

## HEALTHY FOOD MARKETING ACROSS CONSUMER AND RETAIL LEVELS: A DESCRIPTIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTION

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### ABSTRACT

Healthy food marketing influences consumers and retailers across three stages of the decision-making process. The purpose of the study is to describe and compare how marketing cues shape consumer perception, how specific strategies influence purchase decisions, and how store level conditions affect the adoption of health-oriented marketing practices. Three peers reviewed articles form the basis of the analysis. The first article, by Li et al. (2024), explains about packaging cues related to taste and health shape consumers' beliefs about product healthfulness and their purchase intentions. Their findings show that taste-focused cues increase purchase intention but may reduce perceived healthiness, while health-focused cues enhance health perceptions across product types. The second article, by Vidal and Castellano (2022), identifies the strategies that influence purchase intention. Their work highlights the effect of front of pack labels, nutritional information, natural quality cues, and emotional appeals on consumer choice. The third article, by Houghtaling et al. (2019), reviews the factors that influence food store owners' and managers' willingness to use healthy choice architecture and marketing mix strategies. Their findings show that adoption depends on customer demand, profit expectations, staff capacity, and operational constraints. Consumers form health beliefs from marketing cues, these beliefs influence responses to targeted strategies, and store operators adjust their marketing mix in response to customer behavior and financial expectations. This study contributes an integrated understanding of how perception, strategy, and retail decision making interact, offering insights for marketers, public health planners, and store managers who aim to strengthen healthy food environments.

**Keywords:** Healthy Food Marketing; Consumer Perception; Retail Decision Making; Purchase Intention; Choice Architecture; Front-of-Pack Labels; Health Communication; Taste-Health Trade-off

## INTRODUCTION

Food marketing shapes what people buy. It also shapes what they believe about healthy eating. Walk through any supermarket and you will see this immediately. A bottle of fruit drink promises "natural" on the front. The label suggests wholesome ingredients. Yet the product contains added sugar levels that approach daily limits. Research shows that 97% of sugar-sweetened fruit drinks in the United States carry at least one nutrition-related claim. "Natural" labels appear on 27% of breakfast cereals purchased nationwide. These claims create a health halo. Consumers assume products possess positive attributes entirely unrelated to the actual claim.

This heuristic process occurs because shoppers rarely examine detailed nutrition facts. They rely on quick visual judgments. Colors signal freshness. Images suggest authenticity. Brief claims hint at benefits. Li et al. (2024) demonstrated this experimentally. Taste-focused packaging cues significantly boost purchase intention. The same cues simultaneously reduce perceived healthiness. Health-focused cues elevate health perceptions across all product categories. Consumers respond to emotional triggers and visual shortcuts that bypass systematic evaluation.

Recent media reports also highlight concerns about misleading health claims on food packaging. An analysis of hundreds of grocery products found that front-of-package messages such as "heart healthy" or "keto-friendly" often do not correspond with the actual nutritional quality of the product, which may influence consumers' perceptions during quick purchase decisions (Malesu, 2025).

The mechanism likely involves the Elaboration Likelihood Model. This model suggests that individuals with limited motivation or cognitive capacity rely on peripheral cues. They use colors, claims, and emotional appeals rather than careful analysis of nutritional content. Logullo et al. (2024) found that nearly half of parents incorrectly believe soda with a "natural" claim contains no added sugar. Only 12% hold this belief when no claim appears. The claim functions as a peripheral cue that short-circuits rational assessment.

Yet the narrative extends beyond individual choice. Store owners and managers face practical constraints when implementing healthy marketing tools. Houghtaling et al. (2019) synthesized evidence from retail studies. Adoption depends on specific calculations. Will customers respond favorably? Can staff manage additional workload? Will profit margins remain stable? Without affirmative answers, interventions stall. This creates a feedback loop. Consumer preferences shape retail environments. Retail environments subsequently shape consumer behavior. Isolated interventions become difficult to sustain.

Marketers must recognize how cues shape long-term beliefs. Policymakers need to account for retail constraints that determine intervention reach. Store managers require evidence about which strategies work in practice. This study examines how perception, strategy, and retail decision-making interact across the complete decision chain.

### Research Purpose

Many studies explain separate parts of this process. Some focus on how consumers form beliefs about health. Others examine which marketing strategies influence purchase intention. A smaller group investigates store operator decisions related to healthy marketing tools. However, few studies compare all stages together in a connected framework (Li et al., 2024; Vidal & Castellano, 2022; Houghtaling et al., 2019).

This paper responds to that gap by using a descriptive comparative approach. Comparative reviews are commonly used to analyze patterns across multiple studies and

identify shared themes within behavioral research (Durach et al., 2021; Paré et al., 2015). This approach is suitable for connecting consumer perception, point-of-purchase strategies, and store-level decision-making, as recommended in recent marketing and nutrition research (Kos et al., 2023; Tavares et al., 2024).

The purpose of this comparison is to describe how marketing cues shape perception, how specific strategies influence purchase intention, and how store-level conditions affect the implementation of healthy marketing tools. By examining these three stages together, the study aims to highlight the interaction between consumer behavior and store practices, offering an integrated understanding of healthy food marketing influence across the full decision chain (Steiner et al., 2025; Roberto et al., 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Marketing Strategies in Food Products

Marketing strategies shape how consumers judge food products. Companies design packaging, visuals, color choices, and health claims to attract attention at the point of sale. Research shows that packaging serves as both an informative and persuasive tool, signaling value within seconds while consumers make fast decisions. These signals influence beliefs about taste, quality, and health (Li et al., 2024; Steiner et al., 2025; Kos et al., 2023).

Li et al. (2024) explains that consumers rely on simple cues when deciding whether a product is healthy. Their work demonstrates that taste-focused and health-focused packaging cues shape health perceptions and purchase intentions, especially during quick decision-making moments. Taste cues increase purchase intention but reduce perceived healthiness, while health cues enhance health perceptions across product categories. These findings align with studies emphasizing heuristic thinking in food choice, where consumers form judgments rapidly based on simple cues (Tavares et al., 2024; Logullo et al., 2024).

The theoretical mechanism behind this behavior involves the Elaboration Likelihood Model. This model suggests that consumers with limited motivation or cognitive capacity rely on peripheral cues such as colors, claims, and emotional appeals rather than central route processing through careful evaluation of nutritional content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Tavares et al., 2024). This explains why visual shortcuts play a dominant role in point-of-sale decisions.

### Marketing Strategies That Trigger Purchasing Decisions

Vidal and Castellano (2022) identify specific marketing strategies influencing consumers when they decide to buy a product. They highlight front-of-pack labels, calorie information, ingredient descriptions, natural cues, and emotional messages as key drivers of purchase intention among young adults. Their findings support the idea that clear, simple labels enhance consumer confidence and shape perceived product healthfulness (Kos et al., 2023; Tavares et al., 2024).

This study connects perception to action. If packaging shapes beliefs, these beliefs influence how consumers respond to point-of-purchase strategies. The shortcuts described by Vidal and Castellano (2022) match the visual and message-based cues outlined by Li et al. (2024). This pattern is consistent with broader research showing that emotional and heuristic cues strongly influence consumer decisions in nutrition contexts (Roberto et al., 2021; Logullo et al., 2024).

### **Store Level Factors That Influence Healthy Marketing Use**

Houghtaling et al. (2019) review studies on food store decision-making to explain why owners and managers choose to use healthy marketing tools. Their findings indicate that store operators are more likely to adopt strategies such as healthy choice architecture when they expect stable profits, positive customer responses, and adequate staff capacity. Conversely, they hesitate when facing financial risk, low demand, or operational constraints.

These findings align with research on retail environments showing that store-level adoption of health-oriented strategies depends on both economic feasibility and customer behavior (Cameron et al., 2022; Winkler et al., 2022). Stores increase healthy product displays when consumers show interest and reduce them when sales decline, creating a feedback mechanism between consumer choices and store implementation (Cameron et al., 2022).

### **Comparative Insight Across the Three Articles**

The three studies examine different stages of influence. The first focuses on perception, the second focuses on purchase intention, and the third focuses on store level choices. When these stages are combined, a consistent system appears (Modzelewska et al., 2021; Chen & Antonelli, 2020).

1. Visual cues shape health beliefs.
2. These beliefs influence responses to point of purchase strategies.
3. Store operators adjust strategies based on consumer behavior.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a descriptive comparative approach. This method is commonly employed to analyze similarities and differences across multiple studies and is particularly suitable for exploring processes involving consumer perception and behavior (Snyder, 2024; Paré et al., 2015). Descriptive comparative research allows researchers to identify patterns and relationships across studies without conducting hypothesis testing or statistical modeling. This makes the method appropriate for examining how consumer perception, marketing strategies, and store-level decision-making interact within the literature (Durach et al., 2021; Sauer & Seuring, 2023).

Following recent methodological guidance, the comparative review was structured to evaluate the flow of evidence across selected studies, ensuring consistency with best practices in narrative and comparative analysis (Sauer & Seuring, 2023; Logullo et al., 2024). The World Health Organization (2023) also recommends systematic approaches when analyzing food marketing influences, which further supports the use of a structured comparative framework in this study.

### **Selection Criteria**

Three peer-reviewed articles were selected based on specific criteria. First, all articles were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2019 and 2026 to ensure recency of evidence. Second, all articles were written in English to ensure accessibility and consistent interpretation. Third, all articles employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches with experimental, survey, or systematic review designs to ensure methodological rigor. Fourth, each article examined a distinct stage of the marketing influence process: perception formation, purchase intention, or store-level implementation.

Articles were identified through systematic searches of the PubMed database and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords including “healthy food marketing”, “consumer perception”, “packaging cues”, “front-of-pack labels”, “purchase intention”, and “retail choice architecture”.

### **Sources of Data**

The analysis was based on three peer-reviewed articles that represent different stages of the marketing influence process. Li et al. (2024) examined how packaging cues related to taste and health influence consumers’ perceptions of product healthfulness and purchase intentions. Vidal and Castellano (2022) analyzed marketing strategies that influence purchasing decisions among young adult consumers, including front-of-pack labels, nutritional information, and natural quality cues. Houghtaling et al. (2019) reviewed store-level factors affecting the adoption of healthy marketing and choice architecture strategies among food store owners and managers. Together, these studies provide complementary perspectives that allow a structured comparative analysis of consumer perception, purchasing behavior, and retail decision making.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

All selected articles were reviewed in full, and key information was extracted from each study. This included research objectives, variables examined, methodologies applied, and primary findings. The extraction process followed recommendations for structured narrative synthesis to ensure clarity and consistency across studies (Logullo et al., 2024; Page et al., 2021). Information related to consumer perception, point-of-purchase strategies, and store-level decision factors was organized into thematic categories to support comparison.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The analysis followed two main steps. First, each article was described using parallel analytical categories, including marketing focus, research population, methodological approach, and key findings. This step ensured that each study was examined using the same structural framework, which is a common practice in comparative review methods (Paré et al., 2015; Durach et al., 2021).

Second, the studies were compared to identify shared themes and differences across the stages of the marketing influence process. The comparison highlighted how consumer perception, marketing strategies, and store-level decision factors interact within the broader healthy food marketing environment. This structured comparative analysis allows the study to synthesize insights from different levels of the marketing system and present them as an integrated framework.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The comparative analysis identifies three clear stages of influence across the studies. Each article contributes evidence from a different part of the decision process. Li et al. (2024) studied consumer responses to food marketing signals using controlled experiments with 198 participants in China. Their research employed a between-subjects experimental design with three packaging cue conditions: taste-focused, health-focused, and neutral. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate yogurt products with different packaging designs. The study measured both implicit associations using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and explicit purchase intentions through self-report scales. Their results show that people form health

beliefs from simple cues such as color saturation, imagery, and short health references. They report that taste-focused cues increase purchase intention but simultaneously reduce perceived healthiness.

These early impressions shape long-term beliefs even when the nutritional value does not match the message (Steiner et al., 2025; Tavares et al., 2024). Vidal and Castellano (2022) examined young adult consumers using survey-based data from 256 respondents in Spain. Their research utilized a quantitative survey design with structured questionnaires measuring purchase intention, health consciousness, and responses to various marketing cues. The sample consisted of university students aged 18-30 years, selected through convenience sampling. Their results show that front-of-pack labels, calorie information, ingredient descriptions, and natural quality cues increase purchase intention. They also report that emotional triggers influence these choices. Respondents favored products with simple, easy-to-read labels. These results match the cues identified by Li et al. (2024) and align with recent findings that consumers rely heavily on simplified visual cues when evaluating healthfulness (Kos et al., 2023; Roberto et al., 2021).

Houghtaling et al. (2019) reviewed 87 studies that examined store-level decision-making among food store owners and managers in the United States. Their research employed systematic literature review methodology, searching multiple databases including PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus. Studies were included if they examined retail food environment interventions and reported qualitative or quantitative data from store owners or managers. Their results show that operators support healthy choice architecture when they expect stable profit, positive customer response, and available labor. They also show that operators hesitate to apply healthy marketing strategies when they face low demand, financial risk, or limited staff resources. Similar conclusions appear in newer research, which finds that retail adoption of healthy marketing tools depends on both economic viability and perceived customer interest (Winkler et al., 2022; Cameron et al., 2022).

Taken together, the results show a connected sequence. Marketing cues shape health beliefs. These beliefs influence responses to point-of-purchase strategies. Store operators then adjust their actions based on the way consumers behave. This sequence appears consistently across the three articles and is supported by broader models of consumer food decision-making (Modzelewska et al., 2021; Logullo et al., 2024).

## **Discussion**

The findings show that the three studies form a complete model of how healthy food marketing influences decision-making. The first article explains how perceptions form. The second shows how these perceptions shape purchase intention. The third explains how store operators respond to these patterns. When these stages are combined, the influence process becomes clearer and supports existing behavioral frameworks.

Li et al. (2024) provides the foundation by showing that consumers rely on fast and simple judgments. Their experimental design with randomized assignment and mixed-methods measurement (IAT plus self-report) strengthens the validity of these findings. These cues activate heuristic thinking, meaning consumers make quick decisions without detailed evaluation. Recent studies reinforce that heuristic cues such as colors, images, and health tags remain dominant influences at the point of sale (Logullo et al., 2024; Tavares et al., 2024).

Vidal and Castellano (2022) show how these early perceptions influence behavior. Their survey-based approach with a defined population of young adults allows for generalization within this demographic. They identify specific strategies that activate the beliefs formed during the first stage. Their respondents reacted strongly to simple labels, natural cues, and

ingredient lists. These findings align with more recent research showing that consumers prefer minimalistic, transparent labeling systems, especially when making fast health judgments (Tavares et al., 2024; Kos et al., 2023).

Houghtaling et al. (2019) demonstrate that store-level choices depend on consumer behavior and economic conditions. Their systematic review methodology with comprehensive database searching and inclusion criteria ensures broad coverage of existing evidence. Operators support healthy marketing strategies when they see positive results. They reduce these strategies when sales are low or when operational costs rise. This creates a feedback loop in which consumer preferences shape the retail environment and the retail environment shapes consumer choices. More recent work also highlights the importance of retailer perceptions of risk and profit (Winkler et al., 2022; Cameron et al., 2022).

Based on the combined evidence, healthy food marketing does not operate in isolation but instead forms a continuous behavioral chain. The strength of this chain depends on whether the cues at each stage reinforce each other. For example, if packaging creates strong health impressions but store placement is weak, the influence may break. Conversely, consistent signals across perception, labeling, and store layout create a stronger behavioral push toward healthier purchases. This perspective aligns with multi-level marketing models that emphasize synergy across consumer and retail environments (Modzelewska et al., 2021; Logullo et al., 2024).

The methodological diversity across the three studies strengthens the overall findings. Li et al. (2024) used experimental methods with random assignments, establishing causal relationships between packaging cues and consumer responses. Vidal and Castellano (2022) employed survey methods with a specific population, enabling demographic-specific insights. Houghtaling et al. (2019) utilized systematic review methods, providing comprehensive evidence synthesis. This triangulation of methods increases confidence in the identified patterns and suggests that the three-stage model holds across different research approaches and contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how healthy food marketing influences consumers and store-level decisions across three stages: perception formation, purchase intention, and store implementation. The comparative analysis revealed a connected sequence that operates as a behavioral chain.

First, visual and taste cues shape consumers' health beliefs. Li et al. (2024) demonstrated that packaging cues activate heuristic processing, where taste-focused cues increase purchase intention while simultaneously reducing perceived healthiness. This suggests that early perceptual judgments are formed rapidly based on simple visual elements.

Second, these beliefs influence purchase decisions through specific mechanisms. Vidal and Castellano (2022) identified that front-of-pack labels, ingredient descriptions, and emotional triggers convert health perceptions into buying behavior. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on their alignment with the heuristic shortcuts consumers use at the point of sale.

Third, store operators adjust marketing strategies based on consumer responses, profit expectations, and operational capacity. Houghtaling et al. (2019) showed that adoption of healthy choice architecture depends on economic viability, customer demand, and staff availability. This creates a feedback loop where consumer behavior and retail environments continuously influence each other.

The findings have practical implications for three audiences. Marketers should design clear, simple, and emotionally engaging cues that align with heuristic processing to influence early perceptions. Policymakers may strengthen regulations on labeling to prevent misleading health claims, particularly those that exploit automatic associations between visual cues and healthfulness. Store managers can optimize healthy marketing tools by combining clear information with supportive placement strategies when customer demand and profit expectations are favorable.

Limitations include variations in methodological approaches across the reviewed studies, differences in cultural and economic contexts between the Chinese, Spanish, and US samples, and the cross-sectional nature of most primary studies included in the reviews. Future research should examine these stages in diverse populations beyond the current samples, explore longitudinal effects of repeated exposure to marketing cues, and investigate how digital marketing channels might alter the three-stage sequence. Overall, the study contributes an integrated understanding of healthy food marketing influence, linking perception, choice, and store behavior in a single decision-making chain.

### APPENDIX

There are no additional materials or raw data to be included in the appendix. All information used in this paper is derived from the three reviewed journal articles, and all relevant analysis has been presented in the main text.

**Tabel 1. Appendix A – Article Comparison**

Article	Sample / Population	Method	Key Findings	Stage of Influence
Li et al. (2024)	198 Chinese adults	Between-subjects experiment with IAT and self-report scales	Taste-focused cues increase purchase intention but reduce perceived healthiness; health-focused cues enhance health perceptions across categories; heuristic thinking activated	Perception
Vidal and Castellano (2022)	256 Spanish university students aged 18-30	Quantitative survey with structured questionnaires	Front-of-pack labels, calorie information, ingredient descriptions, natural cues, and emotional messages increase purchase intention; simple labels preferred	Purchase Intention
Houghtaling et al. (2019)	87 studies of US food store owners and managers	Systematic literature review of PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus	Store adoption of healthy marketing strategies depends on customer demand, profit expectations, and available labor; hesitation occurs when financial risk or low demand exists	Store Implementation

Table 2. Appendix B – Coding

Article	Research Question	Variables / Cues	Method	Key Findings	Notes
Li et al. (2024)	How do packaging cues influence perception and purchase intention of healthy food?	Packaging color saturation, taste, focused cues, health-focused cues, imagery, short health references	Controlled experiment with randomized assignment and Implicit Association Test	Consumers form health beliefs rapidly from visual cues; taste cues increase purchase intention but reduce perceived healthiness; health cues enhance health perceptions across product categories	Early-stage perception crucial for shaping beliefs; dual process theory explains heuristic processing
Vidal and Castellano (2022)	Which marketing strategies influence purchase intention?	Front-of-pack labels, caloric information, Ingredient lists, natural cues, emotional triggers	Survey (n=256) with convenience sampling	Clear, simple labels and emotional cues increase purchase intention; aligns with early perception cues; young adults prefer minimalistic, transparent labeling	Links perception to action; elaboration likelihood model explains peripheral cue processing
Houghtaling et al. (2019)	How do store-level factors influence adoption of healthy marketing?	Profit expectations, customer demand, staff availability, operational constraints, financial risk	Systematic literature review with narrative synthesis	Adoption of healthy marketing strategies occurs when demand and profit expectations are positive; reduced under low demand or limited labor; feedback loop exists	Feedback loop: consumer behavior affects store strategies; economic viability determines implementation

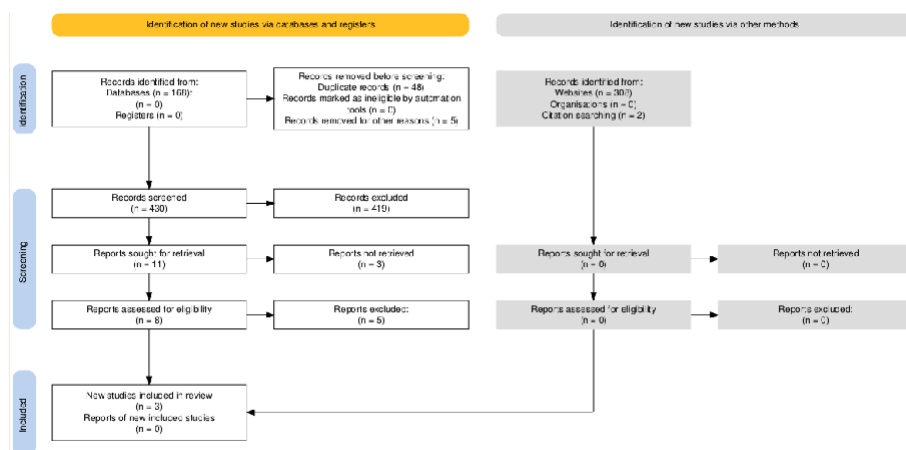


Figure 1. Appendix C - PRISMA Flow Diagram and Conceptual Framework

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