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Short Communication

How to position ‘mildly sustainable’ products: The joint impact of assortment display and price setting



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ABSTRACT

To tempt consumers towards more sustainable food choices, ‘intermediately’ sustainable products (i.e., in between conventional and organic) have been introduced. This poses the managerial question how to best position this range of products. In an experiment with intermediately sustainable meat products, we show that the choice share of these intermediate products is high when price level and physical display signal a consistent positioning of these products. This implies that the effect of layout depends on the price level at which intermediately sustainable products are offered. When these products are offered at intermediate prices, displaying them in a separate section will increase choice (i.e., unique feature positioning). Yet, when intermediately sustainable products are offered at low prices, a mixed display in which intermediately sustainable and conventional products are dispersed will be more effective in increasing choice for the intermediately sustainable options (i.e., comparative positioning). These results show the importance of assortment display in affecting the sales potential of products, and how the most optimal display in-store depends on price level.

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1. Introduction

Although consumers report positive attitudes towards organic products, sales levels remain low (Krystallis, Grunert, De Barcellos, Perrea, & Verbeke, 2012; Verhoef, 2005). For many consumers, the difference between relatively cheap conventional items and more expensive organic products is apparently too large to act upon their good intentions (Wier & Calverley, 2002). A meat market study for the European Commission showed a wide gap between consumer intentions to buy organic meat and their actual purchases (GfK EU3C, 2012). When asked if they would like to change their purchasing behavior, 41% of the surveyed European consumers mentioned buying more organic meat, but only 16% currently buy this type of meat at all. The most frequent answer to why they do not already buy organic meat more often is that they consider it too expensive. Offering products at a level of sustainability intermediate between conventional and organic products, rather than catering to the extremes of conventional versus organic products only, has been suggested as a solution (De Jonge & Van Trijp, 2013; Ingenbleek, Immink, Spoolder, Bokma, & Keeling, 2012). The communication of such a graded level is often

achieved through stars, smileys, or colors, and is common in areas such as healthfulness (Feunekes, Gortemaker, Willems, Lion, & Van den Kommer, 2008; Van Herpen, Hieke, & Van Trijp, 2014).

The introduction of products at intermediate levels of sustainability poses new questions, as to how these can best be positioned. Product positioning involves communicating to consumers what the product means, which benefits it delivers, and how this differs from competing products (Hooley, Piercy, & Nicoulaud, 2008). Effective positioning depends on the product's attribute levels being communicated (how products are positioned in attribute-space), on their physical display (where products are located in-store), and their interaction. A physical in-store display that is inconsistent with other marketing mix elements can negate an established positioning strategy (Buchanan, Simmons, & Bickart, 1999). Extending this, and based on the idea that consistency among product cues determines overall product evaluation (Miyazaki, Grewal, & Goodstein, 2005), we argue that the effectiveness of the positioning strategy for intermediately sustainable products depends on the extent to which it is consistently communicated. To investigate this, we use price level as an important product attribute and display organization (i.e., in separate section or intermixed with established product lines) as an important factor of physical display. Whereas price levels are constrained by production costs, retailers can decide upon assortment layout with much more flexibility. It is thus important for retailers to have

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insights on the likely effects of assortment layout at different possible price levels.

In the present study, we investigate the most extreme price levels for intermediate products that are realistic: a (low) price comparable to conventional products and a (high) price comparable to organic products, as well as an intermediate price. This implies that the assortment can contain options with the same price but different degrees of sustainability. We aim to show that even in such cases consumer response depends on assortment display. If the in-store display does not support direct product comparisons between conventional and intermediate alternatives, many consumers may not buy intermediate products even when price is as low as that of conventional products.

The main objectives of this study are thus to (1) demonstrate the viability and sales potential of intermediately sustainable products and to (2) show that the effects of price and assortment display are not independent of each other. By showing the interaction between price and assortment display, this study offers several novel insights. Specifically, whereas retailers and manufacturers may expect that low price levels will always increase sales, this study shows that the extent to which this occurs differs, depending on assortment display. Likewise, sales of products at intermediate price levels depend on assortment display, but the optimal display for products at intermediate price levels is not the same as the optimal display for low-priced products. These are important insights for retailers who extend their assortment beyond the conventional range by offering organic products and intermediately sustainable products. Retailers already often face “a dilemma as to where such [sustainable] products should be shelved” (Dahm, 2005), and want insights on whether to put sustainable products in a separate section or dispersed with conventional groceries (Lazarus, 2010). This becomes even more complex when there are also intermediately sustainable options. Should these be placed with organics to highlight their sustainability? Should these be placed in a separate section, to highlight their unique position? Or should they be together with conventional options to attract choice share from conventional buyers? To answer these questions, we turn to product positioning.

2. Positioning intermediately sustainable products

Product positioning aims at affecting consumer perceptions of a product within an explicit frame of reference, usually competing products (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). An important managerial decision is whether to focus mainly on the own product advantages and advocate the unique product features or to focus on comparison with competing products (Kalra & Goodstein, 1998). In unique feature positioning, intermediately sustainable products are presented as a separate product range, without explicit comparison to rival products. In a comparative positioning strategy (the ‘against’ position; Ries & Trout, 1986) intermediately sustainable products claim superiority over well-established alternatives in direct comparison.

A unique feature positioning entails communicating the ‘in-between’ nature of intermediately sustainable products as a unique feature. In general, products with intermediate attribute levels have an advantage over either of the extremes (Müller, Kroll, & Vogt, 2012; Simonson, 1989; Simonson & Tversky, 1992). This advantage is based on the trade-offs that are present (Simonson & Tversky, 1992), with a compromise option being “in the middle” on multiple attribute levels. The intermediately sustainable products are compromise options when these are offered at an intermediate price level. In addition to these advantages for products in the center of attribute-space, placing products in a separate section could signal their distinctiveness (Buchanan et al.,

1999) and thereby support a positioning as unique intermediate options. Congruency between intermediate price and display position to signal that the products are ‘in-between’ options may furthermore stimulate product choice. Thus, we expect that:

H1: When a range of intermediately sustainable products has mid-range prices, a layout in a separate subcategory increases the choice share of these products compared to mixed layouts.

Alternatively, comparative positioning is possible by placing the intermediately sustainable products in direct competition with either conventional products or organic products. This may be a viable strategy to gain share from conventional product customers by providing them with options to enhance sustainable choice at (limited) price premium. Generally, products with intermediate attribute levels tend to take more market share away from low-tier than from high-tier alternatives (Simonson & Tversky, 1992). Furthermore, there appears to be untapped demand for relatively more sustainable products among buyers of conventional products (De Jonge & Van Trijp, 2013; Ingenbleek et al., 2012). Positioning the range of intermediately sustainable products as direct competitors to conventional products may be successful with prices similar to those of conventional products and a physical place intermixed with these products. In that case, consumers are likely to focus product comparisons on products in close proximity and on concrete and alignable product attributes, such as price (Meyvis, Goldsmith, & Dhar, 2012). Placement in close proximity to conventional products allows the intermediately sustainable products to draw attention and be noticed more readily among consumers who would otherwise habitually buy conventionally produced products. Thus, we expect that:

H2: When a range of intermediately sustainable products has low prices, a mixed display with conventional products increases the choice share of these products compared to a separate subcategory or a mixed display with organic products.

Although high price levels for intermediately sustainable products might increase their perceived sustainability and quality, it also implies that the options are dominated by the organic products, which then offer more sustainability at comparable prices. Additionally, gaining share from direct competition with organic products may be a more challenging strategy as the segment of organic buyers tends to be dedicated buyers who are willing to pay a substantial premium to purchase organic products (Cottingham & Winkler, 2007; Van Herpen, Van Nierop, & Sloot, 2012) and who may be more likely to perceive intermediate products as a loss in valued sustainability. Placing intermediately sustainable products in direct competition with organic products is therefore unlikely to increase their choice share. Thus, we expect that:

H3: When a range of intermediately sustainable products has high prices, choice share will be low regardless of layout.

3. Experiment

Intermediately sustainable meat products were introduced in the Dutch market in 2009 using a system with one to three stars (the “Better Life Hallmark” endorsed by Dierenbescherming, a well-known animal welfare NGO). Conventionally produced products receive no stars in this system, whereas products at organic or comparable welfare levels receive three stars. One star products indicate somewhat improved animal welfare conditions compared to conventional. Two star products were not yet in the market during the time of the experiment (July 2011). Our expectations

were tested in an experiment using Qualtrics online software. The assortment of products contained (a) conventionally produced products, (b) intermediately sustainable products with one star labeled “better life”, and (c) organic products with three stars and the most common organic logo, presented to participants at different price levels for the intermediately sustainable products (low, medium, high) and different assortment lay outs (separate vs intermixed with either conventional or organic product lines).

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 187 students of a Dutch university (average age 22 years, 79.7% female). Only people who regularly bought and consumed meat were asked to participate. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions in a 3 (physical display: intermediately sustainable products in a separate section vs. mixed with conventional vs. mixed with organics) \times 3 (price of intermediate products: low (identical to conventional) vs. intermediate (rounded average of conventional and organic prices) vs. high (identical to organic)) between subjects design.

3.1.2. Procedure

Participants were invited by e-mail and eligible for a lottery of four gift certificates (5 Euro each). They were asked to imagine buying meat for themselves and a roommate. The star system and choice task were briefly explained. Depending on condition, the meat products were presented in three sections (conventional, organic, and intermediately sustainable) or two sections (intermediately sustainable mixed with either organic or conventional). Participants saw a main menu with the names of the sections and number of stars, from which they selected the section they wanted to view first (Appendix A). They could view all products within the section, and at any point they could switch back and forth between sections, similar to an actual supermarket in which consumers can alternate between shelves. Meat products were portions suitable for a two-person dinner, presented with pictures, verbal description, amount of grams, and price (Appendix B). Each product range (conventional, intermediate, and organic) consisted of 15 options, matched in type of meat and grams. Thus, in the separate section condition, participants could consult three sets of 15 products each, whereas in both mixed conditions they could consult two sets of products, one consisting of 15 products and the other (mixed) section consisting of 30 products. Price levels for conventional and organic products were based on those at a local supermarket. Participants could choose a product by clicking it. After confirming their choice, they left the store pages and a questionnaire started.

3.1.3. Measures

The computer tracked which sections participants visited. Immediately after making their choice, participants recorded the type of meat product chosen (conventional, “better life”, or organic). For two participants who did not recall their choice it was derived from search records. To check that participants understood the star system, they rated animal friendliness of the three types of meat products (conventional, intermediately sustainable, and organic) on 7-point “not animal friendly” to “animal friendly” scales. Furthermore, price perceptions were rated for the three types of meat products on 7-point “expensive” to “cheap” scales, which were recorded so that higher scores reflected a higher perceived price.

In addition to choice shares, relevant dependent variables are the extent to which participants are satisfied with the organization and whether they feel in control of the shopping experience and free to make their choices. After all, if increased choice shares come at the disadvantage of creating dissatisfaction among consumers,

this can potentially backfire. To check if participants were happy with the organization, they answered two questions on their satisfaction with the display (7-point scales: “not pleasantly organized – pleasantly organized” and “not satisfied with the assortment organization – satisfied with the assortment organization”; $\alpha = .94$). Additionally, the extent to which participants felt in control of the shopping experience was measured with four items (7-point scales: “not pleasant–pleasant”, “influenced by the situation–in control of the situation”, “not free in making my choice–completely free in making my choice”, and “controlled–unrestricted”; $\alpha = .84$). Finally, participants indicated age and gender.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Understanding of the star system

A repeated measures ANOVA on perceived animal friendliness, with type of product (conventional, intermediate, or organic) as within-subjects factor and price and display as between-subjects factors, showed that participants understood the star system. Organic products were perceived as more animal friendly ($M = 5.99$) than the intermediate products ($M = 4.96$), and the conventional products scored lowest ($M = 2.94$; $F(2, 356) = 419.88$, $p < .001$). Contrasts showed that all means differed significantly from each other ($p < .001$).

3.2.2. Satisfaction with the display

Overall, participants were satisfied with the way the assortment was organized ($M = 4.5$ on a 7-point scale), and this did not significantly differ across conditions.

3.2.3. Feeling in control

There was a significant interaction between price and display on the extent to which participants felt in control ($F(4, 177) = 2.85$, $p = .025$). When the price of intermediate products was either low or high participants felt less in control in mixed displays than when intermediate products were placed separately. In other words, in the mixed displays, where price comparisons with intermediate products were more easily visible, participants felt pushed to buy specific products. There were no significant differences between display conditions when the intermediate products had an intermediate price.

3.2.4. Price perceptions

A repeated measures ANOVA on price perceptions showed differences between all three product types ($p < .001$). Organic products were seen as most expensive ($M = 5.70$), conventional products as least expensive ($M = 2.33$), with intermediate products in between ($M = 4.51$; $F(2, 356) = 443.67$, $p < .001$). The interaction between product type and price of intermediately sustainable products on perceived price was significant ($F(4, 356) = 3.12$, $p = .015$). Simple effect ANOVA's showed that, as expected, the price of the intermediate products did not affect price perceptions of conventional ($F(2, 178) = 0.13$, NS) nor organic meat ($F(2, 178) = 0.04$, NS), but for the intermediately sustainable products, price perceptions followed our manipulation ($F(2, 178) = 7.37$, $p = .001$): low price seen as least expensive ($M = 4.09$), intermediate price as more expensive ($M = 4.61$), and high price as most expensive ($M = 4.90$), although the difference between the latter two did not reach statistical significance ($p = .17$).

Physical display also had an effect on price perception of intermediate meat ($F(2, 178) = 3.95$, $p = .021$). Participants perceived intermediately sustainable meat to be more expensive when placed among organic meat ($M = 4.87$) than when either placed among conventional meat products ($M = 4.37$; $p < .05$) or separately ($M = 4.30$; $p < .01$), where the latter two did not significantly differ. This underlines that physical display affects product

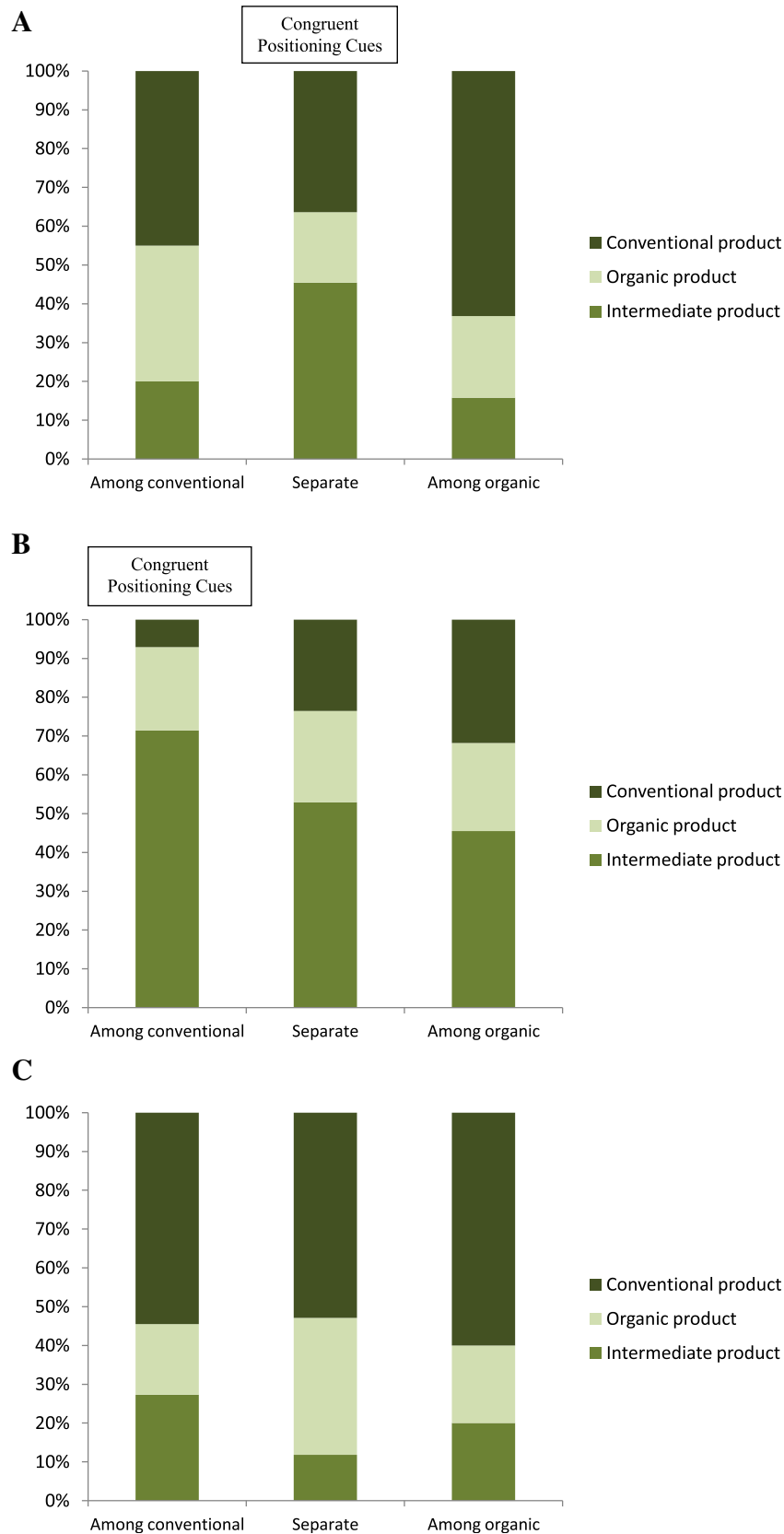


Fig. 1. Choice percentage of meat products as a function of price and display. (A) Intermediate products at intermediate price. (B) Intermediate products at low price. (C) Intermediate products at high price.

evaluations. The interaction between display and price manipulation on price perception of intermediately sustainable meat was not significant ($F(4, 178) = 0.81$, NS).

3.2.5. Product choice

Intermediate products were chosen considerably often (36.4%), almost equal to conventional meat (40.1%), and more often than

organic meat (23.5%). Choice proportions for the different types of meat differed across the nine conditions ($\chi^2(16) = 38.76, p = .001$). To further analyze this, a multinomial probit model predicting choice for intermediate product by display (two effect-coded dichotomous variables, using 'intermixed with organic' as reference category), price level of the intermediate product range (two variables, effect coded, using 'high price level' as reference category) and their interaction terms as independent variables was conducted. Price had a significant effect: participants were more likely to choose an intermediate product over a conventional product when the intermediate products were provided at a low price ($\beta = 1.05, z = 4.92, p < .001$) but not at an intermediate price ($\beta = -0.35, z = -1.67, p = .096$). Thus, providing intermediately sustainable products at the price of conventional products drew choice away from conventional products. Choice of intermediate products over organic products was higher when the intermediate products had a low price ($\beta = 0.54, z = 2.53, p < .05$), whereas no effect of intermediate price was found ($p = .44$). Thus, intermediate products at a low price drew choice away from organic products. Main effects of display were not significant.

Several of the interaction effects between display and pricing were significant. To interpret this, we investigated the effect of physical display separately for each price level.

3.2.6. Choice at intermediate price level

At intermediate price levels, choice share of the intermediately sustainable products was 46% when placed separately, 16% when mixed with organic and 20% when mixed with conventional (Fig. 1). Mixed displays with either conventional products or organic products did not significantly differ in choice shares of intermediate meat. When intermediate meat at intermediate price was presented in a separate section, choice share compared to conventional products increased ($\beta = 0.70, z = 2.04, p < .05$) and marginally so compared to organic products ($\beta = 0.68, z = 1.79, p = .073$). This implies that at an intermediate price level, (1) a separate section for intermediately sustainable products increased choice, in support of hypothesis 1, and (2) that this choice was primarily drawn from conventional products, although there was also an indication this was (marginally) at the expense of organic products.

3.2.7. Choice at high price level

When prices of intermediate products were high, assortment display had no significant effect, and choice shares were relatively low overall (20% on average), in line with hypothesis 3.

3.2.8. Choice at low price level

When prices of the intermediate products were low, a mixed display with conventional items increased their choice share compared to conventional products ($\beta = 0.84, z = 2.20, p < .05$), but not compared to organic products ($p = .40$). No effect of a separate section was found. This implies that at a low price, only a mixed display with conventional products drew choice share to intermediately sustainable products, in support of hypothesis 2. Choice share of the intermediately sustainable products was 71% when mixed with conventional products, and 46% when mixed with organic products. Conventional products were chosen in 31.8% of cases when intermediate products were placed among organic items, and only 7.1% when intermediate products were placed with conventional products. Thus, when intermediate products offered more sustainability at the same price of conventional products, these products were chosen more often when the assortment display facilitated direct comparisons between the two product ranges.

4. Discussion

Prior research on sustainable products has generally shown a gap between positive consumer attitudes and relatively low sales levels (Krystallis et al., 2012; Verhoef, 2005). The current study adds new insights to this existing knowledge regarding consumer choice for organic versus regular food products. Importantly, it shows that the proposed solution for the unmet demand for relatively more sustainable options – offering intermediately sustainable products (De Jonge & Van Trijp, 2013; Ingenbleek et al., 2012) – can indeed spur choice of these products. Intermediately sustainable food products offer a viable option and draw choice share away from regular food products, provided that they are appropriately displayed. Optimal display (separate or mixed display) depends on the price level at which intermediate products can be offered to consumers.

Specifically, at intermediate price levels a separate display of intermediate products enhances choice (unique feature positioning). Alternatively, at low price levels intermediate products gain share from conventional products when a mixed display is used. This way, intermediate products are in direct competition with conventional options. In such a positioning, consumers feel less in control of their decision, and appear more aware that they are steered towards intermediate products. Our results further indicate that offering intermediately sustainable products at a low price can be far less successful in increasing their choice share when these are placed with organic products. It is thus important for producers and retailers to coordinate their activities to ensure a consistent positioning of products, and to maximize sales potential.

The current study also has limitations, which can inspire future research. Specifically, we did not measure whether consumers perceive a specific positioning as more consistent. Future research could examine whether consistent positioning cues are recognized as such by consumers. Additionally, in an experimental setting where people do not really have to pay, budget limitations may play less of a role compared to real life, whereas using a sample of students may increase budget consideration. We thus caution against using our results as indicators of market share. Although results indicate which positioning strategies most effectively increase choice share in what situation, the exact change in market share cannot be predicted. Future studies in realistic settings and using a larger and more representative sample could examine profit implications.

Whereas retailers have full control over layout decisions in their stores, price levels at which they offer intermediately sustainable products are constrained to a larger degree by the production costs of such products. Our results show that if increased production costs are transferred into sales prices, it is best to put the products in a separate section. If intermediate products can be offered at prices similar to their conventional counterparts, they can best be offered in a mixed display with conventional products. Future research may further explore the effects at price levels between conventional and midrange, to investigate the tipping point at which intermediate products can best be placed separately.

To conclude, the specific combination of price level and assortment display influences consumer choice for sustainable food. The key to success is to use cues that communicate product positioning consistently, both in price level and in-store location. For intermediately sustainable food products this implies either a positioning as direct competitor to conventional products at low price and placed among conventional products; or a position as intermediate options at intermediate price and placed in a separate section.

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Appendix A

Display of sections

A. Among conventional



B. Separate display



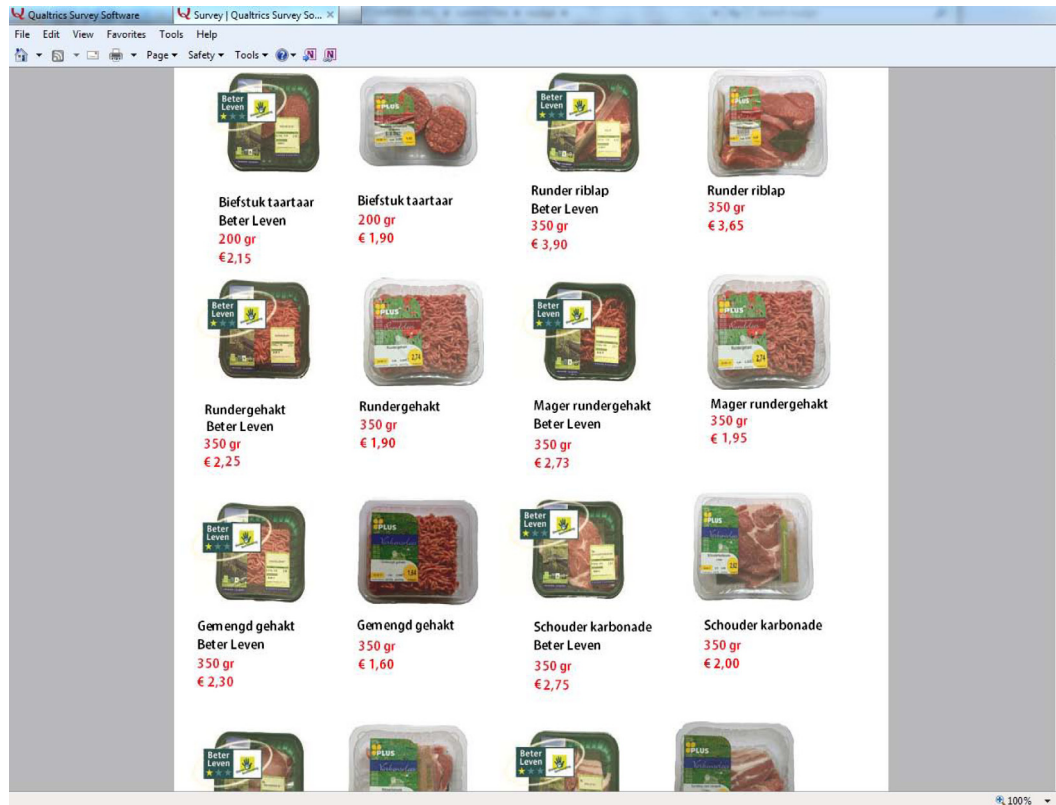
C. Among organic



Appendix A.

Appendix B

Example of stimulus material



Appendix B.

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