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## **When Is a Salad Not a Salad? the Impact of Product Category on Perceived Nutritional Value**

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The results of four studies demonstrate that when identical food items are presented as members of relatively healthy categories (e.g., salad), compared to less healthy categories (e.g., pasta), they are rated as more nutritious and, as a result, are consumed in greater quantities by nutrition experts. These results are explained by the fact that experts (vs. novices) are more likely to rely on category-based heuristics when evaluating products. This research contributes to the emerging body of literature that examines health halos by showing that product category – which might be provided by simple information such as the product name – can drive consumer perceptions of food items as well as resultant eating behavior.

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# When is a Salad Not a Salad? The Impact of Product Category on Perceived Nutritional Value

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The American marketplace has been inundated with “healthy” alternatives to “unhealthy” foods. For instance, smoothies are positioned as healthy alternatives to milkshakes and salads are suggested as replacements for burgers. While salads and smoothies sound like healthy options, objective nutritional information, such as caloric content and number of fat grams, might indicate that they are not really healthier choices. Yet when we do not have complete access to this information, it is hard to decipher the nutritional difference between a healthy option and its unhealthy counterpart. Instead, we may rely on cues to infer an item’s nutritional value. Under certain conditions, however, using cues to infer the healthiness of food items may lead to increased consumption of unhealthy foods. For example, recent research demonstrated that when a fast-food restaurant claims to serve healthy food (e.g., Subway), consumers are more likely to underestimate the caloric content of main dishes and to choose higher-calorie side dishes, drinks, or desserts compared to when no such claims are made (e.g., McDonald’s; Chandon and Wansink 2007). Essentially, the healthy claim associated with the restaurant creates a “health halo,” such that all restaurant items are perceived as healthy, irrespective of their objective nutritional content.

In the present research, we demonstrate that the product category associated with a food item provides another cue that consumers use to infer the healthiness of the item. For instance, imagine that you are ordering dinner from a restaurant menu that presents the items under different category titles (e.g., pastas and salads). Our results suggest that you will perceive a food item that is presented in a relatively healthier food category (e.g., salad) to be healthier than a food item with identical ingredients that is presented in a relatively less healthy food category (e.g., pasta). Moreover, we show that these effects are more likely to be demonstrated by those who are more knowledgeable about nutrition (i.e., experts) because they are more likely to rely on category-based heuristics to form inferences about products (Sujan 1985; Sujan and Dekleva 1987). In four studies, we demonstrate that product category information may bias experts’ perceptions of the nutritional value of food items, such that food items that belong to relatively healthy categories are perceived to be more nutritious than those that belong to less healthy categories. These perceptions of nutritional value, in turn, impact consumption behavior.

In the first two studies, participants were presented with a dish containing identical ingredients, but with different product category assignment as communicated by the item name (i.e., salad vs. pasta or veggie links vs. sausage links). They then evaluated the item’s healthiness and nutritional value and responded to items assessing nutrition expertise. As expected, the results showed that while novices showed no difference in their nutrition perceptions of the items, experts perceived the items assigned to healthier categories (i.e., salad and veggie links) to be significantly healthier than the items assigned to less healthy categories (i.e., pasta and sausage links).

In the third study we sought to investigate the proposed categorization process underlying the effects observed in the prior studies. To do so, we manipulated the processing approach of study participants. After providing participants with the same pasta-salad pair used in study 1, half of the participants engaged in an effortful, piecemeal process by estimating the healthiness of each ingredient

of the food item before evaluating its overall healthiness. The remaining participants engaged in a holistic, categorization process by estimating the healthiness of each ingredient after they evaluated the overall healthiness of the food item. In line with the categorization explanation, the results show that when individuals first estimated healthiness of each ingredient (i.e., piecemeal process), neither novices nor experts perceived any significant difference between the healthiness of the two items. On the other hand, experts—but not novices—considered the salad to be healthier than pasta when they evaluated perceived healthiness of the item before its ingredients (i.e., categorization process).

In our final study, we explored the impact of food category assignment on various product inferences as well as consumption quantity. We provided participants of this study with a sample of an actual confectionary product identified as either “Candy Chews” or “Fruit Chews” and measured perceptions of nutritional value, attitude towards, and purchase likelihood of the item, as well as the amount of the product consumed. As in prior studies, when the category name was associated with healthfulness (i.e., Fruit Chews), experts perceived the item to be healthier. They also expressed more positive attitudes towards and showed stronger intentions to purchase the item. Importantly, these inferences translated into behavior; nutrition experts consumed greater quantities of the item when it was positioned as a member of a relatively healthy category. Novices, on the other hand, did not demonstrate these category-based inferences nor was their consumption influenced by the category manipulation.

Together, these findings demonstrate that perceptions of the nutritional value of food items with identical ingredients can differ depending on the food category in which they are presented. For experts, food items that belong to relatively healthy categories are assumed to be more nutritious, are liked more, and are more likely to be purchased than items with identical ingredients that belong to less healthy categories. In turn, these items are likely to be consumed in greater quantities. Novices, on the other hand, are far less likely to rely on category-based heuristics. Ironically, this suggests that the knowledge that was acquired to make informed decisions may accentuate the impact of health halos created by food categories. These findings contribute to the emerging body of literature that examines cues that consumers utilize to infer unknown information about food items (e.g., Chandon and Wansink 2007) by showing that product category information—which might simply be provided by the item’s name—can drive health perceptions of food items and resulting consumption behavior.

## REFERENCES

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