

Label Lust: How Eco-Claims Seduce Our Health Perceptions, Taste Buds, and What's in Our Carts

As environmental and health concerns increasingly shape consumer behavior, eco-labels have emerged as influential tools in the consumer-packaged goods (CPG) industry. Yet, the psychological mechanisms through which these labels affect consumer perceptions and decision-making remain underexplored. This research investigates how unregulated eco-labels—those not certified by third-party institutions—impact consumers' perceptions of healthiness and taste, and how these perceptions, in turn, influence purchase intentions. Drawing on cue utilization theory and the concept of health halos, this work explores whether eco-labels act as heuristic cues that trigger favorable inferences about products. Across six studies employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the presence of a generic eco-label significantly shapes consumer evaluations by activating beliefs about a product's health and flavor profile.

Study 1 uses open-ended responses to assess consumer associations with “eco-friendly” labels. Participants most commonly linked the term to environmental benefits, followed by healthiness and organic quality. Building on this, Study 2 confirms through an experiment that eco-labeled products generate higher purchase intentions than identical unlabeled ones. Studies 3A and 3B explore a sequential mediation model in which eco-labels enhance perceptions of healthiness, which in turn increase taste expectations, leading to greater purchase intentions. These effects were observed across two different food categories—coconut peanuts and peanut butter—providing robust evidence for the proposed model. Study 4 tests whether the type of eco-label matters by comparing a generic eco-label to one emphasizing eco-friendly packaging. Only the generic label, which implies product-level sustainability, elicited positive perceptions of

health and taste. This finding underscores the importance of message framing in label effectiveness. Study 5 examines the moderating role of consumer altruism. Results show that when consumers perceive their purchase as an altruistic act, the effects of eco-labeling on healthiness and taste perceptions are heightened. Without this perception, the influence of the eco-label diminishes. This highlights the emotional and moral dimensions of sustainable consumption.

Together, these studies provide theoretical and practical insights into the broader impact of eco-labeling. Theoretically, the research extends cue utilization theory by demonstrating that eco-labels serve as signals not only for environmental performance but also for internal product attributes like healthiness and taste. Practically, the findings suggest that marketers should highlight both sustainability and health benefits when using eco-labels and should consider framing messages to appeal to consumer altruism. In sum, eco-labels do more than signal environmental value—they influence core drivers of consumer food choice. Understanding these mechanisms enables more effective use of sustainability cues in marketing and product design.