



Health-related ad information and health motivation effects on product evaluations



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ABSTRACT

This study tests the effect of health-related ad information on perceived product healthfulness and purchase intention. Also, the study investigates whether consumers' health motivation moderates the effects, because of the way health motivation affects processing of health-related information in ads. Three types of health-related ad elements are distinguished: functional claims, process claims and health imagery. These elements were combined in mock ads and an online experiment was run to test the study hypotheses. Results show that health imagery has the largest impact on consumers' product evaluations, while functional claims and process claims have much smaller effects. Health motivation shows significant interaction with process claims on product evaluations.

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1. Introduction

Health in food advertising has become more popular than in the past (Kim, Cheong, & Zheng, 2009; Parker, 2003), and many studies postulate that in many countries the number of advertisements that communicate food healthfulness has increased significantly over the past years (Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Ippolito & Pappalardo, 2002; Kim et al., 2009; Rice & Lu, 1988; Sixsmith & Furnham, 2010; Zwieter, 2009). Such a change in dominant advertising themes can be explained as food industry managers' response to the ever-increasing consumer demands for healthier diets and the swelling public discourse on the importance of healthy eating in the fight against obesity and other dietary-related diseases.

Health communication elements used in food advertisements vary from health-related claims to visual elements. Health- and nutrition-related claims are the most widely discussed practices (Ippolito & Pappalardo, 2002), and extant literature shows that such claims can positively impact consumers' perceptions of a food product's healthfulness (Grunert & Wills, 2007; Kozup, Creyer, & Burton, 2003), even though the opposite effect has been observed as well (Lähteenmäki et al., 2010).

The use of production process claims, such as organic and traditional, is another common practice that may affect consumers' perceptions of food healthfulness due to the strong health associations consumers make to such claims (Baker, Thompson, Engelken, & Huntley, 2004; Guerrero et al., 2010; Makatouni, 2002). Finally, visual imagery, as a powerful tool that communicates an underlying meaning and affects perceptions (Branthwaite, 2002; Scott, 1994) is another practice used in food advertising to convey healthfulness of food products.

This study proposes that the three health communication elements in food advertisements described above constitute three generic ways of communicating healthfulness: functional claims, process claims and health imagery. Fig. 1 presents this categorization. Allegedly these three types of advertising elements affect product evaluations in different ways. Functional claims are manifest statements about the healthfulness of a product; they can therefore affect perceptions of healthfulness directly, which in turn can affect overall product evaluation. Process claims do not address healthfulness directly, but consumers may form beliefs about the healthfulness of the product by inferences based on their own subjective theories about process characteristics. Health imagery does not address healthfulness directly, but it can make health a more salient motive, which in turn can affect overall product evaluation.

The way in which these different types of advertising elements affect product evaluations, including the perception of healthfulness, might depend on characteristics of the receiver. With regard to advertising elements that are meant to convey a product's healthfulness, health motivation might be an important determinant of the processing of ad information (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; Mackenzie & Spreng, 1992). People with a high health motivation may process health-related information more deeply, which may lead to a relatively higher impact of functional claims, whereas people with a low health motivation may process health-related information in a more shallow way, resulting in a relatively higher impact of health-related imagery.

The study investigates the effects that each type of communication element has on product evaluations, focusing on perceived product healthfulness and purchase intention as dependent variables. Earlier work in this field investigates the effect of functional claims on product evaluations (Andrews, Netemeyer, & Burton, 1998; Burton, Andrews, &

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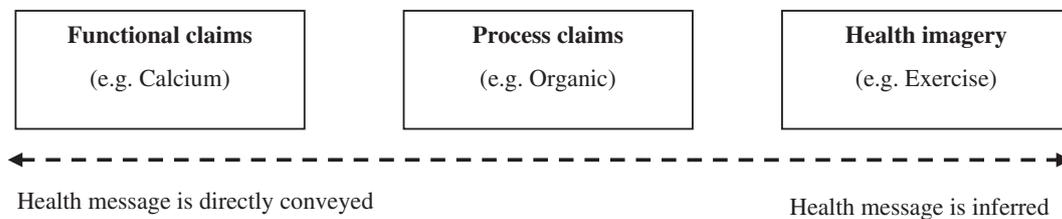


Fig. 1. Conceptual representation of types of communication elements in food advertisements.

Netemeyer, 2000; Keller et al., 1997; Kozup et al., 2003; Roe, Levy, & Derby, 1999), since they are the most manifest attempts to bring about consumer purchase by appealing to the health motive.

Other previous research focuses on the effect of process claims on product evaluations (Bauer, Heinrich, & Schäfer, 2012; van Ittersum, Meulenberg, Van Trijp, & Candel, 2007), and has looked at their effect on a range of dimensions of perceived product quality (e.g. naturalness, authenticity, sustainability, healthfulness). Finally, a few studies exist that focus on the effect of health imagery on product healthfulness. A major limitation of previous research is that each type of health communication element has been studied in isolation only, ignoring the fact that in actual advertisements these co-exist.

This paper builds on this earlier work by looking at the relative effect of the three types of advertising elements and measuring their effects on product evaluation when presented in combination. Furthermore, this paper aims to investigate if consumers' health motivation moderates these effects. Such work should be of major interest both for those interested in communicating the healthfulness of products and for those trying to regulate it, as the singular focus on health claims in many of the existing studies creates the impression that such claims are the major means of communicating healthfulness to consumers, whereas their relative impact actually might be less than the impact of health imagery and process claims.

2. Background and hypotheses

2.1. Health communication elements and product evaluations

The following section describes the communication elements that constitute the proposed conceptual framework of this study and the formulation of hypotheses as regards their impact on product evaluations, focusing on the effects on perceived healthfulness and purchase intention.

Functional claims are statements made on a product asserting the existence or absence of a functional component (e.g. calcium). Such arguments can take the form of either nutrition claims or health claims. According to the European Council Regulation 1924/2006, a nutrition claim is “[...] any claim which states, suggests or implies that a food has particular beneficial nutritional properties”, such as “contains omega-3” and “low in salt”. The same regulation defines a health claim as “[...] any claim that states, suggests or implies that a relationship exists between a food category, a food or one of its constituents and health”, such as “contains omega-3 which enhances the memory function” and “diet low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure”. Although nutrition claims do not directly communicate the health benefits as health claims do, there is evidence that consumers still make inferences similar to health claims in those cases where the nutrient or food ingredient is well-known and carries health associations (Grunert & Wills, 2007; Grunert et al., 2009; Kozup et al., 2003).

Functional claims have an impact on product evaluations (Burton et al., 2000; Kozup et al., 2003; Roe et al., 1999). Roe et al. (1999) find that consumers exposed to a product with nutrition and health claims perceive it as healthier and are more likely to purchase it compared to a similar product without such claims. Similarly, Burton et al. (2000)

show that the use of a specific nutrition ad claim leads to a more favorable brand attitude, attitude toward the ad, and purchase intention than a general nutrition ad claim. Kozup et al. (2003) find that more favorable nutrition claims lead to positive attitudes toward the product and purchase intention than less favorable ones.

H₁. Functional claims positively impact consumers' perceptions of a food product's healthfulness.

H₂. Functional claims positively impact consumers' intention to purchase a food product.

Process claims are arguments about a food product's production process (e.g. organic, natural, and traditional). Process claims can have an effect on product evaluations and purchase intention, and health could be considered as one of the important drivers. This is because consumers often associate process claims with health, and prior literature supports this for organic foods (Baker et al., 2004; Makatouni, 2002; Stanton & Guion, 2010), traditional foods (Guerrero et al., 2010), natural foods (Rozin et al., 2004) and locally produced foods (Roininen, Arvola, & Lähteenmäki, 2006).

Several studies explore the effect of process claims on product evaluations. In the case of organic foods, evidence supports the positive effect of organic claims on the evaluation of a product's healthfulness (Bauer et al., 2012; Orquin, 2011). Furthermore, organic claims influence purchase intention and willingness to pay positively (Bauer et al., 2012; van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). Similarly, in the case of traditional foods, regional indications have a positive impact on attitudes toward the products and further influence consumers' willingness to buy them (van Ittersum et al., 2007). Although the above studies do not measure these effects in an advertising context, similar effects presumably exist when advertisements contain process claims.

H₃. Process claims positively impact consumers' perceptions of a food product's healthfulness.

H₄. Process claims positively impact consumers' intention to purchase a food product.

Health imagery denotes visual elements employed on a product's packaging or advertisement that have an underlying health-related meaning. Visual elements are an important tool for conveying advertising messages and can affect consumers' perceptions about products (Branthwaite, 2002; Scott, 1994). Keller (1987) postulates that the presence of visual cues can have a greater effect on brand attitudes, ad attitudes and purchase intention than the brand name, because they are more effective in activating feelings and prior thoughts from previous ad exposure.

Given consumers' limited resources in information processing and avoidance of information overload, visual cues provide an effective way to infer product attitudes or benefits (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). For example, a kitten in a tissue ad is likely to lead to inferences that the product is soft (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Similarly, a picture of a woman on scales could affect the perceptions of a product as being more healthful.

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