How “Healthy Eating” Packaging Cues Affect Purchasing and Consumption Behavior

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Consumers are susceptible to the influences of external cues when making consumption quantity decisions. This research shows that verbal and visual “healthy eating” packaging cues interact to affect consumers’ in-store purchasing and at-home consumption decisions, when they are mindless as well as when they are mindful.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Research has consistently shown that consumers oftentimes use external cues to make consumption volume decisions (Chandon and Wansink 2007; Scott, Nowlis, Mandel, and Morales 2008; Vale, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2008; Wansink and Chandon 2006). According to Brian Wansink (http://mindlesseating.org/faq.php), “Most of us don’t overt act because we’re hungry. We overeat because of family and friends, packages and plates, names and numbers, labels and lights, colors and candles, shapes and smells, distractions and distances, cupboards and containers.” As the obesity crisis escalates that currently 34% of adults and 17% of children are obese (Belluck 2010), marketers and researchers have been studying the effects of external cues on consumption rates and how cues can be used to control or prevent overeating.

In this research, we focus on the effects of “healthy eating” packaging cues, more specifically verbal nutrition claims and visual product images featured on the package, on consumers’ purchasing and consumption decisions. Across four studies we address several important questions. First, how do packaging cues affect consumers’ in-store purchasing and at-home consumption decisions? Second, do verbal and visual cues interact? Third, can packaging cues affect consumers when they are mindless as well as when they are mindful? Our research reports four important findings. First, in the store, verbal claims can interact with visual cues to affect purchase intentions, but only if the verbal claims are ambiguous. Second, this interaction between ambiguous verbal cues and visual cues only occurs when consumers are mindful. When they are mindless, an independent effect of visual cues is observed. Third, packaging cues influence consumers differently in the store environment from the way they influence consumers at home. Once the package is purchased and taken out of the store, consumers process information more heuristically and there is no interaction between verbal and visual cues even in a mindful state. When making consumption decisions (rather than forming intentions), when consumers are mindful they are influenced only by verbal cues, and when mindless they are only influenced by visual cues. Finally, we find evidence of a boomerang effect that visual cues that indicate “perceived lightness” of a healthy product in store and thus increase purchase and consumption likelihoods for those healthy products which is a socially responsible behavior, backfire in consumption occasions at home by causing consumers to eat more, which is an unhealthy practice.

Our findings contribute to the literature on packaging. Previous research has shown that packaging cues can both influence purchase intentions and later consumption evaluations, when the product experience is ambiguous. For example, Levin and Gaeth (1988) showed that product packaging (identifying ground beef as 75% lean or 25% fat) could affect evaluations towards the product, and even have effects on perceived tastiness of the beef, although the latter effects were somewhat mitigated by tasting the food. We add to this literature by showing that packaging effects can not only frame purchase intentions and consumption evaluations, but can also affect consumption quantities.

Like the previous research, we show that packaging effects are stronger for ambiguous cues (in our case, ambiguous verbal cues). We however add another moderator: whether the consumer is mindful or not is important in predicting the effects. And unlike most of this previous research, we find boomerang effects rather than consistent evaluations between purchase and consumption occasions. In that regard, our findings are more similar to those described by Vale, Pieters and Zeelenberg (2008) and Wansink and Chandon (2006) who showed that small package formats and low-fat nutrition labels can “backfire” as consumers no longer feel the need to regulate their own behavior. However, our results differ from these more recent studies in that we find these effects not only with nutritional labeling that is evaluated mindfully, but rather also through visual cues that are evaluated mindlessly. Our findings therefore also contribute to the literature on mindless eating by introducing a new marketing cue that influences this type of behavior. We find that when consumers are eating mindlessly, the location of the product image on the package can affect how much consumers eat.

REFERENCES


