

Often, consumers inadvertently give too much credit to 'scientifically studied' product claims

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Credit: UCLA

Being scientifically studied and being scientifically proven are two completely different things.

But a study led by UCLA psychologists has found that consumers often incorrectly remember marketing claims about just how lab-tested—or lab-proven—products actually are. The research discovered that even when products are labeled "clinically studied," people frequently recall them as being "clinically proven."

"'Clinically studied' can mean lots of things," said Alan Castel, the paper's senior author and a UCLA psychology professor. "Maybe the product was studied only in animals, or in people, but found to be ineffective or not effective enough. 'Clinically studied' only shows that someone was interested enough in the product to study it, not that the study was well-designed or showed conclusively that the supplement works."

The findings, published in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, suggest that the popularity of products like dietary supplements—a \$21 billion industry in the U.S. alone—is due in part to consumers' unwarranted confidence in [product claims](#). The study also highlights anew the importance of carefully reading [product labels](#) or consulting medical professionals.

Castel studies aging, memory and brain health, and he often reads about "science-backed" brain-training products or Alzheimer's drugs. The new study was spurred when he came across a magazine ad for a cognitive enhancement supplement with a "clinically studied" claim; Castel wondered how consumers would interpret that phrase.

With his colleagues, Castel recruited two groups of subjects to find out: one cohort of 150 college students, a demographic in which people tend to have stronger memories, and another of 166 adults at least 65 years old, representing the typical target consumer for memory supplements.

Participants were shown three versions of the ad: The original, with the "clinically studied" phrasing, one in which the scientific claim was

replaced with "clinically proven," and another that omitted the reference altogether. After being given an unrelated task meant to distract them temporarily, the subjects were asked whether they believed the claim in the ad was "scientifically studied," "scientifically proven," "clinically studied," "clinically proven" or none of these.

Remarkably, only 26% of the subjects in the overall study correctly remembered which phrase was used—even though subjects were generally able to accurately remember other aspects of the advertisement, including the layout and a photo of a doctor. No matter which ad they viewed, participants tended to recall the word "proven" being present much more often than "studied."

The younger participants remembered a few more details about the ads than the older adults, but both groups misremembered the crucial phrase almost equally.

"The findings fit models of memory suggesting that we remember the gist of things better than details," Castel said. "When people see or hear scientific claims made in vague terms, they later misremember them in more definitive terms."

The problem, Castel said, is that even if marketers are truthful in their claims that a product has been scientifically studied, they may be taking advantage of the fact that human memory is malleable, which can easily lead consumers to trust the product without solid reasons. In particular, he said, older adults who are worried about memory loss could be susceptible to wasting money on supplements that ultimately are useless.

"How do you evaluate these claims if your memory is already slipping, or you are distracted?" Castel said.

His advice? "Don't rely on memory before spending money or choosing

a course of action. Consult others and look into it before you buy. Take time, pay attention and don't make decisions too quickly."

Other researchers who contributed to the study are current and former UCLA graduate students Dillon Murphy, Shawn Schwartz, Kylie Alberts and Alexander Siegel; UCLA undergraduate student Brandon Carone; and Aimee Drolet, a professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management.

More information: Dillon H. Murphy et al, Clinically studied or clinically proven? Memory for claims in print advertisements, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/acp.4106](https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.4106)

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