

How Health Claims on Product Packaging Influence Consumer Perceptions and Purchase Decisions

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Abstract

The food industry is facing a new era of consumers who are demanding healthier options. A study conducted by Nielson Global Health and Wellness Foundation, found that 41% of millennials surveyed indicated they would spend more if a product was healthier. However, of participants aged 35 and older, only 26% would consider spending more on health food products (Watson, 2015). This is putting pressure on food marketers to appeal to this new health conscious market to gain an edge over their competitors and has led to an explosion of new products and offerings to attract the attention of these health conscious individuals. Modern day grocery shelves are becoming flooded with foods marketed as “low fat”, “gluten free” and “non GMO”.

Existing research on this topic has focused upon health claim regulations (Gallagher 2010; Elliott 2012; Rutkow, et. al., 2015) , consumer health knowledge (Mackison, Wreiden, and Anderson, 2010; Hirogaki, 2013), and how consumer health concerns change over time (Ippolito and Mathios, 1991; Zank and Kemp, 2012, Garretson and Burton, 2000).

The goal of the present study is to examine consumer perceptions of health and nutrition claims made on food packaging and subsequent impact on purchase decisions.

Undergraduate students were asked to take part in a study which measured their overall health knowledge and nutritional interest. In a 2x2 design, subjects were presented with one of four nutrition bar packages where the product was either a well-known brand name or a generic brand and either a salient health claim was made on the package (i.e. high in fiber) or no claim was made.

The first hypothesis (**H1**) predicts that there will be major differences in the way that male participants and female participants respond to health claims. (**H2**) predicts that consumers who score higher on the Health Consciousness Scale will be less likely

to be influenced by health claims on product packaging. This hypothesis is derived from Hirogaki (2013) study which found that those who were more knowledgeable about health were less likely to trust the health claims made by food marketers. The final hypothesis (**H3**) is that people who score high on the Nutrition Information Interest Scale will be more likely to be influenced by health claims on product packaging. This scale differs from the previous scale in that it measures one's interest in nutrition, as opposed to their health consciousness and knowledge.

Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire. Participants first completed Burns and Jayanti (1998) Health Consciousness Scale. This six question scale measures the degree to which an individual was concerned and knowledgeable about health issues. The next three survey items were a part of a second scale, called Nutrition Information Interest (Burton, Garretson and Velliquette, 1999). This scale differed from the first in that it measured the degree to which someone was concerned about nutrition information.

The next two sections of the questionnaire included attribute and health claim importance scales. This was followed by the experimental manipulation where each subject was randomly presented with one of the four variations of a nutrition bar package described earlier. After viewing the package for thirty seconds, participants were then asked a series of questions about the product they were shown. These questions measured their familiarity with the brand, attitudes toward the product, purchase likelihood and whether or not they trusted health claims.

Findings indicated that both females and those who score highest on a health knowledge scale are more likely to be influenced by packaging claims. On both the Health Consciousness and Nutrition Information Interest scales, females had a higher mean score. Females also rated brand name, nutritional claim, and ingredient level as more important than males. They also tended to favor health claims that promoted a product as being "low calorie", "high in fiber" and "low sugar" (H1)

Respondents who have high levels of health consciousness are more likely to care about the health claims on food products. In particular, they pay the most attention to brand name, nutritional claim, and ingredient label. Those that scored lowest on the Health Consciousness scale, on the other hand, felt that taste was most important.(H2)

Participants who scored highest on the Nutritional Information Interest scale were more likely to rate the importance of nutritional claim and ingredient label as higher than others. The high scorers also tended to value claims such as "low fat", "low calorie" and "high in fiber".(H3)

Implications for marketers and future research directions are further discussed in the body of the paper.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This study provides insight as to how consumers perceive health and nutrition claims made by food companies on their product packaging. This study provides implications for segmentation, targeting and positioning.

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Track: Consumer Behavior