The “Weight” of Product Claims and Vertical Location: Health Goes Up and Taste Goes Down

Alexandra Festila, Aarhus University, Denmark
Polymeros Chrysochou, Aarhus University, Denmark

The present research shows that claims denoting healthy attributes will elicit more favorable consumer evaluations (towards ads, packages and products) when placed at higher locations, whereas claim denoting “unhealthy” attributes (e.g., taste) will elicit more favorable evaluations when placed at lower locations.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024569/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/. 
The “Weight” of Product Claims and Vertical Location: Health Goes up and Taste Goes Down
Alexandra Festila, Aarhus University, Denmark
Polymeros Chrysochou, Aarhus University, Denmark

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Healthy food products are generally perceived to be lower in calories and less filling than unhealthy food products, and the source of such inferences is usually based on specific stereotypes about the product category (Oakes 2005) and the content of food product labels and claims (Gravel et al. 2012).

The perceived lightness or heaviness of foods has further downstream consequences in the design of packages and ads. Recent literature demonstrates that, by visually manipulating the “heaviness” of various package design elements, one can alter consumers’ inferences about the product. For example, a food presented in a heavier container is perceived to be more sating and dense than when presented in a lighter container (Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence 2012). Furthermore, Karnal et al. (2016) shows that a change in the visual weight of colors and typeface affects consumers’ healthfulness perception. Products that are assigned lighter (as opposed to heavier) colors and typeface are perceived as healthier. In a similar fashion, the location of different elements on the package can also influence perceived heaviness/lightness of the product. If the context matches the location - “light” locations for healthy products and “heavy” locations for unhealthy products - consumers’ evaluations are enhanced (Deng and Kahn 2009). As healthy foods (as opposed to unhealthy foods) are perceived to be lighter and lighter objects (as opposed to heavier objects) are associated with a higher vertical location, we propose that descriptors of light and healthy foods will be preferred at the top, whereas descriptors of heavy and unhealthy foods will be preferred at the bottom (H1).

Furthermore, drawing on the notions of semantic match (or congruency) and processing fluency (Schwarz 2004) we next argue that, in a marketing context, a match between the content of the verbal claim (healthy versus unhealthy) and vertical location (top versus bottom) will elicit more positive consumer responses. Following this rationale, we posit that a match (vs. mismatch) between vertical location (top vs. bottom) and the content of the verbal claim (healthy vs. unhealthy) will produce more (vs. less) positive consumer responses (H2).

In Study 1, a classification task was used in which respondents were asked to place five pairs of two words (healthy versus unhealthy) in a top or in a bottom. The pairs of words used were: healthy foods-unhealthy foods, salad-burger, light-heavy, lean-fat, empty-full. Our results provide initial evidence that individuals tend to associate healthy concepts with a top location and unhealthy concepts with a bottom location (H1). Specifically, respondents in this study consistently and more frequently placed at the top words relating to health, supporting the claim that the metaphor of lightness and heaviness of healthy and unhealthy foods manifests in the perceptual vertical space. For an overview of the studies and main results.

Drawing on this initial finding, in Study 2, we investigate whether these effects can be verified in a marketing context by alternating the location (top and bottom) of two food product claims (health and taste) on food packaging. The claims used for this study were “your daily dose of health” and “your daily dose of taste” respectively. The product used was a fictional smoothie brand. Our results suggest that a claim denoting healthy attributes will elicit more favorable evaluations (pack attitude and anticipated product satisfaction) when placed at the top of the package. Conversely, a claim denoting unhealthy attributes (taste) will elicit more favorable evaluations when placed at the bottom of the package (H2).

In Study 3 we test the replicability of these effects in a different marketing context (ads) and with two product categories that vary in their degree of healthfulness – apples and muffins. The claims used for this study were “your healthy choice” and “your tasty choice”. As in Study 2, verbal claims conveying product attributes related to health elicit more positive consumer responses when placed at the top compared to the bottom, whereas verbal claims designating unhealthy food attributes (e.g., taste) elicit more positive consumer responses when placed at the bottom compared to the top. Furthermore, these effects seem to be consistent across food product categories varying in their degree of healthfulness.

As outlined and demonstrated in the first three studies, if the content of the claim describes healthy attributes of food products, it is more effective if located at the top of the package (as opposed to the bottom). Contrary to this, the results from the Study 4, employing a content analysis of food packages, suggest that, in practice, most health-related claims are located at the bottom of the package. This finding highlights the need for more research-driven managerial decision-making. Although at the outset it might seem like an inconsequential design decision, the location of the claims seems to be an important driver of product evaluation and possibly even choice.

The findings of this paper are in line with recent literature demonstrating that, by manipulating the heaviness of various design elements, one can alter consumer inferences such as perceived food satiety, density and healthfulness (Karnal et al. 2016; Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence 2012) and have potential implications both for marketing practitioners (in brand positioning and communication) and for policy makers that try to nudge consumers into making healthier food choices.

REFERENCES:
Gravel, Karine, Eric Doucet, C Peter Herman, Sonia Pomereleau, Anne-Sophie Bourlaud, and Véronique Provencher (2012), ““Healthy,”“ Diet,” or “Hedonic”. How Nutrition Claims Affect Food-Related Perceptions and Intake?,” Appetite, 59 (3), 877-84.