DO LIGHT FOOD CLAIMS LEAD TO OBESITY? AN INVESTIGATION WITH BEHAVIOURAL DATA

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Extended Abstract

Purpose – The introduction of light food products (e.g. low-fat; low-sugar) has been a strategy put forward from companies, and public authorities, to address the raising public discourse in relation to the importance of following a healthy diet (Chrysochou 2010). It is thus of no surprise why such food products have gained significant consumer acceptance and growth rates (Krystallis and Chrysochou 2011; Sjostrom et al. 2014). A critical issue addressed in earlier literature is that light claims may decrease consumers’ consumption guilt and result in overconsumption (Wansink and Chandon 2006). In other words, products with light claims may, instead of preventing, lead to obesity. A criticism to these studies is that are based on experimental data, and therefore although consumers are actually misled, their actual behaviour may still not change. In this paper, we try to address this issue by looking at performance of brands and in particular brands that carry light claims. Our overarching hypothesis is that brands that carry light claims are bought more frequently, showing further excess loyalty, and thus drive consumers to overconsumption.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Panel data provided by GfK in Denmark were analysed for 7 product categories across a series of 6 years (2006-2011). For each product category basic brand performance measures (i.e. market share, penetration and purchase frequency) were calculated, which were further used as input measures for estimating the NBD-Dirichlet model (Ehrenberg et al. 2004). The model was used as a benchmark tool to assess the overall performance of brands that carry light claims, compared to those that do not carry any.
Findings – Our results show that in two (milk and yoghurt) out of seven product categories that we analysed, brands with light claims showed an excess on purchase frequencies both at the category and brand level. In the remaining categories (soft-drinks, salad dressing, soda, dessert cheese, margarine) we did not observe any excess performance on purchase frequencies. Our findings thus show that light claims may lead to overconsumption, but it is not a universal effect. On the opposite, the results show that it is category specific, and seems to occur more on categories that are considered as relative virtue (i.e. product categories that promote health). For categories that traditionally are considered as vice (i.e. do not promote health), such as soft-drinks and soda, consumers purchase, and thus consume, equal amounts.

Research Implications – Our results have several implications. First, the backfire effect of light-claims in leading to overconsumption seems to be evident through behavioural data. However, it is a category specific phenomenon. Second, consumers may show excess loyal to a specific light claim but this loyalty is not driven from increased purchase frequency, but from preference toward such positioning claims. In reality such increased preference is actually desired to shift consumers’ focus on healthier alternatives of food products. Finally, although more product categories should be included to safely conclude, the fact that light claims do not lead to overconsumption on relative vice categories but on virtue ones, is alarming as to how valuable are for product categories that there is no particular need to change consumers’ preferences.

Originality/Value - Few studies if any have used behavioural data to address the effect of product claims on brand performance (Chrysochou et al. 2012; Sjostrom et al. 2014). This study contributes to this literature. It further gives more insight to the effect of light claims on leading to overconsumption.

Keywords: Light claims, Overconsumption, Purchase Frequency, Brand Performance Measures.

References


