

Cereal's colour trumps health star rating

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Credit: University of Technology, Sydney

Parents are interested in star ratings indicating the nutritional value of cereals but it's the colour in the breakfast bowl that has final sway, a study by researchers at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has found.

"Parents will use health star ratings as much as features like price, product claims, cartoons and other imagery when they make cereal choices," says Associate Professor Paul Burke, one of the designers of the study. "The colour of the product, however, trumps them all."

The study by marketing and health researchers from UTS also found reliance on star ratings was lower among parents of children with fussier eating habits, and among parents who had concerns about their child's weight.

In the study, the researchers varied numerous front-of-pack elements to see whether parents altered their purchasing decisions. A total of 520 parents with a child aged between five and 11 years took part in the research, published in the international journal *Appetite*.

The Australian government introduced a Health Star Rating (HSR) system in 2014 to help consumers identify healthier options within a product category and several companies have since adopted this voluntary system. A product's [nutritional value](#) is represented by a visual star rating that ranges from half a star to a top rating of five [stars](#). In addition, a summary panel of nutrient facts contains information on four "risk" nutrients (energy, sugar, saturated fat and sodium) and one positive nutrient (such as dietary fibre or protein).

In Australia, where the study was conducted, one in five children aged between four and 18 is overweight or obese, study co-author Dr Georgina Russell says. "One cause is poor [eating habits](#), with two-thirds of Australian children exceeding recommended sugar intakes and four-fifths exceeding recommended saturated fat intakes."

"The wide range of marketing and nutrition information on food packages can be confusing for consumers," says marketing researcher Dr David Waller. While some marketing images can signal health – athletes or fruit, say – the nutrient profile of the product may nevertheless be inconsistent with a healthy diet.

However, it appears the star ratings may be helping parents make better choices.

"We're not saying the health star rating system is perfect, but we did find consumers chose the five-star rated product over two-star rated options or those with no star rating information at all," says Associate Professor Burke, a consumer behaviour researcher.

Another significant result was that the colour of a product dominated choices.

"Consumers were more likely to reject a product because it was artificial looking in terms of being blue, green, pink and purple," Associate Professor Burke says. "On the other hand, they chose a product just because it was yellowish like other cereals or brown like bran in colour."

The researchers found consumers used this visual cue more than the nutritional star rating or panel information.

The study also investigated how [parents](#) of fussy eaters or those with concerns about their children's weight made decisions.

Parents of children who they reported as fussier in eating behaviours were less likely to use the star rating system – though when they did they consistently chose the healthier five-star option over the two-star or unrated option.

Parents who were concerned their child was underweight were also less likely to use the rating information.

Parents who were worried about their child being overweight were more likely to reject options with no rating information at all.

More information: Catherine Georgina Russell et al. The impact of front-of-pack marketing attributes versus nutrition and health information on parents' food choices, *Appetite* (2017). [DOI](#):

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