, it is the “Misfit fruits and veggies” and for the Canadian retailer Metro, the “Rebels fruits and

vegetables”. A recent survey, conducted in the Province of Québec, indicates that respectively 7.6%, 5.8% and 5.6% of the population of this Province buy suboptimal products at Maxi-Maxi&Cie, IGA and Metro-SuperC retailers.²

Empirical research on suboptimal or abnormal or imperfect or ugly fruits and vegetables is scarce (Loebnitz et al., 2015; de Hooge et al., 2017; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017). Moreover, current works focused on consumers' reactions to abnormally shaped fruits and vegetables when they are confronted to these specific products (generally through the use of pictures and outside a real retail setting). They did not consider the societal advertisements³ elaborated by retailers on imperfect fruits and vegetables.

Consequently, this paper will answer to four main research questions:

- 1) Are retailers legitimate, from the consumers' point of view, to send out societal advertisements (Capelli and Sabadie, 2005; Lapeyre, 2013) on abnormal fruits and vegetables?
- 2) Are these societal advertisements on abnormal fruits and vegetables perceived as credible (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) by consumers and what are consumers' attitude toward them (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986;

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¹ <http://www.fao.org/save-food/resources/keyfindings/en/>.

² Barometer of responsible consumption. Québec Edition 2017.

³ Societal advertisements may be defined as the communication activities in whatever medium, delivering messages about environmental, social or societal commitments of an organization (Benoît-Moreau et al., 2010).

MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989)?

- 3) What are the influence of societal advertisements on abnormal fruits and vegetables on retailers' perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy (Mohr and Webb, 2005; Pivato et al., 2008; Castaldo et al., 2009; Marin et al., 2009; Tian et al., 2011; Herault, 2012; Lombart and Louis, 2014) and perceived price image and are these two images compatible (Labbé-Pinlon et al., 2013; Lombart and Louis, 2014; Lombart et al., 2016)?
- 4) What are the impacts of societal advertisements on abnormal fruits and vegetables on consumers' relationship with retailers (Lapeyre, 2013; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989)?

Because consumers' evaluations and reactions can be specific to an advertisement and a retailer (de Hooge et al., 2017), we integrated in this research three advertisements with different claims and two different retailers. The three claims considered are those generally used by retailers in their marketing campaigns on abnormal fruits and vegetables. One focuses on the contribution of abnormal fruits and vegetables to consumers' health, the other focuses on the good taste of abnormal fruits and vegetables and the last one focuses on their lower prices. The retailers considered are Intermarché and Biocoop. The first one is a classical grocery retailer and the last one is a retailer specialized in organic products. We decided to integrate a retailer specialized in organic products as abnormal fruits and vegetables may be considered by consumers as organic products (Loebnitz et al., 2015). Moreover, from the consumers' point of view, these retailers may differ in their legitimacy to communicate on abnormal fruits and vegetables as well as in their CSR policy and price image.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, we present the theoretical background and the hypotheses development. The methodology used is then described and the results presented. Finally, the limitations of the study are noted and future research avenues are proposed.

2. Theoretical background

Loebnitz et al. (2015) were the first to focus on imperfect fruits and vegetables. They showed that food shape abnormality influences consumers' purchase intentions. Consumers are indeed least likely to buy extreme abnormally shaped fruits and vegetables. However, these authors did not find differences in consumers' purchasing intentions between normal and moderately abnormal fruits and vegetables. In essence, only large deviations in food shape have an impact on purchase decisions, but not small deviations. Consumers perceive the extremely abnormal fruits and vegetables as significantly different, and of less quality, than normally shaped fruits and vegetables, which lower their purchase intentions.

Loebnitz et al. (2015) also indicated that consumers with weak and strong proenvironmental self-identities did not differ in their purchase intentions toward abnormally shaped fruits and vegetables. By contrast, consumers with higher problem awareness are more likely to purchase abnormally shaped fruits and vegetables. Thus, consumers with a strong proenvironmental self-identity must also be aware of food waste issues to motivate their purchases intentions for moderately and extremely abnormal fruits and vegetables.

Recently, de Hooge et al. (2017) showed that if consumers imagine themselves in a supermarket, 25% of them would buy a bent cucumber and only 2.6% an apple with a spot. In the same vein, if they imagine themselves at home, 36.9% of them would consume a bent cucumber and only 21% an apple with a spot. In addition, the apple with a spot was more frequently associated with "to be discarded" in the supermarket condition compared to the home condition. Consequently, consumers needed the highest discount for the apple with a spot before they were willing to buy it. In the home condition, consumers showed a higher probability to throw away the apple with a spot compared to the bent cucumber.

Thus, consumers' preference for suboptimal fruits and vegetables depend on the condition they are in (supermarket vs home condition). Consumers' preference depend also on the type of sub-optimality or the possible deviations in appearance (i.e., shape, color, size ...). If consumers are willing to purchase and consume a product that deviated on the basis of shape (i.e., the cucumber), an appearance deviation in terms of color (i.e., the apple with a spot) is only limitedly accepted.

de Hooge et al. (2017) also indicated that consumers who have a higher commitment to environmental sustainability show a higher preference for suboptimal fruits and vegetables. Moreover, consumers also show a higher tendency to choose suboptimal fruits and vegetables when they have a lower perceived own household food waste and when they find the issue of food waste more important.

Finally, Aschemann-Witzel et al. (2017) pointed out that the imperfect fruits and vegetables did not have and added ethical quality dimension or become more valuable in the perception of consumers due to their contribution to reducing food waste. Moreover, consumers did not want any comprise in their purchases in order to help the retailer avoid wasting food. They only choose the fruits and vegetables which match their requirements. They avoid fruits and vegetables that might lead to food waste in their own household, given they simply do not like wasting food or money. Besides societal concerns, the personal benefit of not wasting money is an important motivator not to over-purchase and overconsume. In addition, consumers avoid the risk of becoming guilty of wastage and thus the negative emotion of self-perception that might come with it.

3. Research model and hypotheses

In this section, the links between the different components of consumers' perceptions of societal advertisements on abnormal fruits and vegetables (the legitimacy of the retailer which advertises (Capelli and Sabadie, 2005; Lapeyre, 2013), the credibility of the message sent through these advertisements (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) and the attitude toward these advertisements (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989)) will be first tackled. Then, the impact of consumers' perceptions of societal advertisements on abnormal fruits and vegetables on consumers' trust in the retailer and their attitude toward this retailer will be discussed (Lapeyre, 2013; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). The influence of perceived CSR policy (Mohr and Webb, 2005; Pivato et al., 2008; Castaldo et al., 2009; Marin et al., 2009; Tian et al., 2011; Herault, 2012; Lombart and Louis, 2014) and perceived price image on consumers' trust in the retailer and their attitude toward this retailer will be addressed (Lombart and Louis, 2014; Lombart et al., 2016). Finally, the links between consumers' trust in the retailer and their attitude toward this retailer will be posited (Lombart and Louis, 2014; Lombart et al., 2016). Fig. 1 offers a synthesis of these paths.

Through this model, this research will show that being perceived by consumers as a responsible retailer with an attractive price image increase consumers' trust in this retailer as well as their attitude toward it. However, in order to reach this end, the retailer has first to engage in

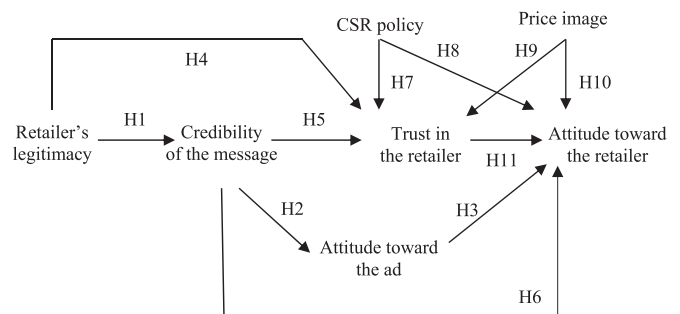


Fig. 1. Research model.

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