

Four Ways Foods Claim to Be ‘Healthy’

Front-of-package claims can influence perceptions

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Key messages

- > Foods claim to be healthy either (1) by focusing on the positive or the negative, or (2) by claiming to have scientifically improved the food or to have preserved its natural properties.
- > As a result, there are four ways to claim that a food is healthy: (1) by adding something positive, (2) by removing something negative, (3) by not adding something negative or (4) by not removing something positive.
- > The types of claim found on the front of the packages of breakfast cereals are totally unrelated to the actual nutritional quality of their contents.
- > Nevertheless, the means whereby breakfast cereals claim to be healthy significantly influences people’s expectations of how healthy, tasty and fattening they are.
- > Regulators and marketers need to examine how people interpret food claims, not just whether the claims are factually correct.

Imagine a product that is described as ‘natural.’ It is plant-based and locally grown in America. It is also organic and 100 percent additive-free. It certainly sounds like a healthier choice than oth-

er brands in its category – and that is, in fact, what 64 percent of people who buy it believe.¹ In reality, the natural, plant-based, locally grown and 100 percent additive-free product is ... tobacco, and cigarettes made using this particular tobacco are just as dangerous as any other cigarettes.²

“What people and brands mean by ‘healthy’ is changing”

As I have written previously, and based on my research, perception matters a great deal in eating, and interest in healthy eating is increasing.^{3,4} But what people and brands mean by ‘healthy’ is changing. It is less about checking nutrition information on products and more about selecting ‘real food,’ ‘clean eating’ or following some downright unhealthy ideas peddled on Instagram.

FIGURE 1: Four ways that food may be considered healthy

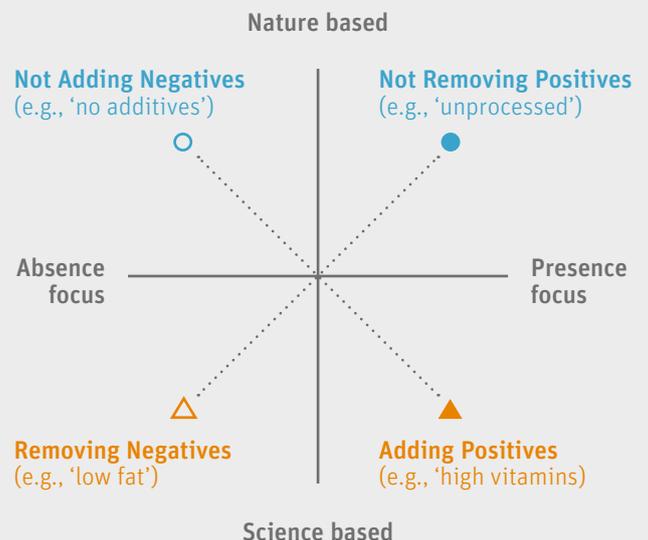
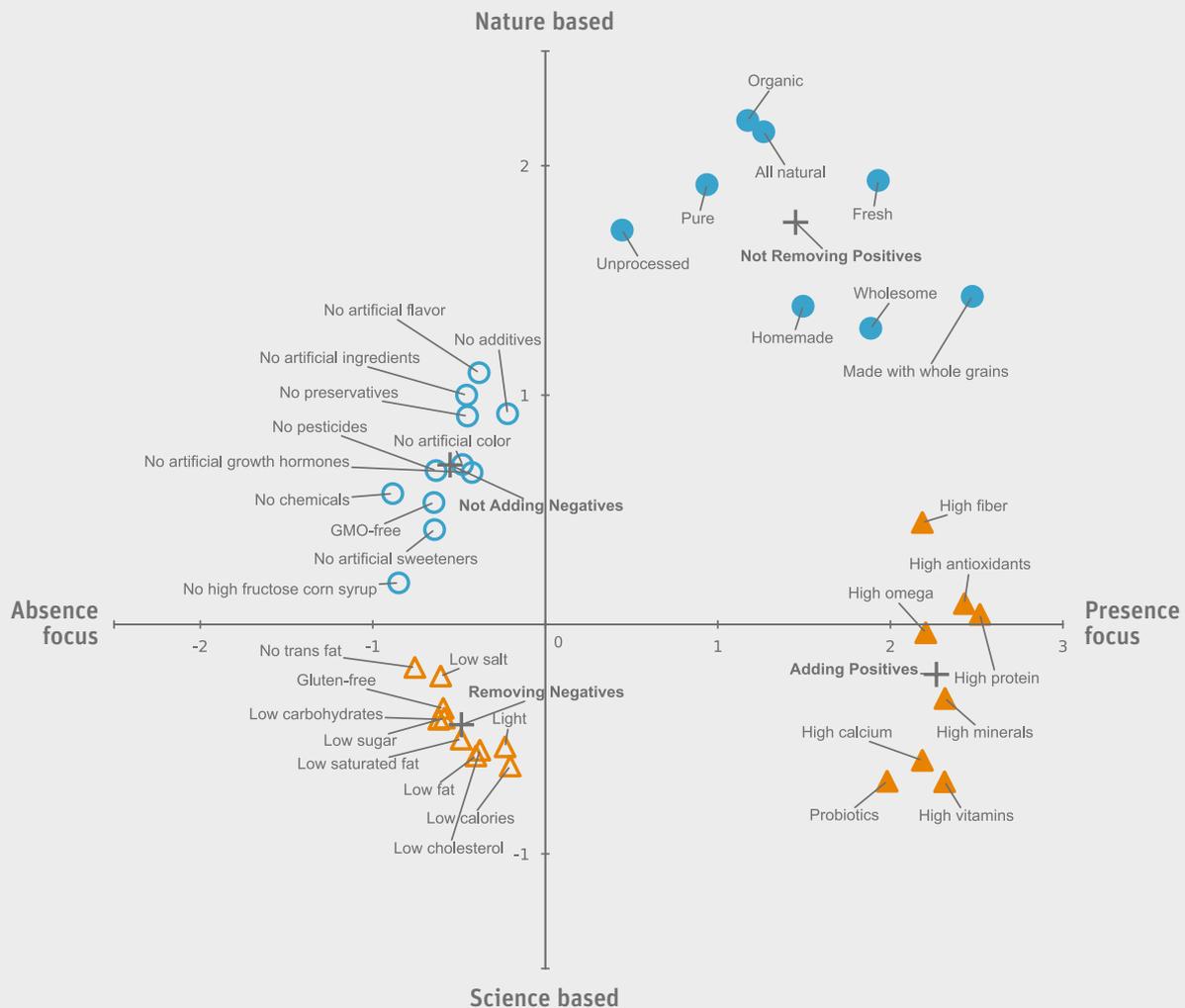


FIGURE 2: Rating of food health claims

In a recent article,⁵ I studied the categorization of front-of-package claims and their impact on consumers' choices and their expectations of taste, healthiness and weight loss. Co-authored with Quentin André of the Rotterdam School of Management and Kelly Haws of Vanderbilt University, this article was published in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* in 2019.

Healthy through presence or absence, nature or science

Earlier research had considered food claims at either the macro level – using broad descriptions such as 'healthy' or 'tasty' – or the micro level,⁶ studying single claims such as 'low fat'.⁷ We found a middle-ground solution of four clusters, based on two underlying dimensions:

1. The first dimension is health claims based either on the presence of something good or on the absence of something bad.

2. The second dimension is health claims based either on improving the food (science) or on preserving the food (nature).

The outcome is four distinct ways that food may be considered healthy, as shown in **Figure 1**. A carton of milk, for example, could be 'high in vitamins' (adding positive), 'low fat' (removing negatives), 'no artificial growth hormone' (not adding negatives) or 'all natural' (not removing positives).

We asked 443 people to rate 37 common claims (distilled from a list of 107) on these two dimensions (to prevent survey fatigue, each person rated eight claims). As shown in **Figure 2**, there was no middle ground, and claims clustered well around the four types: adding (or not removing) positives and removing (or not adding) negatives.

FIGURE 3: Rating of food health claims

Perceptions and reality

We examined the consequences of these claims, both perceived and real, in three studies of breakfast cereals – a popular food category in which food claims are common and which often has a ‘health halo’ despite large differences in actual nutrition quality.⁷ To explore the perceived benefits of different types of food claim, we asked 363 Americans to evaluate breakfast cereal boxes carrying a variety of health messages.

“Consumers had a more positive attitude towards claims based on the presence of something good”

We found that consumers had a more positive attitude towards claims that are based on positivity, the presence of something good, compared with claims that are about the absence of something bad. People expected breakfast cereals with claims about both ‘adding positives’ (‘high protein,’ ‘high antioxidants,’ ‘high fiber’ or ‘high calcium’) and ‘not removing positives’ (‘all natural,’ ‘made with whole grains,’ ‘wholesome’ or ‘organic’) to be healthier than brands with claims about ‘removing negatives’ or ‘not adding negatives,’ even if the messages claimed the absence of something considered to be harmful (see **Figure 3**).

“Are consumers correct in making inferences based on the type of claim that is on the box?”

We also found that when consumers see nature-focused

health claims, such as ‘homemade’ or even ‘no preservatives,’ they are inspired to believe the food will be tasty. Finally, if the claim is about removing negatives (‘light,’ ‘low fat,’ ‘low calorie’ or ‘low sugar’), consumers believe that the breakfast cereal helps with weight loss or weight maintenance.

The idea that these claims influence perceptions is not that surprising. After all, this is the goal. But are consumers correct in making inferences, particularly about the healthiness of a food, based on the type of claim that is on the box? To find out, we used data from Open Food Facts (<https://world.openfoodfacts.org>), a collaborative, free and open database of food products from around the world, which has food claim and nutrition information for 633 breakfast cereals. This database also provides the Ofcom nutrient profiling score developed for the British Food Standards Agency, which is a validated measure of nutritional quality.⁸ To our surprise, the correlation between the type of ‘healthy’ claim made and the actual nutritional quality of the breakfast cereal was almost zero (0.04, to be precise).

Predicting food choices, depending on people’s goals

Does understanding the four ways brands claim to be healthy help predict what consumers will choose? In our fourth study, we introduced three goals – healthy eating, hedonic eating and weight loss – to see how the type of claim helps predict consumers’ choices between different foods with or without food claims. With the help of PRS IN VIVO (www.prs-invivo.com), a leader in shopper and nudge-related research, we randomly assigned 611 breakfast buyers to one of the three shopping goals and asked them to choose between foods with different claims on the label, as seen in **Figure 4**.

Compared with the breakfast cereal and milk carton without claims, all those with any claim at all had a higher probability of being chosen. More importantly, we found that goals influenced the effectiveness of the claims. When choosing a product for

taste or health reasons, study participants went for the brands with the nature-based claims. When the goal was losing weight, however, they selected the foods with the 'removing negative' claims, such as 'low sugar' and 'low fat.' Overall, what consumers expect from food had an impact on their choices.

What's next for policymakers and marketers?

Although there was no link between the type of claim and overall nutrition quality in our particular product category, consumers expected the type of claim to be a strong predictor of the healthiness, taste and dieting properties of the products. None of the claims we surveyed explicitly said that the product would make people healthier (or help them lose weight or stay thin), yet consumers interpreted these claims as such. And their perceptions influenced their choices.

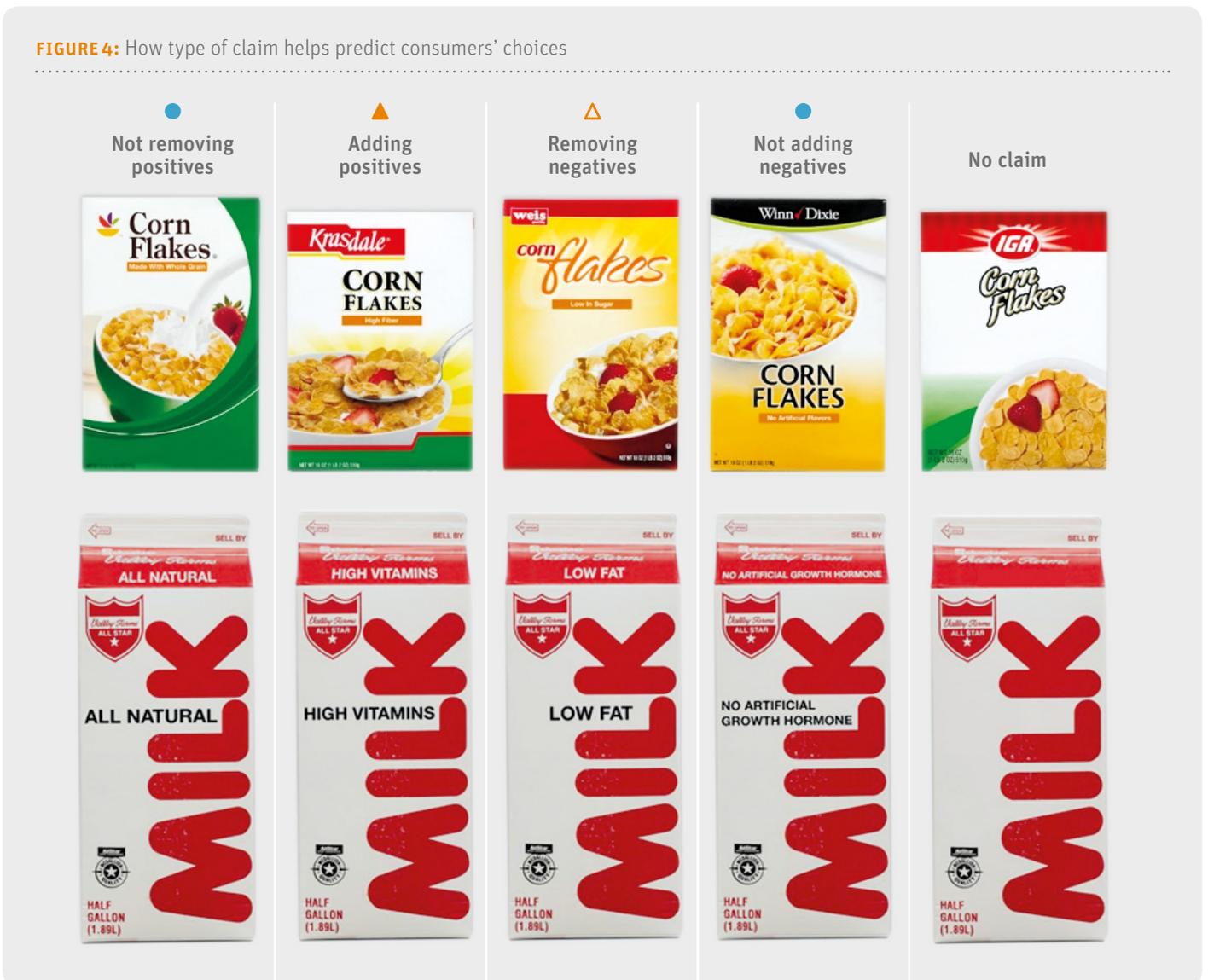
As people are moving away from nutrition-based to nature-based approaches to 'healthy' eating, so are food claims. The danger is that claims are receding from nutrition, based on

science, towards beliefs based on folk theories or, worse, the opinions of celebrities.⁹ This should motivate legislators to consider stricter regulation of food claims.

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“Claims are receding from nutrition towards beliefs based on folk theories or the opinions of celebrities”

At present, the first principle in the regulation of marketing claims is to ensure that they are not incorrect. This is not enough, however. After all, the tobacco product mentioned at the beginning of this article really is organic and 100 percent additive-free. The problem is the misleading interpretation that this makes it healthier. This is why in 2010 the Federal Trade

FIGURE 4: How type of claim helps predict consumers' choices



Commission forced the company producing this cigarette to include the disclaimer that “no additives in tobacco does NOT mean a safer cigarette” and why, in 2015, the Food and Drug Administration took action to force it to remove the ‘natural’ and ‘additive-free’ claims altogether.¹⁰

There is no reason why food should be treated differently. Obviously, claims must be accurate, but they should also not be misleading in such a way that consumers might expect benefits that the food cannot deliver. Rather than basing their regulations on what the mythical ‘rational consumer’ would think, policymakers should take into account what real consumers expect from products that carry health claims.

“Policymakers should take into account what real consumers expect from products that carry health claims”

The association we have between nature and health is often true. The advice given by Michael Pollan to “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants” is sound.¹¹ Ironically however, the only foods that are universally accepted as healthy are fruits, vegetables and some nuts – that is, the few foods without a claim on the label. This is because they don’t have a label. Nature, as most consumers understand, knows best.

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