

## EXPLORING HOW YOUNG CONSUMERS' PROCESSING SNACK PACKAGING CUES FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### INTRODUCTION

Obesity has become one of the most significant nutritional problems facing global populations. In the UK, the obesity rates have been on a steady rise, with young adults aged 16-24 being subject to a high risk of becoming obese (Intel, 2013). This age group displays weaker attitudes towards healthy living than elderly people, and a strong tendency towards snacking. Kerr et al. (2008) observes an increase in snacking, snacking portions, and snacking frequency. Crisps and chocolate are some of the major energy-dense snacks that cause obesity (Astrup et al., 2006), when coupling with over consumption and lack of physical activity. One of the interventions implemented by policy makers in an attempt to encourage consumers to adopt healthy dietary choices is nutrition labelling (NL). The UK was one of the main instigators of the development of nutrition labelling within the European Community (Shine et al., 1997).

This study seeks to understand how snack and snacking involve in young adults' lifestyle. Of specific focus are energy-dense crisps and chocolate, which are easily accessible, portable and inexpensive. Previous consumer research in NL studies has predominantly adopted experimental research design to examine the role of external information, and internal characteristics in influencing consumers' use of nutritional information (NI), product evaluation, and food intake. Whilst experimental studies can identify causal relationships among factors, the number of factors investigated within a study is limited. Also, the use of NI is a complex decision task (Burton et al., 1999), suggesting that consumers must be highly motivated or they will seek heuristics to simplify their decision-making process (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994). Hence, existing studies have clearly omitted the potential role of brand in a snack-buying decision, because the branding literature has long considered brand as heuristic (Keller, 2008). Adopting the phenomenological approach, this study aims to offer a holistic understanding of the meaning young adults associate with snack, and the interplay between internal characteristics and external information involved in consumer information processing (CIP) within a snack-buying decision.

## BACKGROUND

The CIP models (Bettman, 1989; Brucks et al., 1984) propose that information processing takes place in different stages of consumer decision-making process. Also, they suggest that information acquired may stop at any stage of consumers' decision-making, depending on how they perceive the problem. Brucks et al.'s (1984) model identifies the effects of external elements on internal elements, and decision. Bettman's (1989) model focuses on information processing components rather than process and extensively considers the role of memory, motivation, and choice heuristics.

Snack purchasing is classified as an impulsive buying situation (Duarte et al., 2013), in which hedonic consumption values (e.g. emotional satisfaction) are prevalent, particularly for young consumers (Liao et al., 2009). Hence, snack purchasing implicates low-involvement, suggesting that snack purchasing is a non-significant problem. Consumers are not highly motivated to expend an effort in searching for and processing information. They, on the other hand, seek information processing efficiency (Solomon, 1992). This suggests that nutritional information (NI) processing, which is a complex decision task (Burton et al., 1999) may not take place. However, studies have identified positive effects of NLs (Drichoutis et al., 2008), nutrient claims (Andrews et al., 2009), and portion size (Wansink et al., 2005) on consumers' product evaluation, purchase intention, and energy intake.

NL studies focus on information the acquisition, comprehension and use stages of CIP. Experimental studies have examined positive effects of different presentation formats (van Herpen et al., 2014). Portion suggestion, another cue on food packaging, has been found to influence consumers' consumption behaviour and energy intake (Mohr et al., 2012). This cue has been made more important due to the supersized pricing strategies that increase the portion sizes of food products (Colapinto et al., 2007), leading to an increase in the amount that consumers believe they can consume (Elow-Martin, 2005). Experimental studies have identified consumers' preference for smaller packaging (de Vale et al., 2008), and pre-portioned amorphous food products (Stroebele et al., 2009) to regulate their energy consumption. This shows their reliance on the size of a food package to control their consumption.

Another visible cue on food packaging is brand. However, past studies have omitted brand in their experimental design. The branding literature (Keller, 2008) highlights brand as heuristic that provides consumers with efficiency during their information processing, particularly when they are under time pressure and buying a low-involvement product such as snack (Pieters and Warlop, 1999). Under this light, the saliency of NI to consumers could be low. NLs and portion suggestion may become non-diagnostic in the snack-buying situation, based on the accessibility/diagnosticity framework (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Brand, which triggers information highly accessible from consumers' memory, becomes more relevant (Duarte et al., 2013), suggesting high levels of accessibility and diagnosticity. Yet, based on the experimental results, Haws and Winterich (2013) suggest that the saliency of NLs and portion suggestion at the point of purchase can capture consumers' attention, which leads them to reflect on making a healthy decision. The question is whether this will be the case for young adults buying snack. Based on the insights from the dual-process framework (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and NL research (Grunert et al., 2012), motivation and nutrition knowledge are two key determinants of consumers' use of NI. Again, because of the low-involvement buying situation of snack, consumers may have low motivation, which results in their use of emotion to evaluate choices. Hence, young adults may adopt affective,

heuristic processing rather than the cognitive, systematic one. Subsequently, NIs, nutrient claims, and portion suggestions may be less important than brand, which provides accessible and relevant information that sums up different information such as brand feelings, brand image, brand awareness, brand benefits, and brand attitudes (Keller, 2008). Other studies suggest that knowledge increases efficiency (Miller, 2009), which reduces cognitive effort in processing NI. Hence, although consumers are not highly motivated, their nutritional knowledge may lead to an increase in NIs use, an accurate evaluation of food healthfulness, and dietary quality. Yet, other studies (Wansink and Chandon, 2006) suggest a gap between acquisition and use of NI. The mixed results of the role of NIs, claims, and portion suggestion as well as the omission of brand in past studies suggests that further examination is necessary to understand the interplay of the external packaging cues and the internal factors involved in young adults' snack-buying decision. In effect, the flaw of experimental studies lead to the following questions that guide this study's research design discussed in the next section:

1. How do young adults perceive snacking in relation to their lifestyle?
2. Do they attend to and process NI on snack packaging? Why or why not?
3. Among different packaging cues, which one(s) is more salient to them during their snack buying decision? Why?
4. How do their motivation and perceived nutrition knowledge affect their use of packaging cues?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The aim of phenomenology is to obtain a first person account of experiences within a specific cultural context that reflects the understanding and the interplay with the individuals' lived world (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 1998). The phenomenological interpretation is relevant to this study as it allows the researchers to explain the role of snack in young adults' life, leading to an understanding of the interplay between their internal characteristics and external packaging cues in CIP. Exploratory qualitative research was adopted to capture holistic perspectives of the complexity of CIP in the snack-buying decision through language of and social interactions with young adults (Eisenhardt, 1989). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with students from a school and a university in Yorkshire. Purposive sampling (Laverly, 2003) was adopted to ensure that all participants have lived experiences with snacking and snack buying. Their consent was sought prior to an interview. In total, twenty-one interviews were conducted with students from different subjects: specifically, seven are from a school (age 16-18), and fourteen are at a university (age 18-24).

An interview guide was developed with guidance from the literature with insights from two marketing academics and another academic from a Health department. To aid reliving snack and snack-buying decision experiences, the interviews used different crisps and chocolate brands (single-pack, and multi-packs). Notes were taken during each interview, along with a digital record. Each interview was transcribed. Each transcript and note were read several times to ensure familiarity and comprehension. Recurrent themes were extracted into codes that were cross-validated by two researchers to gain inter-coder agreement (Cresswell, 2009). Only inferential descriptive codes with a theoretical foundation that provided validity and helped answer the research questions were retained.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Taking a different methodological approach from past studies to explore the interplay of different internal and external elements involved in CIP within a snack-buying decision from young adults' perspectives, this study offers an emergent perspective of their relived experiences in a snack-buying decision, and how they interpret and make use of cues as influenced by their motivation and nutritional knowledge from a holistic viewpoint.

The findings highlight that young adults do not perceive snack buying as important. Participants are well aware of their unhealthy nature and often feel guilty after consumption. Yet, snack is considered a source of hedonic and utilitarian values that fit their student lifestyle. For example, *'sometimes you can use [snack] as a motivational tool. Like, if I do this amount of work tonight, I'll have that to eat as a reward for it'* (KJ). Also, *'I am a student ... snacking kind of gets me through my work and helps me concentrate'* (MM) and *'I like [snacking]. I enjoy it. It makes me feel good'* (CW). As snack buying is not considered an important buying decision, internal characteristics, particularly motivation, are the major hindrance of CIP with a snack-buying decision. Participants overlook NLs and portion suggestion, not because of the formats but because of their low motivation for a snack-buying decision. Also, they usually buy snack on impulse, and thus make their decision instantly. Therefore, cognitive effort and time expended are limited; *'I actually pay no attention to [labels and portion suggestion]. I just see the chocolate bar I want and I buy it, and eat it'* (HP). In general, they select the snack that they usually have out of habit. Indeed, since they are well aware of the unhealthiness of snack, they do not consider NLs as useful and diagnostic to their buying decision. It is evident in the findings that heuristic processing is employed as they seek to simplify their snack-buying decision to save time and effort; *'with chocolates and crisps, I don't tend to regard [NLs] as much as if I was going for something else'* (BJ). Therefore, the role of brand is prevalent in snack-buying decision. It is observed that few participants report the use of brand in their decision-making. Most participants consider taste as the crucial decision-making factor. However, all do not hesitate to suggest a few brands as their favourite crisps and chocolate brands. Exploring deeper, participants associate taste with brand based on their past experience and brand advertising that influences their product quality perception through the embedded value proposition.

More interestingly, this study discovers that the lack of NLs use leads to the lack of portion suggestion use. Indeed, participants find it difficult to gauge how much one portion is, and consider the suggested portion is too small and unrealistic; *'I find [portion suggestion] sort of more annoying. Sometimes you might actually eat half and not a quarter or eat all of it'* (HP). Rather than using suggested portion size information, participants narrate that they use package size to regulate their consumption amount. However, despite their effort to control their consumption by buying a so-called single-pack, most single chocolate bars contain two servings. As participants report a low motivation to process NLs and portion suggestion information, they were unaware of this until they went through NLs and portion suggestion labels on different chocolate packaging. Furthermore, their snacking frequency often undermines their effort to control their snack consumption by buying one single-pack at a time. In effect, this study highlights that their perception toward snack and snack purchasing affect their level of motivation and NI use, as well as their attention to portion suggestion information and the number of portions consumed, implying pertinent issues between snack and energy intake and subsequently obesity.

Finally, the lack of motivation to process NI leads them to be influenced by how the brand is advertised by marketing communication campaigns. This could be captured by the passage of a particular participant (MM). First, MM believes that *'KitKats are alright because they have their strategy of low-calorie food. Maltesers as well. They are all about guilt free'*. Then, when asked to deliberately process NI from NLs in conjunction with portion suggestion, she discovers that Mars provides fewer calories, fat and sugar level than Maltesers at 100 grammes. She was surprised and points to the marketing campaign as a source of her misconception; *'Really? It's because of their marketing campaign. That's interesting!'*. Despite the deliberate exposure to and the cognitive processing of NLs as part of the interview, like other participants, she confirms that she will not change the brand attitudes, and continue to buy the same brands; *'I will still buy KitKats though'*. This piece of finding suggests not only the important role of brand in snack-buying decision, but also how the established brand preference and brand attitudes are resistant to change, particularly for young adults.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

Motivation, as an internal characteristic, plays a prevailing role in determining how young adults process NI when buying snacks. Indeed, as young adults perceive snack-buying situation as unimportant and often buy snack on impulse, they have limited motivation to expend their effort and time. Also, NL processing alone is a complex task but to understand portion suggestion, they have to process it together with NLs. This makes NI processing more complicated. The lack of motivation and limited nutrition knowledge lead consumers to follow heuristic processing, based on the dual-process framework. Hence, this study discovers that young adults use brand as heuristic to save their time and effort in making their buying decision of snack. Furthermore, brand elements are present on food packaging, and brand information is easily retrieved from their memory. Hence, brand speeds up their decision-making, which is relevant to their low-involvement impulsive buying situation of snack. Hence, this study shows that the theoretical assumptions of the accessibility/diagnosticity framework could enrich the understanding of heuristic processing of the dual-processing framework within CIP.

This study focuses on young adults. However, food preferences, habit, and attitudes were developed since they were younger. Therefore, future research may explore this phenomenon from a younger sample's perspective. Finally, this study focuses only on snack food. Future research could investigate how CIP changes when snack is considered together with other meals in consumers' daily dietary plan.

## **REFERENCES**

References available upon request.