

Research focuses on how food marketing creates a false sense of health

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Cherry 7-Up Antioxidant is one of the products used in the research study. Credit: University of Houston

Health-related buzzwords, such as "antioxidant," "gluten-free" and "whole grain," lull consumers into thinking packaged food products labeled with those words are healthier than they actually are, according to a new research study conducted by scholars at the University of Houston (UH).

That "false sense of health," as well as a failure to understand the information presented in nutrition facts panels on packaged food, may be contributing to the obesity epidemic in the United States, said Temple Northup, an assistant professor at the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at UH.

"Saying Cherry 7-Up contains antioxidants is misleading. Food marketers are exploiting consumer desires to be healthy by marketing products as nutritious when, in fact, they're not," said Northup, principal investigator of the study, "Truth, Lies, and Packaging: How Food Marketing Creates a False Sense of Health."

The study examined the degree to which consumers link marketing terms on food packaging with good health. It found that consumers tend to view food products labeled with health-related euphemisms as healthier than those without them. The research also showed that the nutrition facts panels printed on food packaging as required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration do little to counteract that buzzword marketing.

"Words like organic, antioxidant, natural and gluten-free imply some sort of healthy benefit," Northup said. "When people stop to think about it, there's nothing healthy about Antioxidant Cherry 7-Up – it's mostly filled with high fructose syrup or sugar. But its name is giving you this clue that there is some sort of health benefit to something that is not healthy at all."

The study also looks at the "priming" psychology behind the words to explain why certain words prompt consumers to assign a health benefit to a

[food product](#) with unhealthy ingredients.

"For example, if I gave you the word 'doctor,' not only 'doctor' would be accessible in your mind – now all these other things would be accessible in your mind - 'nurse,' 'stethoscope,' etc.," Northup said. "What happens when these words become accessible, they tend to influence or bias your frame of mind and how you evaluate something."

This triggered concept is then available to influence later thoughts and behaviors, often without explicit awareness of this influence – the so-called priming effect, Northup said.

Northup developed an experiment using priming theory to gather quantitative research on how food marketers influence consumers. He developed an online survey that randomly showed images of food products that either included actual marketing words, like organic, or a Photoshop image removing any traces of those words, thereby creating two different images of the same product. A total of 318 study participants took the survey to rate how "healthy" each product was.

The products with trigger words in their labels analyzed in the study were: Annie's Bunny Fruit Snacks (Organic), Apple Sauce (Organic), Chef Boyardee Beefaroni (Whole Grain) Chef Boyardee Lasagna (Whole Grain), Chocolate Cheerios (Heart Healthy), Cherry 7-Up (Antioxidant), Smuckers Peanut Butter (All Natural) and Tostitos (All Natural).

Northup found when participants were shown the front of [food packaging](#) that included one of those trigger words, they would rate the items as healthier.

"I took a label from Cherry 7-Up Antioxidant and Photoshop it without the word 'antioxidant' and only the words, 'Cherry 7-Up.' I then asked people via the online survey which one they thought was healthier," said Northup. "Each time a participant saw one of the triggering words on a label, they would identify it as healthier than the other image without the word."

After completing the product evaluations, the study

participants then reviewed the nutrition facts panels on a variety of products. These labels would be presented two at a time so the participants could choose the healthier food or drink option.

"Food marketers say there are nutritional labels, so people can find out what's healthy and what's not," he said. "Findings from this research study indicate people aren't very good at reading nutritional labels even in situations where they are choosing between salmon and Spam. Approximately 20 percent picked Spam as the healthier option over salmon," said Northup.

Northup hopes the results of this study will contribute to an increased dialogue on how food is marketed, guide development of specific media literacy and help people understand the effects of how [food](#) is marketed to consumers.

Provided by University of Houston

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