

The case that I am focusing on for this project is the topic of food/nutrition labels, which stems from the discussion that we started in class about deception and hidden truth on food labels. When I was at Safeway this weekend I paid particular attention to the labels. While shopping for groceries, the average consumer is faced with a variety of options. For example, in class we discussed the choice between eggs labeled as “free-range,” “cage-free,” “organic,” and “regular.” There are many other types of food that appear to be the same, yet have different labels that I observed. In the meat department one must choose between “grass-fed,” “locally raised,” “organic,” “natural,” and different percentages of fat. In the seafood department you are faced with the choice between “farm-raised,” “wild-caught,” and “sustainable” fish and other seafood. When it comes to produce you can choose between “organic,” “local,” and unlabeled. Even more confusing are the aisles of packaged/processed foods which contain labels ranging from “low-calorie,” “low-fat,” “dairy-free,” “low-sodium,” and “low-sugar” to “extra creamy,” “sugar-free,” “no artificial colors” and “good source of fiber.”

I presented my supermarket observations to two different people. One was a male friend close to my age (20 years old) who is a student at Georgetown. The other was an older woman (approx. 50 years old) who is a lawyer and has a family with two kids in their early twenties.

I used the tools that we discussed in the last homework assignment, specifically Kahneman’s piece about the cognitive effects of anchoring, which suggests that anchoring mechanisms make people more suggestible and gullible, and less likely to think twice about something. I also referred to Cook and Lewandowsky’s advice for debunking myths in order to figure out how to present my evidence/observations. I didn’t want to fall into the trap of the familiarity backfire effect or the overkill backfire effect in which the actual debunking is complicated and difficult to understand, consequently making people just believe the myth more. So, I tried to present my observations as casual commentary on going grocery shopping, describing briefly what I saw and noticed on my trip to Safeway. In regards to their perceptions of the observations, I explained what cognitive biases are and how to try to avoid them.

I presented my observations pretty similarly to both people, based on the assumption that they both shop for groceries at a similar supermarket without dietary restrictions. They could therefore be the “average” American consumer that major brands target. First I presented my analysis of the supermarket labels, suggesting that the seemingly same product can be labeled in different ways and put in different packaging, which reflects the description on the label. For example, standard cow milk in a carton vs. “plant-based, soy-free” milk in a smooth, green and blue plastic bottle. I suggested that these two types of packing and the labels send different messages to the consumer. I also suggested that although labeled differently, the labels are still confusing: what does *plant-based* really mean? What kind of plant? Is it therefore dairy-free? Lactose-free? Next, I described how packaged foods are labeled, as mentioned in the first paragraph. An example I described was Oreos, which come in a “sugar-free” version of the original cookie. I showed the participants a photo of the label of sugar-free Oreos. I also showed the subjects the label of Strawberry Pop-Tarts, which claims to be “baked with real fruit.”



I asked questions, such as: if it is sugar-free, what is it sweetened with? What is the difference between sugar and sugar alcohol? Do you understand the words on the ingredient list? Does the label want you to believe it is healthier? Does this mean it is actually healthier?

When asked these questions, both subjects seemed to realize, in the process of answering the questions, that they really did not know or understand the difference between a sugar and a sugar alcohol, or what the various chemical additives were. Furthermore neither said they would have bothered to read deep into the ingredient lists of either products, or of products in general had I not asked them. However, when I pointed out that it says halfway through the label that the Pop-Tarts are made with “two percent or less of dried strawberries, dried pears, dried apples,” the subjects were both shocked that this qualified the product to claim “baked with real fruit.” Overall the subjects seemed really surprised when they actually read the labels and tried to pronounce the ingredients. Both acknowledged that they had never analyzed labels before buying products.

The younger male subject responded with somewhat of indifference to the different types of labels and their different messages. He said he’s in college so he usually doesn’t want to spend too much time at the supermarket, so he usually just buys the cheaper options of each product that he needs. In doing so, he doesn’t pay too much attention to the label. On the other hand, the older woman said she tries to make an effort to buy “healthy” food, meaning organic or natural, but that in retrospect she does not really know the difference between specifications such as cage free or organic so she will just buy one arbitrarily, or stick to the brand that she usually buys.

Ultimately I did not have a specific goal going into this exercise, rather I was curious to see what people’s reactions would be when I asked them to analyze or look more closely at very familiar food products that they have eaten or bought before. In the process of doing so I realized that I had never looked this closely at food labels myself, so this exercise proved to be more productive than I had anticipated. I am glad I was able to bring the issue of deceiving/hidden food labels to my subjects’ attentions; however, I do not think that I was able

to persuade them to analyze labels to this same extent going forward. I understand that they are both busy people and therefore that stopping to read all of the ingredients on a label would be time consuming and also confusing. While this is a seemingly mundane topic, I think it is such an important issue because **if consumers are not aware, or do not care, about what is in their food or the different products to choose from, companies will only continue to exploit this lack of knowledge to make profits.** Going forward, I realize that I need to educate myself more on food labels because it is something that I do not know as much about as I would like. In addition, I am interested in thinking about how I could offer advice to consumers about reading labels quickly and efficiently in order to avoid buying products that are mislabeled or that contains BS ingredients.