

Labelling advertised foods in social media with the Nutri-score: what role for perceived nutritional value?

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Abstract

Front-of-pack nutritional labels (FOPNL) steer consumers toward healthier products, but little research is conducted to understand their effects in social media advertisements. We focused on the Nutri-score, which grades products from most nutritious (A) to the least (E). With a sample of 163 respondents, we tested responses to disclosed Nutri scores A/E in Instagram ads. We found that disclosing a Nutri-score A increases perceived nutritional quality of breakfast cereals, while a Nutri-score E decreases it. In addition, a Nutri-score A improves purchase intention through the mediation by perceived nutritional quality. Conversely, a Nutri score E lowers purchase intention through the same mediation. We recommend that food marketers use the Nutri-score to highlight the health and nutritional benefits of their products to increase sales from a setting like social media. Policymakers in France and elsewhere should consider making the Nutri-score mandatory in ads to fight poor dieting.

Keywords: Perceived nutritional quality; Nutri-score; food advertisement; social media food ads; nutrition labelling

Résumé

Les étiquettes nutritionnelles au-devant des packagings aident le consommateur à choisir des produits alimentaires de meilleure qualité, mais peu de recherches sont faites sur leurs effets dans les publicités sur les réseaux sociaux. Nous nous sommes focalisés sur le Nutri-score, qui évalue les produits du plus nutritif (A) au moins nutritif (E). Avec un échantillon de 163 répondants, nous avons évalué les réponses à l'égard de la divulgation de Nutri scores A/E dans des posts Instagram. L'étude révèle qu'un Nutri-score A augmente la qualité nutritionnelle perçue des céréales pour le petit déjeuner, alors qu'un Nutri-score E diminue cette perception. Aussi, un Nutri-score A améliore l'intention d'achat par la médiation de la qualité nutritionnelle perçue. A l'inverse, un Nutri score E réduit l'intention d'achat via ce même processus. Il est recommandé aux marques d'utiliser le Nutri-score pour mettre en valeur les bénéfices santé et nutritionnels de leurs produits afin d'accroître leurs ventes à partir des réseaux sociaux. Les décideurs politiques en France et ailleurs devraient considérer l'imposition de l'affichage du Nutri-score dans les publicités afin de lutter contre les mauvaises habitudes alimentaires.

Keywords : Qualité nutritionnelle perçue ; Nutri-score ; publicité alimentaire ; publicité alimentaire sur les réseaux sociaux ; étiquetage nutritionnel

Introduction

Poor dietary habits are recognized as responsible for non-communicable chronic diseases around the world (Afshin et al., 2019). Examples of the chronic diseases a poor diet can cause are high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, type-2 diabetes and certain types of cancers (Jones et al., 2019). To safeguard public health, empowering consumers to make nutritionally favourable food choices has become crucial (Hafner and Pravst, 2024). However, technical nutritional information on food products has proved less efficient than simplified nutrition information systems in the form of Front-Of-Pack Nutritional Labels (FOPNL) (Nelson et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2018). FOPNLs are simple and graphical labels that “provide at-a-glance information on nutritional quality on the primary display panel of foods and beverages [...] to complement detailed nutrient declarations on back-of-pack” (Jones et al., 2019, p.1). Previous research showed that colour-coded, interpretative FOPNLs are the most effective type in nudging consumers toward healthier food choices (Kelly et al., 2024; Ikonen et al., 2020; Nohlen et al., 2022; Gomez et al., 2017). In the past decade, the Nutri-score (Figure 1) has become one of the most popular FOPNLs across Europe. It is a colour-coding and interpretative label that reflects the nutritional composition of packaged foods based on 100 grams for solid food and 100 millilitres for beverages (Yamin and Werle, 2025).

Figure 1. Nutri-score’s five grades



At present, the Nutri-score is the official FOPNL in eight European countries, namely France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Santé Publique France, 2026). The harmonised mandatory use of the Nutri-score in the EU has been challenged by Regulation n°1169/2011 (EU Regulation, 2011), but consumer groups and members of parliament in France, its birthplace, have been pushing for a national act making it mandatory in advertisement (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, 2024). While the literature on the Nutri-score’s impact in the context of packaging is considerable (Hafner and Pravst, 2024), there is some silence in the context of food advertisements, especially those made on social media. Presumably, most ads on social media display the front part of the advertised packaged food. According to the cognitive social theory (Dixon et al., 2007; Bandura, 2009), people tend to do what they see around their environment or their peers do. In terms of dietary habits, Story et al (2002) indicated that two of the most influencing factors come from (1) the immediate inter-personal environment (e.g. peers, family members, online influencers, etc.) and the (2) macro-systemic or societal spheres (e.g. mass media, marketing, etc.).

We know of no academic research that investigated the influence of disclosing the Nutri-score of packaged food on socially engaging environments like social media. To fill the gap, our study aims to (1) identify the impact of disclosed favourable vs unfavourable Nutri-scores on consumers’ purchase intentions of advertised products on Instagram (2) and test a path explanation of the effects on purchase intention.

1. Conceptual Framework

1.1. Influence of the Nutri-score on perceived nutritional quality

Based on signalling theory (Nasr et al., 2024), the type of the Nutri-score disclosed in an ad may positively or negatively alter consumers cognitive assessment of the product (e.g. perceived nutritional quality of the product). Past studies showed that the valence of the nutritional information has an impact on the estimated level of nutritional benefits associated with the product (Scarborough et al., 2015; Marette et al., 2019). In a classical advertisement poster, Courbet et al. (2024) demonstrated that while favourable Nutri-scores (i.e. Nutri-scores A & B) increased perceived nutritional quality, unfavourable Nutri-scores (i.e. Nutri-scores D and E) decreased it. We therefore hypothesise that:

H1a: Compared with the absence of the Nutri-score, the presence of a favourable Nutri-score will increase consumers 'perceived nutritional quality of promoted products.

H1b: Compared with the absence of the Nutri-score, the presence of an unfavourable Nutri-score will decrease consumers 'perceived nutritional quality of promoted products.

1.2. Processual influence of the Nutri-score on purchase intention via perceived nutritional quality

Nutrition advertising claim literature has revealed that nutritional cues are used to inform purchase decisions (Andrews et al., 1998, 2000; Kim et al., 2009), what is also shown recently with the Nutri-score (Courbet et al., 2024). In the presence of nutrition claims, consumers tended to have higher purchase intentions, while disclosing some negatively-valenced nutritional details (e.g. through evaluative signals) diminished these intentions (Andrews et al., 1998, 2000). Nabec et al. (2022) showed that parents would purchase more breakfast cereals for their children when the former displayed favourable Nutri-scores vs unfavourable ones. Upon these grounds, we expect that:

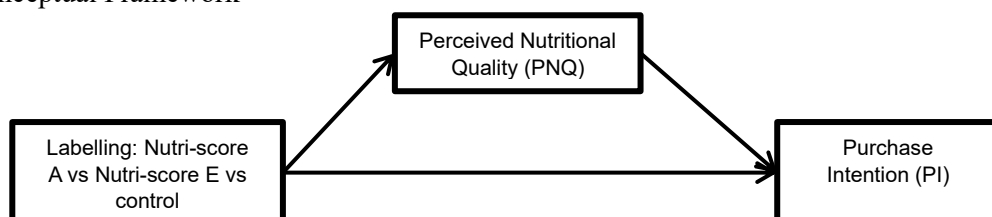
H2: Perceived nutritional quality will be positively associated with purchase intention.

Research has shown that greater perceived product healthiness leads to more likelihood of purchasing food products (Werle et al., 2022; Jones and Richardson, 2007; Newman et al., 2018). Products that are labelled with Nutri-scores A or B (vs the absence of any nutritional signal) are more likely to be perceived as beneficial to one's health and, eventually, to lead to higher purchase intentions (Janssen and Bogaert, 2023; De Temmerman et al., 2021; Heeremans et al, 2025). Analogically, the reverse effect may be observed with products labelled with Nutri-scores D or E. Therefore, we pose the following mediation hypotheses:

H3a: The higher purchase intention raised by the favourable Nutri-score will be mediated by consumers 'perceived nutritional quality.

H3b: The lower purchase intention raised by the unfavourable Nutri-score is mediated by consumers 'perceived nutritional quality.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework



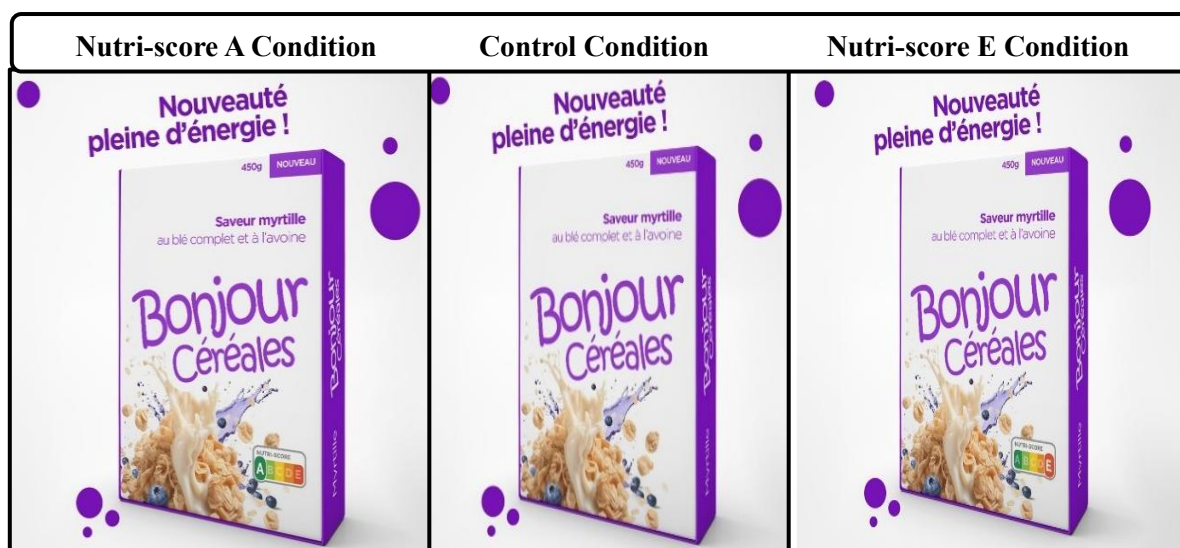
2. Method

2.1. Design and subjects of the experiment

We designed a between-subject experiment to test the effects of disclosed favourable and unfavourable Nutri-scores on consumer responses. Participants were randomly exposed to one of the three Instagram ad posts for a packaged breakfast cereal from a fictitious brand (i.e. “BonjourCéréales”). The choice of breakfast cereals was based on French consumers habits and the product nutritional variation (Nabec et al., 2019; Dubois et al., 2021). Apart from the presented Nutri-scores, all the ad posts contained the same information (number of likes, the claims, the description, etc.).

We adopted a full factorial between-subjects design (Nutri-score A vs Nutri-score E vs control). A total of 163 French undergraduate students ($M_{age}=18.49$ years, $SD=0.73$; $M_{BMI}=22.05^1$, $SD=2.93$; 55.2% women) participated in the study. Unlike Courbet et al. (2024), we decided to display the Nutri-score directly on the packaging since it is unlikely that brands ostensively display an unfavourable score (in this case, a Nutri-score E). Report to Annexes 1, 2 and 3 for full screen visuals of the posts.

Figure 3. Instagram posts used as stimuli in the experiment



2.2. Measures

In each condition, participants evaluated, with seven-point semantic differential scales, their perceived nutritional quality (from bad to good (Werle et al., 2022)). Purchase intention was measured with a seven-point Likert item (“Imagine that you are planning to purchase breakfast cereals, would you be susceptible to buy the product that you see on the screen?”: from strongly disagree to strongly agree) (Nabec et al., 2022). Participants were subjected to two manipulation checks. We first checked if respondents assigned to a given Nutri-score recalled it. Then, we assessed the recognition of the Instagram ad post seen by simultaneously presenting the three ad posts (Figure 3) to participants. Respondents provided sociodemographic information (e.g., parents’ socio-economic category, their age, gender, weight, height, etc.).

¹ N=162. One participant in the “Nutri-score E” condition could not remember their weight

3. Results

3.1. Manipulation checks

The overall manipulation check revealed that the Nutri-score manipulations were successful in the first check (dummying “Nutri-score A” designation : $\chi^2(2) = 136,83$, $p < 0.001$; dummying “Nutri-score E” designation : $\chi^2(2) = 158,64$, $p < 0.001$; dummying “absence of the Nutri-score” identification : $\chi^2(2) = 114,05$, $p < 0.001$). The results of the second check were aligned with those of the first check: 98.1%, 94.5% and 89.1% of respondents in, respectively, the « Nutri-score A », « Nutri-score E » and control conditions were able to recognise the ad post they had seen.

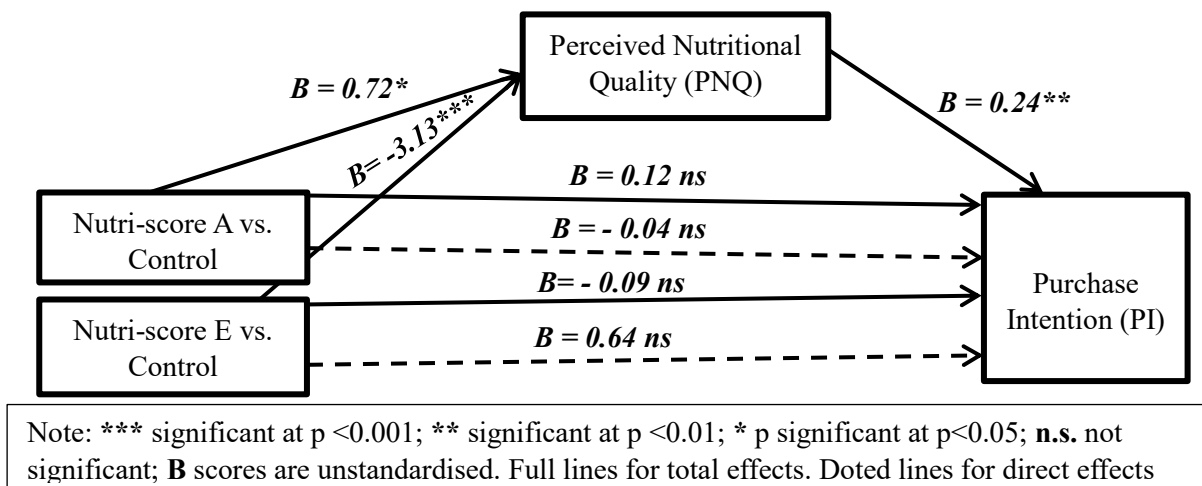
3.2. Effects of the Nutri-scores on perceived nutritional quality

We conducted an ANOVA with Nutri-score presence (A vs. E vs. control) as the independent variable, predicting the respondents perceived nutritional quality of the advertised cereals. We find a significant effect of Nutri-score presence $F(2,160) = 99.569$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.554$). Respondents from the “Nutri-score A” condition give higher perceived nutritional quality ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.48$) compared with “Nutri-score E” condition ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.48$; $p < 0.001$) and control condition ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.55$; $p = 0.04$). However, disclosure of the Nutri-score E evokes a lower perceived nutritional quality of the product than the control condition ($p < 0.001$). These results support H1a and H1b.

3.3. Mediation analyses: effects of the Nutri-score on purchase intention through perceived nutritional quality

To explore if perceived nutritional quality (PNQ) mediates the effect of the Nutri-score on purchase intention (PI), we conducted 2 mediation analyses with model 4 of the Macro process (Hayes, 2022) for each Nutri-score (i.e. Nutri-score A/E (vs control) \rightarrow PNQ \rightarrow PI). We performed a simple linear regression of PNQ on PI and found a significant positive relationship ($F(1,161) = 5.522$, $p = 0.02$, $R^2 = 0.03$). This finding support H2. In mediation analysis “Nutri-score A vs control”, we find a significant mediation on purchase intention through PNQ ($ab = 0.17$, $SE = 0.08$; 95% CI: [0.02, 0.35]). H3a is supported: the higher purchase intention raised by the favourable Nutri-score is mediated by consumers ‘perceived nutritional quality. We also find a significant mediation on purchase intention through PNQ with “Nutri-score E vs control” ($ab = -0.74$, $SE = 0.27$; 95% CI: [-1.29; -0.21]). H3b is corroborated: the lower purchase intention raised by the unfavourable Nutri-score is mediated by consumers ‘perceived nutritional quality. We aggregately illustrate the results of the mediational processes in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Mediation analyses results



4. Discussion

4.1. Conclusion

The experimental study we conducted first shows the absence of direct effect of disclosing the Nutri-score (i.e. A or E) on purchase intention. Central to the effects we find is the variable “perceived nutritional quality” of products. In fact, disclosing a Nutri-score A(E) fosters (mitigates) products perceived nutritional quality, which ultimately increases (decreases) purchase intention. These results provide further process evidence for the dual effect of the Nutri-score: consumers primarily distinguish nutritional quality levels of products which then influences their purchase intentions.

4.2. Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute to an enlarged understanding of the effectiveness of FOPNLs regarding the nudging power of simpler evaluative nutritional labels (Dubois et al., 2021; Cadario & Chandon, 2020; Newman et al., 2016; Courbet et al., 2024; Nasr et al., 2024; Nabec et al., 2022). We also complement previous literature in terms of the different mechanisms by which nutrition label influences purchase behaviour. For example, recent studies have shown that “perceived healthiness” was an important transitory state of FOPNL’s influence on behavioural outcomes (Shin and Park, 2023; Heeremans et al., 2022, 2025; De Temmerman et al., 2021; Nasr et al., 2024; Werle et al., 2022; Yamim and Werle, 2025). In addition, we contribute to the literature focusing on the signalling role of nutritional messages (Grunert and Wills, 2007; Werle et al., 2022) and the outcomes of their disclosures in advertisement (Andrews et al., 2000; Shin and Park, 2023). The mediation effects we observed, however, suggest a superiority of negative effects on purchase intention with a Nutri-score E over the positive effects with a Nutri-score A. It echoes with the findings about red-colours in nutrition labels (Scarborough et al., 2015, Ikonen et al., 2020) but is opposed to other works highlighting stronger effects with green colours (Dubois et al., 2021; De Temmerman et al., 2021; Nikolova and Inman, 2015).

4.3. Marketing and public policy implications

Eight European countries have already officially given their support to the Nutri-score while many other governments are considering it (e.g. Canada). Previous research has demonstrated the relative effectiveness of the Nutri-score in comparison to more complex and descriptive nutrition labels (Dubois et al., 2021; Bossuyt et al., 2021; Crosetto et al., 2020). Our study adds to that the effectiveness of the Nutri-score in the context of social media advertisement and helps clarify which processes are involved in changing purchase intention (Grunert and Wills, 2007). We advise public policy makers to consider the mandatory implementation of the Nutri-Score in food advertisement to guide consumers toward healthier food choices.

For marketing professionals, our research provides insights into how the Nutri-score is effective, pinpointing the pivotal role of “perceived nutritional quality”. We therefore recommend brands to highlight more the link between their Nutri-scores and, if any, the resulting health benefits. The findings in this study speak against the lack of consumers’ trust in the Nutri-score (Mazzu et al., 2022). Making mandatory the presence of the Nutri-score in advertisements can especially help consumers consider the healthfulness of products before decision making. Public policy makers should envisage the mandatory presence of the label in food ads and test possible ways of increasing consumer awareness and the food industry participation.

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Annex 1: Full screenshot of Instagram ad post representing control



Annex 2: Full screenshot of Instagram ad post containing Nutri-score A



Annex 3: Full screenshot of Instagram ad post containing Nutri-score E

