People are smart, when it comes to interpreting satiety-related claims

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A new study shows that most people understand satiety-related claims found on food products, and are aware of their own role in reaching health-related goals.

Satiety is defined as a "subjective feeling of a reduction in the motivation to eat", and satiety-related claims found on food products can exert an important influence in consumers. For example, a product bearing the claim Helps to control hunger may lead a consumer to think this product will help with their weight loss goals. And an important question in the field of consumer research concerns how people react towards satiety claims made on the food products they consume. In this sense, it is debated whether consumers over-interpret satiety claims beyond their literal meaning and consider them as magic bullets, meaning that they associate satiety claims with an automatic weight loss "rather than as part of a broader behavioural repertoire necessary to achieve effective weight management".

Studies in this field work around the means-end chain (MEC) theory, a model of consumer behaviour that aims to obtain a better understanding of why people buy the foods they buy. A key assumption of the MEC model is that people buy products mostly because of the benefits they expect to obtain from them.

A new study led by researchers at Wageningen University and the Research Centre in the Netherlands surveyed 1,500 people from the U.K., France, Italy and Germany on satiety-related issues. Their results provide evidence that most people do not over-interpret satiety claims, and are clear about the importance of their own contribution in achieving specific weight control goals. The results of this study are the first to show such an effect, and provide fertile ground for future studies on consumer research.

Participants were asked to evaluate five satiety-related claims, namely Contains active fibres, Increases fullness, Helps to control hunger, Helps you want to eat less and Keeps you going between meals. As a control, participants were also asked to evaluate the claim "Contains B vitamins" which has no actual link to satiety but which allowed researchers to evaluate the accuracy of their measurement. Participants were then told to assume they encountered these five claims on a food product and were asked to rank each of them against seven different potential benefits, and to say whether each "reflects the claim well", "does somewhat reflect the claim" or "does not reflect the claim". Basic data on age, weight and participants weight-gain and dieting behaviour were also collected, in order to account for possible mediating effects of socio-economic and individual characteristics on the interpretation of satiety-claims.

Results of the study show that most participants correctly linked the claims to their actual meaning. For example, for the claim Contains active fibres, participants clearly recognised it as being primarily related to content, Increases fullness and Helps to control hunger were correctly associated with "feel full for longer" and "controls appetite", respectively. The study also identified specific consumer groups that may be prone to over-interpreting claims in general, and satiety-related ones in particular, like restrained eaters. Socio-economic aspects such as income, gender, age, and bodyweight perception were significantly correlated with the measured scores of claim interpretation, and these answers did not differ across participants for
any of these aspects. For example, age and income had a positive correlation with over-interpretation of many satiety claims, whereas bodyweight perception and income produced a significant but negative correlation. However, the researchers did find that U.K. participants were less likely to over-interpret satiety claims compared to the other countries studied. The authors suggest that the longer history of manufactured foods in this country - compared to France, Italy and Germany - can help explain this result.

Lastly, while most participants linked the control-claim ("Contains B Vitamins") to the presence of ingredients, a considerable number of participants (500-800) considered this claim to refer to satiety and weight-related benefits. These findings highlight the importance of including controls in such studies, and can be explained by theories which suggest that when people are exposed to a concept, as in this case satiety and weight loss, they tend to more easily correlate further information to these concepts.

The authors call for further studies with different samples, including other countries, and in the context of a broader on-pack communication and/or different products, in order to extend the validity of these results. Variation in the wording used to refer to satiety claims as well as the study of under-interpretation of these claims also warrant future research.

For more information, see