

**Millennial and Generation Z Consumers' Conceptualization of Clean Label Food Products**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

Food label claims are appearing more frequently as widespread concern over food ingredients has caused consumers to become interested in new food items that encourage a healthier lifestyle (Asioli et al., 2017; The Nielsen Company, 2017). As 75% of consumers assess ingredients in a product, many are shifting their shopping focus to look for label claims declaring specific product attributes, rather than concentrating on the overall nutrition of the product (Label Insight, 2017; The Nielsen Company, 2017). One label claim that has surfaced as a result is termed the “clean label.” Items within this category are typically organic, natural, and “free from” any artificial ingredients; however, a mutually agreed-upon and straightforward definition of clean label food items does not exist (Aschemann-Witzel, Varela, & Peschel, 2019; Asioli et al., 2017). Millennial and Generation Z consumers have described their definition of healthy food as natural, organic, locally sourced, or sustainable attributes, as well as possessing a distinct focus on clean eating (Hoffman, 2012; Rosenbloom, 2018; The Nielsen Company, 2017; The NPD Group, 2018). As such, it is crucial to determine Millennial and Generation Z consumers’ conceptualization of clean labels due to their clear capacity for controlling the future of the trend.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Food label claims are generally understood to be used as heuristic cues, because they provide an avenue for a quick purchase decision without the need for complex cognitive processing (Hoek, Roling, & Holdsworth, 2013). Thus, the Heuristic-Systematic Processing Model (HSM) was used as the conceptual framework for this study. HSM posits that individuals make their decision about a persuasive message based upon either information they already possess (i.e., heuristically) or through comprehensive analysis (i.e., systematically) (Chaiken, 1980, 1987; Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). Their ultimate attitude formation is mediated by their level of issue involvement, message characteristics, and source characteristics (Chaiken, 1980). Verbeke (2008) recommended using heuristic processing in the context of food- and nutrition-related research due to most decisions being made based on heuristics.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of consumers’ conceptualization of clean label foods. One research question guided this study:

**RQ1:** What were participants’ conceptualizations of clean label products?

This study was part of a larger study that assessed consumers’ perceptions, attitudes, willingness to pay, and visual attention allocation to clean label food products. The complete study design was a 2 (visual: yes vs. no) x 2 (textual: yes vs. no) x 2 (product type: chips vs. granola bar) within- and between-subjects factorial design with a control, where participants saw one version of a clean label on two distinct products. The four label conditions were: 1) visual only, 2) visual and textual, 3) textual only, and 4) control. Participants’ conceptualization of clean labels was assessed directly after viewing the images, through a free response item stating, “to the best of your ability, please tell us everything you know about clean labels.” Answers from the free response item were coded according to their distinct theme. Themes were identified after a review of all responses, with new codes emerging throughout the process. As new codes were developed, answers that had previously been coded were reexamined.

### Findings

The researcher identified 12 distinct themes among the responses ( $n = 117$ ) and each response was coded accordingly into one category. A majority of participants ( $n = 79$ ) fell within four themes, ranging from no knowledge to naming most of the attributes of a clean label (Table 1). Twenty-nine participants made an association with clean labels and packaging features, although there were no differences between the four label conditions in influencing this occurrence. The remaining eight themes encompassed responses from 38 participants and focused on general labeling tactics, or associated the clean label with the nutrition panel or attributes such as quality, sustainability, or chemicals.

Table 1

*Participants' Conceptualization of Clean Labels (N = 79)*

Code	Label 1 <i>f</i>	Label 2 <i>f</i>	Label 3 <i>f</i>	Label 4 <i>f</i>	Total <i>f</i>
Don't know, never heard of it, or blank	5	7	9	9	30
Associated clean label with packaging features	8	6	7	8	29
Described 1-2 attributes of a clean label	2	6	7	8	12
Knew most of the attributes of a clean label	1	5	1	1	8

### Conclusions

The results from this free response question provide insight into current Millennial and Generation Z consumers' conceptualization of clean label food items. As the trend increases in popularity, it is crucial food marketing professionals understand it and communicate an accurate characterization to consumers. These findings indicate this group of consumers has little knowledge of clean labels or gravitate toward associating these label claims with packaging that is free from any marketing elements. Only a small group of participants were able to provide a comparable definition of clean label items, with little variation in which label claim led to the most accurate response. Even as Millennial and Generation Z consumers are encouraging the clean label trend, more education surrounding the label's meaning is required from agricultural and food communicators. Without the proper context, consumers are unable to use the labels as heuristic cues, rather taking information from alternate aspects of the product or using information from unrelated heuristic cues. Ultimately, a mutually agreed-upon and regulated definition would provide the most stability for the future of the clean label trend.

### Implications/Recommendations

This study provides an avenue for future research regarding Millennial and Generation Z categorization of food label claims, as they have potential to influence communication efforts. Millennial and Generation Z consumers have a firm grip on the future of food trends, and therefore, agricultural practices. By understanding their conceptualization of certain topics, communicators can craft salient messages and provide education in areas of sustained misinformation. Companies who produce clean label foods should lobby for a government definition of the claim, with the intention of keeping the trend from steering in alternate directions.

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