Nutrition Information As Cultural Contaminant

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We predict and found that hedonistic cultures (e.g., French) perceive nutrition information as a cultural contaminant because it is associated with utilitarian symbols. Three experiments conducted in France, which places strong emphasis on the pleasure of eating, examine the cognitive and evaluative consequences of feelings of cultural contamination.

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It's not Just Numbers: Nutrition Information as Cultural Contaminant
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

France is worldwide known all over the world for its passion for cooking to such an extent that the French gastronomic meal has been recently declared as a world intangible heritage (UNESCO 2010). However, despite its world renowned reputation, the French food model suffers from relative isolation. The hedonistic approach to food is far to be shared by all cultures. For example, in the United States, food choices are mainly driven by utilitarian concerns in which health holds a central place (Rozin, Remick, and Fischler 2011). Based on this utilitarianistic view of eating, many Western countries have established public health plans in order to increase health-conscious food choices. France does not escape this process of food utilitarianization. By introducing the National Nutrition and Health Program in 2001, the French ministry of health hoped to improve the health of the French population. Thus, French consumers are encouraged to place a greater emphasis on the relationship between their food choices and overall health. There is reason to believe that this focus on the utilitarian aspects of eating may decrease the French cultural enthusiasm for food. For instance, the French start to consider food more as a basic necessity than a pleasure (Hébel 2008). Borrowing from recent research on the social psychology of globalization and on the effects of cultural mixing (Morris, Mok, and Mor 2011; Torelli et al. 2011), we argue that these attempts to enforce healthy eating can be perceived by French consumers as something that is both foreign to their culture and symbolic of utilitarian values that are inconsistent with the Frenchness of food enjoyment. In this research, we focused on the case of nutrition information because this is one of the most visible and noticeable aspects of public health plans designed to fight obesity. Indeed, in France, most food items display nutrition information (Storcksdieck et al. 2010).

Thus, because food enjoyment is a central aspect of French culture, providing nutrition information in food could induce feelings of cultural contamination and its concomitant negative reactions (Chiu et al. 2011; Torelli and Ahluwalia 2012; Torelli et al. 2011). As a result, we believe that the exposure to nutrition information when French identity is made salient will enhance the perception that it is associated with values impervious to the in-group (i.e., utilitarian values). The current research is based on the assumption that nutrition information in foods is perceived as a cultural contaminant, or as an attempt to add something foreign to a cultural symbol. We report three studies that investigate the evaluative and cognitive consequences among French consumers of presenting nutrition information in foods upon making French cultural identity salient (vs. not).

Study 1 examined the influence of making French identity salience (vs. not) on processing fluency. This prediction is consistent with past research, which suggests that exposure to bicultural products (i.e., those that are culturally incongruent or that juxtapose symbols of contrastive cultural traditions) increases processing difficulty (Torelli and Ahluwalia 2012). Identity salience was manipulated by asking 218 French undergraduates to list three reasons someone might prefer to live in France or to study at their college. Following the cultural identity salience manipulation, participants were asked to assess the nutrition labeling of either a healthy version or an unhealthy version of a ready-made meal. As predicted, in the French identity condition, participants rated nutrition information as more difficult to process than those in the college identity condition. A moderator mediation analysis indicated that feelings of processing difficulty mediated the relationship between cultural identity salience and perceived healthiness when the food item was framed as unhealthy but not when the food item was framed as healthy.

Study 2 proposed that French consumers will assess food items containing French primes as less healthy than food items containing neutral primes when nutrition information is provided. We expect that simultaneous exposure to nutrition information and iconic symbols makes accessible the stereotype that French food is unhealthy (Lee, Kim, and Vohs 2011) and, consequently, increases risk perceptions. 138 French adults participated in an online experiment. We primed cultural identity by exposing the participants to a food item that contained either French identity primes or neutral primes. Additionally, nutrition information or general information about how to preserve the product properly was shown to participants. Participants exposed to French primes reported higher risk perceptions in the presence of nutrition information than those exposed to neutral primes. Thus, cultural contamination induced by nutrition information exposure triggered defensive mechanisms that drive participants to devaluate the healthiness of culturally iconic food items.

Study 3 aimed to further demonstrate the negative reactions induced by cultural contamination by extending it to product evaluations. A sample of French adults (N=165) recruited from an online consumer panel completed the questions designed to make the French identity salient. In order to check that product actual healthiness does not moderate cultural contamination effects, two food items were tested (a virtue and a vice). Feelings of cultural contamination were induced by providing or not nutrition information to participants. Findings showed that belonging to the vice or virtue category did not influence participants’ responses to cultural contamination. However, a direct effect of nutrition information on product evaluations emerged. Further analysis revealed that the decrease in evaluations of products was due to a reduction of anticipated pleasure and perceived Frenchness.

This article examines how culturally incompatible marketplace cues influence cognitive and evaluative processes. More specifically, we have found that nutrition information, which is usually treated as a neutral stimulus in the marketing literature, is perceived as a cultural contaminant by French consumers. The reason is that nutrition information symbolizes a food model (utilitarianistic) antagonistic to the French one (hedonistic). Our results support the findings that apparently innocuous global standards in nutrition information is perceived as cultural contaminants and that these feelings of cultural contamination lead to meta-cognitive experience of disfluency and exclusionary responses (i.e., product derogation).

REFERENCES