

The health halo effect: Don't judge a food by its organic label

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Jenny Wan-chen Lee, a graduate student in Cornell University's Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, has been fascinated with a phenomenon known as "the halo effect" for some time.

Psychologists have long recognized that how we perceive a particular trait of a person can be influenced by how we perceive other traits of the same individual. In other words, the fact that a person has a positive attribute can radiate a "halo", resulting in the perception that other characteristics associated with that person are also positive. An example of this would be judging an attractive person as intelligent, just because he or she is good-looking.

A growing literature suggests that the halo effect may also apply to foods, and ultimately influence what and how much we eat. For instance, research has shown that people tend to consume more calories at fast-food restaurants claiming to serve "healthier" foods, compared to the amount they eat at a typical burger-and-fry joint. The reasoning is that when people perceive a food to be more nutritious, they tend to let their guard down when it comes to being careful about counting calories—ultimately leading them to overeat or feel entitled to indulge. This health halo effect also seems to apply to certain foods considered by many to be especially healthy, such as organic products. Specifically, some people mistakenly assume that these foods are more nutritious just because they carry an "organic" label –an area of longstanding active debate among food and nutrition scientists.

As part of her master's research, Lee asked whether the "health halo"

surrounding organic foods would lead people to automatically perceive them as tastier or lower in calories. She tested this question by conducting a double-blind, controlled trial in which she asked 144 subjects at the local mall to compare what they thought were conventionally and organically produced chocolate sandwich cookies, plain yogurt, and potato chips. All of the products, however, were actually of the organic variety – they were just labeled as being "regular" or "organic." Participants were then asked to rate each food for 10 different attributes (e.g., overall taste, [perception](#) of fat content) using a scale from 1 to 9. She also asked them to estimate the number of calories in each [food](#) item and how much they would be willing to pay. As part of the scientific program of the American Society for Nutrition annual meeting, results from this study will be presented on April 10 at the Experimental Biology 2011 meeting.

Confirming Lee's health halo hypothesis, the subjects reported preferring almost all of the taste characteristics of the organically-labeled foods, even though they were actually identical to their conventionally-labeled counterparts. The foods labeled "organic" were also perceived to be significantly lower in calories and evoked a higher price tag. In addition, foods with the "organic" label were perceived as being lower in fat and higher in fiber. Overall, organically-labeled chips and cookies were considered to be more nutritious than their "non-organic" counterparts.

So, not only is there a health halo emanating from organic foods, but it's strong and consistent– at least for cookies, chips, and yogurt. Although Lee is the first to acknowledge that her study was limited in the variety of foods tested, she is confident that this effect is real and has important implications as to what, and how much, people eat, especially those who preferentially seek out foods carrying an "organic" seal. Additional studies will be needed before we know whether these perceived taste and nutrition attributes result in greater consumption of organic versus

conventional foods.

Until that time, remember not to judge a book (or a cookie) by its cover (or its organic label).

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