

'Stop sign' disclosures on ultra-processed food found to have a positive effect

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Marketing researchers at the University of Arkansas examined the usefulness of "stop sign" disclosures on ultra-processed food packaging and found that such warnings can counterbalance positive—and possibly misleading or inaccurate—claims by marketers. The researchers' study was [published](#) in the *Journal of Business Research*.

The research showed that front-of-packaging marketing claims about the processing of such food products—"natural," for example—can mislead consumers about ultra-processed food. Ultra-processed information disclosures, on the other hand, can reduce inappropriate or exaggerated [health claims](#) and influence consumer evaluations of the dietary impact of ultra-processed foods.

"This research is forward-looking in its examination of ultra-processed food disclosures, and we believe it offers implications for consumer well-being, food marketers and health considerations," said Scot Burton, Distinguished Professor of marketing in the Sam M. Walton College of Business.

Burton completed the study with two former doctoral students in marketing, Garrett Rybak and Christopher Berry. Rybak will become an assistant professor in the Department of Management at the Air Force Academy, and Berry is an associate professor in the Department of Marketing at Colorado State University.

Globally, consumption of ultra-processed foods—which include items such as boxed [breakfast cereals](#), chips, hot dogs and carbonated sodas—has emerged in recent years as a major concern for the [public health](#) and policy communities.

Many countries are beginning to recommend reductions in ultra-

processed food consumption because of high levels of calories, sugar and sodium. Chile, for example, has placed a large black stop sign on packaging for foods to warn consumers when there are high levels of these negative nutrients.

In the current research, such stop sign warnings are extended to explicit warnings that the food product is ultra-processed. In addition to often having high levels of sodium, sugars and saturated fat, ultra-processed foods contain additives, fillers and often unrecognizable ingredients.

Previous medical research has shown that high levels of ultra-processed food consumption is associated with greater risk of adverse health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity. The findings indicate that a stop sign indicating that a product is ultra-processed can reduce consumers' evaluations of the healthfulness of the product and increase their perceptions of long-term disease risk.

More information: Garrett Rybak et al, Reducing the negative impact of ultra-processed foods: Consumer response to natural claims, organic claims, and processing level disclosures, *Journal of Business Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114588](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114588)

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