

How “good” claims can evoke “bad” impressions

12 November 2012

Ethical and environmental issues have become an important aspect to consider in the research area of consumer food choice. Ethical claims such as organic do not always evoke a positive impression in consumers. In a recent study conducted by researchers at the Cornell University and the University of Michigan, a total of 371 test persons were surveyed on their perceptions of food products with and without an organic claim. The authors conclude that whether ethical claims are perceived as "good" or "bad" is highly dependent on personal values and the context of the product, even if consumers show a high interest in environmental issues.

The computer-assisted questionnaires were conducted at Midwestern universities. The study was split into two parts. The first part included 215 students and aimed at the perception of healthfulness and taste quality of organic compared to conventional food. The second study included 156 students and analysed further the relationship between pro-environmental attitude and negative perception of organic food. For this part, a news article was used describing an organic formula drink for malnourished children in Africa – high in calories and added nutrients. For all participants, the level of environmental concern was measured.

The key findings from this study are that organic food was perceived significantly more healthful but significantly less tasty compared to conventional food. The perceived taste quality was weaker the lower the environmental concern was. Pro-environmental consumers judged an organic product as more negative than a conventional one if it did not hold the positive co-features they expected from an organic product. It was perceived significantly less effective when it was described as organic rather than conventional.

Consumer studies have shown that a single positive attribute of a food can lead to a positive evaluation of other features, even if those are not necessarily positive. This is known as the so-called “halo effect”. The present study analysed whether this effect takes place when consumers evaluate ethical claims on food products. In contrast to previous research, the authors are able to show that perception is strongly influenced by its context. In the present study, pro-environmental participants evaluated the formula drink that was high in calories and enriched with essential nutrients as less effective when labelled organic compared to carrying a conventional label. A possible explanation lies in the features that are often associated with organic products, such as "low in calories", "natural" and others. These features are in conflict with the product description in the study at hand and as such may have resulted in a negative halo-effect. Additionally, the authors argue that a fortified food that is high in calories could, in a Western context, be associated with possible health risks. This stereotype in turn may lead to more negative evaluations, even if the product is clearly beneficial in a different context - e.g., for malnourished children in Africa. The authors note that further research is needed to understand and explain this effect in more detail.

In contrast to previous research, this study shows that personal values and the product context have a stronger influence on the perception of organic products than overall attitudes such as environmental



concern. As such, converse food choice and purchase behaviour can, in part, be explained by individual and context factors. Further research could add to this by using actual taste experiments, combined with real life shopping situations, in order to better understand how consumers use food and drink labels to form their attitude towards a product.

For further information, see

[Schuldt, JP & Hannahan M \(2012\). When good deeds leave a bad taste: Negative inferences from ethical food claims, *Appetite* \(in press\).](#)