

Preventing obesity starts in the grocery aisle with food packaging

July 28 2022, by Eugene Y. Chan and Liangyan Wang



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In 2018, Statistics Canada reported that [nearly one in three Canadians were obese](#). Similar figures have been [reported in Australia](#), but more concerning is the United States, where more than [40% of the population is obese](#).

Obesity is not the only diet-related illness to be concerned about—[diabetes is just as prevalent](#). When it comes to such diseases, diet and physical activity help reduce the chance of being diagnosed. In fact, when it comes to Type 2 diabetes, diet and physical activity [can prevent 50%](#) of it.

Food [packaging](#) plays an important role in diet-related illnesses. We live in a [food environment](#) that prioritizes marketing, sometimes to the detriment of our health.

Consider the average supermarket, where there can be [upwards of 60,000 different products in a store](#). With so much competition, [food](#) marketers need to grab the attention of consumers so they buy their products, not a competitor's. This is why product packaging is so important.

Food marketing uses a variety of tactics, like using [bright, bold colors and eye-popping visuals](#), to try and persuade consumers to buy certain products. They also change the size of food images shown on products—the size of the chip on Dorito's packaging or the size of the bread on a jar of peanut butter, for example.

Bigger is better

Our [recent research](#) looked at how something seemingly innocuous, like the size of food images on product packaging, can impact how likely it is that someone buys a product. While the size of this image might appear to be harmless, our research found that it can increase the food's appeal to consumers: the larger the image, the better tasting consumers believe the food will be, which increases the chance of them purchasing the product.

The reason for this is a [concept called mental imagery](#), which suggests

that the way people visualize a product in their minds can make them think a product is better, higher quality or, in our case, tastier.

This has implications when it comes to food choice. When thinking about what foods are most appealing, junk foods, such as chips, popcorn and candy, come to mind. These kinds of products often have large, exaggerated images of food on their packaging. Since the size of the food image on these products are bigger, it makes consumers psychologically salivate more, persuading them into buying and eating these unhealthier foods.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Color matters

Ours isn't the only research that has been done on health habits and food product packaging. Similar research has also found that [the color of food packaging](#) and [the location of food images on a product](#) also impacts whether or not consumers are more likely to buy a product.

When it comes to colors, red significantly increases a food's perceived taste, while green increases the food's perceived healthiness. Food images that are located higher on the package suggest that the food is "light" and therefore "healthy," making it more likely for a consumer to purchase the product.

Previous studies have also found that [junk food brand names are easily remembered by children](#), and parents often listen to their children when making food choices. Also, the [use of traffic light signals on food labels](#) promotes healthier food choices by allowing people to identify the nutritional content directly on the food package.

Knowing and understanding how appearance impacts food desirability is crucial for marketers and has resulted in a special visual language among consumers and products. This allows, for example, people with diabetes and hypertension to quickly locate foods that are appropriate for their needs in a [grocery store](#). However, it also makes some consumers vulnerable to marketing ploys when they aren't aware of how advertisers are manipulating them.

Healthy shopping strategies

There are some strategies consumers can use when shopping to help maintain healthy habits. Instead of focusing on the images of food on packaging, we recommend that consumers focus more on the nutritional needs and requirements.

Consumers should read the entire nutritional label front and back to try

to make the best informed decision possible and try not to be swayed by what the image on a package looks like.

Don't let the size of the food image tempt you: some Pringles or gummy bears is fine as a little indulgence, but if you're tempted by these food products every time you step into your local grocery, it can have serious consequences for your health.

Food product packaging doesn't just have implications for consumers, but for policymakers as well. Most governments, [including Canada's](#), focus on nutrition labels and how food marketers advertise to consumers of all ages, such as rules [limiting junk food ads during Saturday morning cartoons](#). But regulation should start even more fundamentally with the packaging itself.

While it might seem extreme to regulate the size of a scoop of ice cream on a box of Chapman's, food image size is especially relevant when it comes to junk food. If we want to reduce the prevalence of diet-related health issues, like obesity and diabetes, regulating the size of images, which is what we see first and foremost in the grocery aisle, on food products might just be what's needed.

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