

Literature Review:

Consumer Perceptions of Product Branding Across the Health Foods Sector

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Introduction

The jobs of marketing professionals and advertisers would be next to non-existent if they were not accompanied by the comprehension of why people want to buy specific products. Knowing and understanding what motivates consumers to select certain brands over others is important in deciding how to market products and in determining which tactics will make them sell. With the continuing rise of social media platforms, the advertising industry has had to adapt and learn to use new channels of outreach and presentation, such as social media influencers, to their advantage. Furthermore, advertising is pervasive in mass media today, such as in TV shows, movies, etc. and companies need to take this new norm into consideration to ensure exposure of their products to a large audience. This study examines labels, packaging, and unique product positioning and exposure, as well as the differences in how consumers perceive brands that are promoted by social media influencers versus those promoted by, or created by, celebrities. Additionally, the connections and associations between attractive brand packaging and a food product's perceived healthiness will be explored, along with further discussions around how emotive factors, cognitive behavior, and credibility affect consumer perceptions of health food brands.

Forms of Exposure

Virtual Brand Communities

When looking into the effects of agenda setting, the topic is typically linked with news media and how certain people, brands, etc. are portrayed in order to generate a sense of resonance in the minds of a target audience. Ragas and Roberts (2009) discuss a more relevant group of people in today's society, one that has equal importance to the idea of an "audience," labeling them virtual brand communities. Past research on agenda setting often revolves around

the concept of community as traditionally defined as a geographically-based construct. However, when it comes to virtual brand communities, geographics are not relevant, as such a group of people forms around a specific brand, rather than a particular place (Ragas & Roberts, 2009). This newer concept of virtual brand communities is highly relevant when discussing agenda setting, as virtual communities are the ones that often decide what is important to talk about online and which brands consumers are supporting. Marketing teams understand that they need to be aiming their products towards these virtual communities as they are likely to benefit from shaping the agenda of their existing brand within this virtual brand community, rather than trying to encourage their followers to share their brand agenda with others (Ragas & Roberts, 2009).

Message Framing

Wu et al. (2012) discuss the common advertising strategy of message framing and compare positively framed messages with negatively framed ones. Framing is the way in which a topic, brand, etc. is communicated to an audience, often affecting their perception of the idea or persuading them to think one way or another. Their article examines positively and negatively framed messages when marketing dietary supplements and their outcomes. This text is highly relevant to the discussion of health foods as the authors point out the idea of health as a trend, stating that many people today are “interested in adopting a healthy lifestyle and consuming healthy foods is one way to achieve this” (Wu et al., 2012). With health being used as a strategy for promoting dietary supplements, we can examine how message framing has an impact on consumers and whether positive or negative messages are more effective. Wu et al. (2012) describe positive framing messages as placing emphasis on the gains that come from purchasing/using a product, while negative framing messages would emphasize the losses that result from not purchasing the product, as a way to promote fear within consumers. Ultimately,

the authors find that, in general, positively framed messages are more effective than negatively framed ones, *unless* the effect of potential losses is stronger than that of potential gains (Wu et al., 2012). This demonstrates the importance of framing in advertising and can be clearly connected to how products are best promoted across available platforms.

Labels and Packaging

Although conventional marketing frames are typically more explicit than simple changes in labels, Roh and Niederdeppe (2016) state that framing in its simplest form, can involve only the use of alternative labels or word choices to describe a concept or issue. Issue framing with alternative labels, as these authors describe, “is communicated in a way that provokes a certain definition and/or way of thinking among an audience at the expense of alternative considerations that could have otherwise been evoked” (Roh & Niederdeppe, 2016). To expand on this idea, the authors go on to include how a word (frame) is associated with an image in the minds of consumers, representing an accessible concept. For example, in their study, Roh and Niederdeppe (2016) find that when presenting two frames for the same product, the words used in the frames typically bring about different conceptual associations for the participants. These two frames in this instance are “soda” and “sugar-sweetened beverages.” Although the authors find that the two frames do not provoke different levels of perceived healthiness in the minds of the subjects in this study, they did find that more brand-related thoughts prevailed when asked about “soda” than for “sugar-sweetened beverages.” To reiterate, the mention of “soda” brought about more ideas of specific company brands (e.g., Coke, Pepsi, Sprite, Dr. Pepper, etc.) from the subject’s minds, compared to the ideas that the subjects provided when asked about “sugar-sweetened beverages” (Roh & Niederdeppe, 2016). These results suggest that consumers are driven more by cultural conditioning and contextual factors that form concepts of food and

beverage choices rather than by the particular information associated with the product itself through its marketing and presentation. In this respect, Roh and Niederdeppe, (2016) recognize different cognitive concepts that are at work in public discourse regarding different frame choices. The focus on cognitive conceptualizations of the healthiness of frame choices is important because even the smallest adjustments in marketing and advertising strategies can have an effect on consumers and can impact their product purchasing decisions.

Taking this research further, Kunz et al. (2020) find associations between food packaging design and consumer perceptions of healthiness, as well as tastiness. The researchers find that past studies have shown attractive package design affects both taste expectations and healthiness perceptions, which proves to be important because “whether a food product is healthy and whether it tastes good are among the most important criteria for consumers when deciding about what to eat” (Kunz et al., 2020). Flavor however is not the only factor. Along with labels, color has also proven to be a highly relevant visual cue for consumers, as different hues in packaging and presentation inspire consumers to make different inferences about both the health and taste attributes of food. The researchers believe that this is because colors in product packaging often convey meaning to consumers and stimulate immediate impressions that link to cognitive processing (Kunz et al., 2020). For example, evidence has shown that products are perceived to be healthier when calorie labels are displayed in green rather than in red or white because consumers tend to associate the color green with healthier products. Research has also indicated that colors of food packaging and presentation have a direct impact on the appetite level of consumers (Schlintl & Schienle, 2020). Furthermore, there is a plethora of research demonstrating that people tend to match certain colors with the basic tastes, and that color helps people to correctly identify a food or drink's flavor (Kunz et al., 2020).

This factor of color in food presentation can also help consumers to identify the freshness of foods (Kunz et al., 2020). For example, consumers can look at an apple's color and tell at first glance whether it is ripe or not. Given that ripe apples are understood to taste sweeter than unripe fruit and to be optimally fresh without being over-ripe, we therefore associate the food product to be both healthier and tastier. This is a relevant example to consider because it shows how these same cognitive processes are used when deciding whether or not to purchase brand products. Kunz et al. (2020) state that peoples' first visual impressions of a product's package may determine whether or not they decide to purchase it; furthermore, colors have the potential to immediately evoke emotion and active associations, causing color to be one of the main aspects affecting consumers' purchase intentions.

Product Placement

When a brand is associated with something that consumers find enjoyable, the consumers are more likely to have a positive association with that brand. Many companies will try to utilize product placement in major motion pictures and/or TV series that are likely to be popular, in order to gain exposure and promote their brand. Cha (2016) points out that prior research has found product placements to occur most frequently in comedy films as opposed to any other genres. This is because comedies usually provoke emotions of happiness and enjoyment. When associating a brand with a comedy movie, consumers are more likely to associate those positive emotions with the featured product. On the other hand, many advertisers are reluctant to promote their products within violent, horror, or R-Rated movies that may depict the brand in a negative way out of concern for how any potential negative associations may transfer to audiences (Cha, 2016). This factor is important to note as it reinforces the capacity for emotional response and consumer behavior correlations to determine food product choices.

Park & Berger (2010) expand on this idea with the statement that moviegoers leave the theater with two things in mind: the entertainment they have experienced and the subconscious brand awareness stimulated by the film's product placements. These researchers then go on to explain how the strong and enduring emotions and moods that these films deliver, relate to the way in which we make purchasing decisions in everyday life. For example, Park & Berger (2010) discuss product placement dating back to as early as the 1920s where leading actors and actresses would be seen smoking cigarettes from specific tobacco companies. As a further example of the transfer of product placement from entertainment to the real life context, Ray-Ban sunglasses were featured in the 1997 film, *Men in Black*, which in turn, boosted sales of Ray-Ban products. Looking more specifically at food related placement, Reese's Pieces were a highlight in the hit film, *E.T.* (1982) (Park & Berger, 2010). These examples indicate how product placement is shown throughout box office films and the effects that they have on consumers. If audiences come out of a film with a positive attitude, they are more likely to have a positive attitude of any products associated with that film title, and even more importantly, if they are fans of the actors or actresses who feature in the film, they will likely want to indulge in the same products which those celebrities consume or use.

Effects and Hypotheses

The "Halo Effect"

Many researchers (Flynn et al., 2020; Paek et al., 2011; Sundar, 2021) have discussed the "halo effect" and its impact on consumers in the realm of advertising. The "halo effect" is defined as a cognitive bias that uses positive impressions of people, brands, and products to positively influence our feelings in another area. Flynn et al. (2020), discuss why this happens in relation to human memory, stating that when information is presented to an individual from an

external source, our memory is prompted to search for similar knowledge structures that are relevant to that content. When associating this effect to food branding, it is often seen among health foods where advertising makes careful word associations. An example of this effect in advertising often happens when a brand suggests that their product is high in protein; this claim is likely to activate other health-related claims information in the memory, such as “low-carb,” “low-sugar,” or “healthy” in general, even though the relative claims do not always remain true (Flynn et al., 2020).

Flynn et al. (2020) further discuss claims used in advertising mediums of food and beverage brands and how they are associated with consumers. These authors begin by explaining the three main claims used in advertising, allowing for a greater understanding of future discussions surrounding effects and hypotheses that relate to advertising implementations. The first type of claims that are discussed are health-related claims which are used as a strategy to focus the consumers’ attention on the benefits of that product (Flynn et al., 2020). This means that product statements typically take the form of a health appeal using phrases such as “organic” and “all-natural.” The second claim that is focused on has to do with the emphasis on specific ingredients, highlighting amounts of “good” ingredients in products versus “bad.” An example of some of these claims include statements like “good source of fiber,” “low fat,” or “30% less sugar” to create comparative aspects between products (Paek et al., 2011). Finally, the most common, and most favored type of claim used in advertising is the consumer claim. These kinds of claims highlight certain aspects of a product such as taste, quality, or price; or even consumer benefits from the product, such as positive emotional or social outcomes.

With these claims, we come to the “halo effect” which is touched upon in both this article, as well as in a 2021 research article by Sundar et al. (2021). The authors discuss how the

“halo effect” can cause changes in consumer purchasing habits based on food and beverage labels. To explain this concept, the authors first present the idea that when foods are labeled as being natural, this creates a positive health halo, causing consumers to make further assumptions about the product. For example, when food is labeled as “organic,” consumers tend to automatically believe that that product has fewer calories than non-organic products (Sundar et al., 2021). With this said, advertising teams will often use this information to their advantage, knowing that certain phrases make a product seem healthier and more beneficial to the consumer, which is usually what people want.

The consumer preference for healthier foods has witnessed an increasing trend among both adults and adolescents since the early 2000s. Previous research shows that when food products are promoted as being healthy, adult consumers often change their whole product beliefs, generating a more positive attitude toward the product, and therefore, purchasing the product more regularly (Adams & Geuens, 2007). Advertisers are aware of the health consciousness trend in society today, and are therefore very particular in the way that they choose to market their products, as healthier has proven to meet the wants and needs of today's consumers.

Naturalness Hypothesis

A similar concept to the “halo effect” is the naturalness hypothesis which explains why people exhibit strong associations between prettiness and naturalness and between naturalness and healthiness (Hagen, 2020). In marketing and advertising, professionals will frequently style their food and beverage products to look more pretty, knowing that their consumers will likely associate such products with being healthier. Additionally, pretty aesthetics tend to prompt more favorable evaluations than others. This can be seen in the example that Hagen (2020) discusses

regarding the association between healthiness and sophistication. As a society, we often associate “upper class” citizens with being more sophisticated and having a more pleasing aesthetic lifestyle. Hagen goes on to explain how mass media portrays success as tantamount to being slim and fit, as well as expensive foods being perceived to be healthier. This phenomenon shows how humans subconsciously associate one aspect of their lives with those of others and how they aspire to live a certain way depending on what is depicted in the media and online.

In this respect, Zhang (2015) makes an apt comparison between pretty foods and consumer likability that can help give this association further credibility. He says that “Food and its symbolic representation can be used to communicate ideas, values, identities, and attitudes” (Mennell, 1996). Although this is not directly translatable to marketing and advertising of products, it indicates the importance of how food and beverages are represented and perceived by consumers, and can therefore translate to how advertisers choose to market their food and beverage products.

To round off this idea of brand representation, Chrysochou (2010) makes strong points surrounding consumer perceptions that are important to include. He discusses messages used by health brands and how they often try to promote aspects of products that can contribute to enhanced lifestyle values while tapping into consumers’ desires to optimize their personal health. This relates back to claims of consumer benefits which brands will commonly use when targeting their advertising towards the idea that their healthy products will give the consumer the opportunity to achieve weight loss, muscle strength, etc. To understand this phenomenon further, it is important to consider where these advertisements are being placed and by whom.

Influencing

Social Media Influencers

In today's society, social media plays a significant role in the promotion of food brand products. Many connections can be made between social media influencers (SMIs) and the reasons for their engagement. The world of social media today has given substantial momentum to influencers. Advertising no longer relies solely on print or radio advertisements, as such channels are no longer considered primary sources of information; Instead, marketing teams target people on the internet using popular spokespersons to engage an audience. SMIs are "individuals who have accumulated a significant following online through the creative narration of their personal lifestyles, engagement with their audience and monetisation of their digital content through sponsored collaborations with brands" (Abidin, 2015).

Drew et al. (2022) take a deeper look into the motives of SMIs, specifically on Instagram, when producing food related content. The authors point out that previous marketing professionals have recognised Instagram as being the optimum channel for SMIs. This is because the platform focuses on visual aesthetics which makes it an appropriate and ideal platform to promote products, brands, and lifestyles. With that being said, further connections can be explored between the aesthetic of the platform with the aesthetic of the influencer, as well as the aesthetic of the product itself. Knowing that the "halo effect" causes consumers to believe that prettier packaging means a healthier product, we can begin to consider whether or not similar connections can be made between more physically attractive influencers and the credibility of those influencers.

Saima & Khan (2021) first touch on the relationship between influencer expertise and credibility. Through their studies, it was found that influencer's expertise was insignificant in affecting the influencer's credibility. This is important to note because it represents the function

of influencers today; consumers are not looking for true knowledge on the brand being promoted, but are more interested in the influencer themselves and the desire to relate to them.

Past research can be applied to today's influencers based on findings of two studied models: the source-credibility model and the source-attractiveness model (Joseph, 1982). In this article, Joseph supplies significant evidence in regards to physically attractive communicators' impact on product opinion change. This research found that more attractive communicators (representing influencers in the media today) are consistently more liked by consumers and have a positive impact on the products with which they are associated. Though this research is not directly associated with influencers on social media currently, it can be applied to this concept as the advertising industry still follows a similar structure despite the time frame.

Social Context

The idea of social context can help to further explain how different aspects of marketing have evolved in significant ways over time. Maldoy et al. (2021) discusses the idea that the pleasure induced in images portraying healthy food may depend on the social context in which the food is eaten. From this premise, Maldoy goes on to imply that eating together with others induces more pleasure than eating alone. To help better understand this concept, Maldoy et al. (2021) uses the example of a social context when drinking coffee or beer. When trying these beverages for the first time, people often do not love the particular taste. However, most people develop a liking for these drinks as time goes on, which may be explained by the human desire to belong, and our need to affiliate with others; Because of this, we tend to adopt or reject the behaviors of others depending on how much we want to associate with them (Maldoy et al., 2021). These specific findings are perhaps why consumers associate their liking of certain food brands with their level of identification with the influencer promoting the products in question.

Maldoy's example displays why consumers may feel the same sense of sharing with the influencer promoting a food brand as they do when they are in social settings.

This interaction between the consumer and SMI can also be labeled as a parasocial relationship, especially if the consumer has had multiple interactions with the influencer. Parasocial relationships are typically described as a two-way connection that forms through interactions with media characters. In this case, the "character" is our influencer and the two-sided interaction exists between them and their consumers, based on impressions such as liking, commenting, or sharing a post (Breves et al., 2021). Breves et al. (2021) go on to explain that parasocial relationships are very similar to real social relationships and are often established and strengthened over time with multiple social media interactions. This relates to the previous discussion of credibility of influencers as consumers will find them more credible the longer and stronger their relationship is with them.

Celebrity Endorsements

Kennedy et al. (2021) analyze the role of celebrities as spokespersons for brands and the extent to which consumers perceive these celebrities to be authentic. The authors begin by stating that perceived celebrity authenticity depends on whether or not the celebrity behaves in a manner that is consistent with their true selves. With this statement in mind, the authors are able to then compare celebrity endorsements with celebrity brands. When a celebrity creates their own brand, they are creating products that are a representation or projection of their true selves and own desires (Kennedy et al., 2021); thus, consumers perceive the celebrity and the brand as being authentic. Brands use celebrity endorsers to enhance their product's position in the marketplace through the celebrity's status and through positive associations that are typically attached to their personalities (Kennedy et al., 2021).

In contrast, when celebrities endorse one brand, but are then seen in public supporting a competing brand, consumers view them and the brand as being less authentic and less trustworthy. For example, David Beckham was an endorser for Motorola but was photographed using an Apple iPhone (Kennedy et al., 2021). This causes consumers to view both David Beckham and Motorola as less trustworthy and inauthentic. In comparison, celebrities who found their own brands are considered to be more authentic. An example of a celebrity brand is Katy Perry Collections. This brand was created by Katy Perry herself, and she has even integrated her own name onto the physical products that are sold by her brand (Kennedy et al., 2021). This is a strategic marketing tactic because Perry's fans and followers will want to own products that align with their role model's ideals and true self.

Wu et al. (2012) examine how it is possible to differentiate between expert and celebrity endorsers within marketing and advertising. These authors first distinguish between the two kinds of endorsers, explaining that celebrity endorsers are individuals who are well known to the public as they promote a product, whereas expert endorsers are individuals who have significant knowledge about a specific product or topic. These differences are important to note because when it comes to aspects such as trustworthiness, persuasiveness, and likability, celebrity endorsers seem to have a significant advantage over consumers (Wu et al., 2012). Our trust in celebrity endorsers likely derives from the fact that these individuals have previously established a name for themselves. With this sense of popularity, consumers are more likely to find likability in the celebrity endorsers than they do in the expert endorser because as Wu et al. (2012) imply, consumers are more interested in likeability, further associated with trust, than they are in straight knowledge from a spokesperson whom they are unfamiliar with. Through their studies,

Wu et al. (2012) find that dietary supplement advertisements using a celebrity are in fact more believable to consumers than the same advertisements that feature an expert endorser.

Conclusion

Throughout the numerous studies examined in this text, it can be concluded that there are definite impacts on consumers based on how a product is marketed and advertised. One of the most prominent takeaways are the associations between attractiveness, credibility, and healthiness. This concept of healthiness works as a factor not only in product labeling and packaging, but also is determined by whom the product is being advertised by, including social media influencers and celebrities. Moreover, celebrity endorsement versus celebrity brand yield significant differences in consumer perceptions, given that in that celebrity endorsement may sometimes feel inauthentic to consumers, whereas celebrity brands are perceived as being authentic, because they are created to show the celebrity's true self and values. As demonstrated, there are various connections and associations that are presented in the marketing and advertising business. These relationships can surely be explored further as these findings only begin to scratch the surface in understanding the consumer perception of brand products and how well-known individuals are being utilized to promote them.

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