

# 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)
- 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

## THEORETICAL 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)
- 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

### RQ1: What were participants' conceptualizations of clean label products?

- The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of consumers' conceptualization of clean label foods
- 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
- 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)
- Participants stated:

*"When I see something that has a "clean label" I start by thinking about food that is processed in the most ethical way possible as well as food that does not have artificial flavors. I also think about food that isn't overly processed. In my mind clean=healthy and ethical"*

*"Clean labels show just the product and the product name. Nothing else"*

*"Clean labels do not contain any artificial ingredients. They are natural and minimally processed"*

*"[Clean labels are] labels on food that tell you how the food was made. If it organic, non-GMO, natural, pesticide free, etc. Clean labels usually go on agriculture products like crops and livestock"*

*"Clean labels are labels that give the most important information about what is in the food and the quality/goodness of the food for you"*

*"I think that they are there to inform the consumer of the benefits of what they are consuming"*

*"Clean labels include serving size, calories per serving, percentages of fat (unsaturated/saturated/trans), sugar, etc. and list ingredients beginning from the most to least amount."*

## CONCLUSIONS

- 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
- 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

## 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

Table 1

Participants' Conceptualization of Clean Labels (n = 117)

Code	Label 1 f	Label 2 f	Label 3 f	Label 4 f
Don't know, never heard of it, or blank	5	7	9	9
Associated clean label with packaging features	8	6	7	8
Described 1-2 attributes of a clean label	2	6	7	8
Knew most of the attributes of a clean label	1	5	1	1
Associated with quality or origin	2	2	3	1
Provides consumers with truthful information and/or isn't misleading	2	1	2	3
Associated with nutrition panel or nutrition information	1	0	3	2
Associated with sustainability/environment	3	0	1	0
Associated with the product being free from chemicals and/or pesticides	3	0	0	0
Referenced the label featured on the stimuli	1	1	1	0
Associated with marketing tactics of organization-supported labels	0	1	1	1
Corresponded with multiple categories	1	1	1	0

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