

Research Article

# It's not just numbers: Cultural identities influence how nutrition information influences the valuation of foods

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## Abstract

This research examines how cultural mindsets cued by a salient identity can influence how consumers interpret seemingly benign nutrition information in foods. Results show that nutrition information can be incongruent with the cultural norm of food enjoyment distinctively associated with French (and not American) identity. This occurs because of a conflict between the motivation to enjoy foods activated by a salient French identity and the utilitarian nature of nutrition information in foods – that does not belong to a French-culture mindset. Three studies demonstrate that French (and not American) consumers with a salient cultural identity are more sensitive (i.e., perceive as riskier for their health) and evaluate more negatively foods that display (vs. not) nutrition information. Furthermore, this devaluation effect is mediated by anticipated feelings that the foods would not be enjoyable. Providing further evidence for the motivational inconsistency between the culturally-distinctive norm of food enjoyment cued by a salient French-culture mindset, French (and not American) consumers with a salient (vs. not) cultural identity experienced more disfluency when processing nutrition information in foods.

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## Introduction

There is no doubt that food enjoyment is a pillar of the French cultural identity (Pitte, 1991). France is worldwide known for its passion for cooking to such an extent that the French gastronomic meal has been recently declared as a world intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2010). However, as most Western countries, France has established public health plans in order to encourage health-conscious food choices among the French. This emphasis on the healthiness of foods often drives an utilitarian view of eating (Rozin, Remick, & Fischler, 2011). Thus, French consumers are encouraged to place a greater

emphasis on the relationship between their food choices and overall health.

However, there is reason to believe that this focus on the utilitarian aspects of eating may interfere with the hedonistic norms of food consumption associated with the French identity. Indeed, the French start to consider food more as a basic necessity than a pleasure (Hébel, 2008). Borrowing from recent research on identity-based motivation and consumers' readiness to fulfill salient cultural identity goals (Oyserman, 2011; Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009; Torelli, 2013), we argue that these attempts to enforce healthy eating can be perceived by French consumers as something that is utilitarian in nature and hence inconsistent with the Frenchness of food enjoyment. This research focuses on consumers' responses to nutrition information because this is one of the most visible and noticeable aspects of public health plans designed to fight obesity. Indeed, in

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France and most developed countries, most food items display nutrition information (Storcksdieck genannt Bonsmann et al., 2010).

We propose that because enjoying foods, instead of appreciating the utilitarianism of nutrition information, is a central aspect of the French culture, making salient the French identity activates norms of hedonic food consumption and motivates French consumers to focus on the hedonic aspects of foods, rather than on the utilitarian value of their food choices. In this context, the presence of culturally-inconsistent nutrition information can become notably salient and induce a motivational conflict that triggers a sense of disfluency, and its concomitant negative consumer responses (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Torelli, Basu-Monga, & Kaikati, 2012). Importantly, because these effects should be triggered by the cultural mindset cued by a salient French identity, they should not emerge among consumers from cultures in which hedonic food consumption is not distinctively central to the culture (i.e., American culture, Rozin, 2005).

Three studies provide evidence for these assertions. The first two studies demonstrate that French (and not American) consumers with a salient cultural identity are more sensitive to the presence (vs. not) of nutrition information in foods (i.e., perceive the foods as riskier for their health) and evaluate more negatively foods that display (vs. not) nutrition information. Furthermore, these more negative evaluations are mediated by anticipated feelings that the foods would not be enjoyable, triggered by the incompatibility between the nutrition information and the salient cultural mindset. Providing further evidence for this incompatibility between food enjoyment, cued by a salient cultural mindset, and the utilitarian nature of nutrition information, Study 3 shows that French (and not American) consumers with a salient (vs. not) cultural identity experience more disfluency when processing nutrition information in foods. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications for these findings.

### **Cultural identities and the motivation to enjoy food consumption**

Food is an important component of the French cultural identity and probably one of the greatest sources of national pride (Gordon & Meunier, 2001). One particularity of the French is that they tend to overweigh pleasure in their food decisions and to focus more on the enjoyment of their food experiences (Rozin, 2005; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). This cultural specificity is well recognized in non-French cultures. Indeed, studies conducted in America show that brand names pronounced in French are judged to be more congruent with hedonic products than brand names pronounced in English (Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dubé, 1994). Because hedonic food consumption is such a central aspect of French cultural identity, French consumers should be motivated to enjoy food consumption when their French identity is made situationally salient. We make this prediction based on the identity-based motivation framework (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2007), which posits that a salient

identity triggers a motivational pull toward identity-congruent judgments and behaviors. When situations cue an identity (e.g., French identity), the cued identity triggers a general readiness to make sense of the world in identity-congruent terms, including the norms and goals associated with that identity (e.g., consuming foods for pleasure).

Conversely, in the U.S., food choices are not only driven by hedonistic goals but also by utilitarian values (Rozin et al., 2011). Americans tend to worry more about food and to focus more on the health consequences of their food choices (Rozin et al., 1999). Health is also a central tenet of American life (Smith & Wallston, 1992). Americans then have a tendency to view their food choices in a utilitarian way, and medical or nutritional terms appear frequently in food imagery (Fischler & Masson, 2008). Supporting this utilitarian view of eating, Americans tend to overweigh shelf-life when making food choices whereas taste and freshness play a dominant role in France (Rozin, 2005). Thus, situations that heighten the salience of the French identity should distinctively activate a food enjoyment mindset (due to the centrality of food enjoyment in French culture, Oyserman, 2009). In contrast, because a hedonic view of foods is less culturally defining for Americans, situations that heighten the salience of American identity should not readily trigger a food enjoyment mindset. This would have consequences for the reactions of American or French consumers to the presence (vs. not) of nutrition information in foods.

### **The Frenchness of food enjoyment and its incongruity with the utilitarianism of nutrition information**

There is strong evidence that food consumption can be alternatively driven by hedonic (i.e., focus on pleasure) or utilitarian (focus on functional product aspects) values (Khan, Dhar, & Wertenbroch, 2005). Furthermore, in the context of food consumption, hedonistic aspects (i.e., the taste of foods) commonly oppose utilitarian aspects (i.e., nutrition and healthiness of foods) (Verbeke, 2006). Because food enjoyment, rather than a utilitarian view of foods, is central to the French culture, we propose that a salient French identity would activate an identity-relevant food enjoyment mindset. In turn, this will heighten French consumers' sensitivity to the presence (vs. not) of nutrition information in foods that does not belong to the salient cultural mindset, and hence create a motivational conflict that triggers a sense of disfluency (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Torelli et al., 2012). As a result, French consumers with a salient French identity would process less fluently and evaluate less favorably foods that display (vs. not) nutrition information.

We don't expect these effects to emerge among American consumers. Because food enjoyment is less culturally identifying for Americans, a salient American identity is unlikely to spontaneously activate a food enjoyment mindset. Furthermore, because Americans hold both utilitarian and hedonic views of foods, it is unlikely that the presence (vs. not) of nutrition information in foods would create a motivational conflict and its concomitant sense of disfluency. We also anticipate that

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