

The decision of sense and sensibility: Consumer acceptance towards the names of cultured meat

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Naming and labeling products can profoundly affect consumer attitudes and subsequent behavior and particularly so in the case of new alternatives in the market. Cultured meat (CM) has entered the stage as a meat substitute, growing an animal's stem cells into muscle tissue in a lab environment (Post, 2012). Because CM is not yet available in the market except for Singapore (Singapore Food Agency, 2020), consumers are not familiar with this meat substitute. How we frame and introduce CM to consumers is crucial at this early stage of its development. Various names have been used to indicate CM, such as "clean meat", "lab meat", "synthetic meat", "in vitro meat", "artificial meat", and "cell-based meat". Previous research observed the difference in consumer acceptance based on the names of CM (Asioli et al., 2021; Bryant & Barnett, 2019). However, reasons behind this phenomenon have not been fully verified yet. The present paper explores the mechanism under the name effect by applying mediation analysis. Dual process theory posits two ways of consumers' information processing to form and utilize their attitudes in decision-making: heuristic processing and systematic processing (Fischer & Frewer, 2009). People with limited knowledge often perceive food technologies based on simple cues or heuristics (Siegrist & Hartmann, 2020a), among them naturalness and tastiness are keys heuristic attributes (Siegrist & Hartmann, 2020b). We postulate that name treatments have an indirect impact on consumer attitudes via perceived tastiness and naturalness. Under the rational systematic processing, consumers usually make food decisions on the provided information by inferring more considered expectations of benefits and risks. We, therefore, hypothesize that perceived benefits and risks of CM could mediate the name effect on attitudes. Moreover, a rising number of studies reported that an object's risk and benefit perception could be impacted by affective feelings, which is called "affect heuristics" (Finucane et al., 2000; Pachur et al., 2012). We proposed a third mediation pathway evoked heuristics (naturalness and tastiness) would influence perceived benefits and risks.

With a sample of 1532 Chinese consumers, we explored the underlying mechanism of the name effect for CM by using different terms ("cultured", "artificial", and "cell-based") to refer CM. To avoid confounding participants with the names of CM, we randomly assigned participants to three name treatment conditions at the beginning of the survey.

The mediation effect was tested using the PROCESS model by Hayes (2013), and the results are presented in Figure 1. Our results show that "artificial" is the more disliked term regarding perceived tastiness, naturalness, and personal and societal benefits. The name "cultured" meat is associated with higher benefit-risk efficiency than "artificial" and "cell-based" meat. Chinese consumers are more sensitive to benefit perception than risk perception. Results also indicate that consumers' attitudes depend on heuristic processing and affect heuristic processing but not systematic processing, highlighting the significance of expected tastiness and naturalness. Our findings provide implications for the global food industry in applying a name strategy for a new food product or technology and implications for introducing CM in China.