

Vegan Rib?: The Effects of Moral and Health Motivation on Incongruity Resolution

(Working Paper)

10.10.14

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Introduction

Vegan restaurant, The Land of Kush, located in Baltimore, Maryland is regionally known for its delicious cuisine. After being in existence for just three years, the restaurant is not only the most popular vegan eatery in the city of Baltimore, but one of the most popular restaurants (vegan or non-vegan) in the region. Attributable to its success is the restaurant's appeal to both vegan and non-vegan consumers. At the core of the restaurant's appeal to the non-vegan customers is its "mock meat" food labeling. While there are traditional vegetable-based dishes such as collard greens and cabbage, some of the dishes are given traditional meat associated names, but labeled with the word vegan or given a variation of its meat equivalent. For instance there are the Vegan "Ribs" or Curry "Chickun". While this labeling effect helps trick the restaurant's patrons into thinking "You won't believe it's veggie" (the company's slogan), it creates an interesting conundrum in its appeal to vegan customers. While some vegan patrons of the restaurant may be drawn to the cuisine by its perceived health benefits, other vegans may be drawn because of a moral motivation to not eat any products that derive from animals. These morally motivated customers may be offended by the clever use of animal-based food labeling. This labeling creates an incongruity that could alienate core vegan customers of the restaurant. So what does The Land of Kush do? While there may be positive effects of this labeling incongruity towards health motivated customers or newly converted vegans, at what cost does this negatively affect morally motivated customers? In this paper, we seek to address how these customers might resolve this label incongruity differently based on their motivation.

Background/Literature Review

Vegetarianism

While the academic literature has varied in a formal definition, at some level vegetarianism generally refers to the practice of abstaining from the consumption of meat. Sometimes this practice is a continuum of categories, measuring the progressive degree to which animal foods are avoided Beardsworth and Keil (1992). The vegetarian food industry is a \$1.6 billion dollar industry in the U.S. alone. A 2013 public policy polling survey found that 13% of Americans identify as either vegetarian (6%) or vegan (7%). Over the past decade there has also been an increase in semi-vegetarianism or flexitarianism. The motivation behind vegetarianism is generally twofold. Some are interested in vegetarianism because of moral concern regarding the raising and slaughtering of animals, and seek to eliminate their meat consumption accordingly (Ruby, 2012). Others are generally more well-being motivated, as vegetarian diets are generally regarded as healthy because of their typically lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, animal protein content, and higher levels of folates, antioxidants, carotenoids, and phytochemicals (Jacob & Burri, 1996). For most modern-day vegetarians (particularly in the West), health reasons play an important role in their decision to maintain a vegetarian life-style (Beardsworth & Keil, 1993). In an effort to appeal to many vegetarians and non-vegetarians who are health-motivated many modern vegetarian food producers have resorted to integrating a proxy meat related title to label its offerings. But while using labels such as “tofurky” and “chickun” creates an enticing incongruity for some consumers, it may cause conflict for others.

Incongruity

Conventional branding wisdom suggests that brands should strive for congruity within in its brand identity. Brand identity refers to the associations that a brand establishes through its

marketing activities. Incongruity literature explores situations where these established associations are challenged. For example, when a new advertisement or a brand endorsement by a celebrity introduces associations that challenge established associations, this creates a conflicting view in the brand image, or views perceived and held by consumers. Past literature has focused on incongruity between brand identity and brand endorsers (Mittelstaedt et al 2000), sponsorships (Jagre et al 2001), advertising (Dahlen et al 2005), point of sale (Buchanan 1999), price (Raghubir and Corfman 1999), and publicity (Dawar and Pillutla 2000). Much of this literature encourages fit and congruence between the associations within the brand identity and those reflected in its marketing efforts. In contrast, there is also literature that expresses positive effects of brand incongruity. Firm-generated brand incongruity can revive interest (Machleit et al 1993), attract attention (Goodstein 1993), enhance brand attitudes (Lee and Mason 1999), and improve brand evaluations (Kirmani and Shiv 1998) in mature brands.

There is scarce literature addressing incongruency effects regarding product naming and labeling. Food items such as white chocolate, turkey burgers, sugarless candy, non-alcoholic wine and red oranges can be a bit perplexing and unexpected to the average consumer at first exposure. A similar incongruent label effect can be found oftentimes with vegetarian “mock meats”. For instance there is chickun (vegan chicken), tofurky (vegan turkey), and vegan ribs. While this incongruent labeling may initially seem like clever marketing, it does include associations with meat. Those vegans who are motivated to eat vegan because of their disapproval of the slaughtering of animals, could possibly be conflicted over or even disgusted by this blended labeling. This creates a conundrum for vegan food restaurants and manufacturers because not all consumers have this same ethical motivation, and some new vegetarians and flexitarians may even be drawn by this incongruity. We seek to observe how these differing

motivations cause mixed reactionary effects to incongruent food labeling. The use of the word or variations of chicken, ribs, and turkey, directly introduces associations that conflict with the definition of vegetarianism and with one of the major motivations of vegetarianism, specifically the moral concern over the treatment of animals. Past brand association literature indicates that a diffuse brand image can result when incongruent associations are introduced (Keller 1993). A diffuse brand image can cause consumers to be confused as to the meaning of the brand and increase the likelihood that consumers will discount or overlook relevant brand associations in making brand choices (Keller 1993). Therefore we propose:

H1: Individuals whose motivation to practice vegetarianism is health related will evaluate the incongruently labeled food item more favorably than those who have a moral motivation for practicing vegetarianism.

As a potential strategy to resolve this conflict for morally motivated vegetarians, we propose the introduction of a moral appeal.

H2: The use of a moral appeal, such as a donation, attenuates the negative evaluation of the incongruently labeled food item for morally motivated vegetarians.

Method

Study 1: The Effects of Vegetarian Motivation on Incongruent Food Label Evaluation

Our underlying premise is that a consumer's motivation to partake in a vegetarian diet will affect the way in which one processes and evaluates incongruent food labels. Study 1 tests this

proposition that morally motivated vegetarians will have a harder time resolving the incongruent food label than the more health motivated vegetarians leading the more health motivated vegetarians to evaluate the food more favorably.

Method

Design. A between subjects design will be used whereby participants will be randomly assigned to one of two conditions (food label: incongruent vs. congruent), but will evaluate the same item. Approximately sixty student subjects will participate in the experiment in exchange for course credit. The stimulus is an actual vegan food item from a vegan restaurant in which the name of the item will be manipulated for our experimental purposes.

Procedure. The participants will be told that they will be evaluating a new vegan food item from a restaurant. Each participant will fill out a questionnaire to rate the product on different aspects such as taste, willingness-to-pay, and likelihood of trial (see Appendix for survey). The same picture of the food item will be shown to all participants; however, the name of the product will be manipulated. Participants in the incongruent condition will see the product's name as *Vegan Ribs*, whereas those in the congruent condition will see the product's name as *Vegan Bites*. After rating the item on several measures, participants will be asked to fill out questions regarding their own dietary and lifestyle habits. These questions will mainly focus on whether or not the participant is a vegetarian, and if so, to what degree the participant follows a vegetarian diet (i.e. very strict to semi-strict). We will also measure the motivation behind the participant's decision to become vegetarian (i.e. health or moral reasons) through several different scales and open-ended questions. Basic demographics such as age and gender will also be captured.

Expected Results

We will use analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze the results. First, we will determine the participants who actually follow a vegetarian diet and only consider their results. Using the measures that capture participants' motivation for vegetarianism, we will categorize them into one of three motivational camps: moral motivation, health motivation, or both. Results for the dependent variables (e.g., WTP, taste, likelihood of trial) will be compared across the three groups. It is expected that participants whose motivation to practice vegetarianism is more health related will rate the food item more favorably than those participants who have a moral motivation for practicing vegetarianism (see Figure 1: Expected Results). Taste, willingness-to-pay and likelihood of trial measures will all be significantly higher for those who are vegetarians for health reasons. Gender and age are not expected to significantly influence results, but will be used as control variables in the analysis.

Study 2: Resolution of Label Incongruence

In Study 1, we expect that morally motivated vegetarians will have a more difficult time resolving the incongruence of the food label (Vegan Ribs) and will therefore evaluate the item more negatively than those vegetarians motivated by health reasons. This next study will focus on resolving the incongruence the food label produces to assess whether providing a means to resolve the conflict results in a more positive evaluation of the item.

Method

Design. A 2 (food label: incongruent, congruent) x 2 (resolution: yes, no) between subjects design will be used. Student subjects will participate in the experiment in exchange for course credit. The same stimulus, a vegan food item, from Study 1 will be used. Again, the name of the item will be manipulated for our experimental purposes. Participants will be randomly assigned to the incongruent or congruent condition and to the resolution or no resolution condition.

Procedure. Similar to Study 1, participants will be told that they will be evaluating a new vegan food item from a restaurant. The name of the food product will be manipulated again (incongruent: Vegan Ribs vs. congruent: Vegan Bites). In contrast to Study 1, however, those in the resolution condition will view a message under the photo of the stimuli that reads: *When you purchase this item, the restaurant will make a donation of 10% of your total bill to the No Kid Hungry foundation, a non-profit organization that works to end childhood hunger.* Participants in the no resolution condition will not see this message. Each participant will fill out a questionnaire to rate the product on different aspects such as taste, willingness-to-pay, and likelihood of trial. Questions regarding dietary and lifestyle habits will be asked. Additional questions will again focus on whether or not the participant is a vegetarian, and if so, to what degree the participant follows a vegetarian diet. To tease out the motivation for becoming vegetarian, participants will answer several scale items and open-ended questions. Basic demographics such as age and gender will also be captured.

Expected Results

We will use analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze the results. First, we will determine the participants who actually follow a vegetarian diet and consider their results. Once motivation for becoming a vegetarian has been determined, results for the dependent variables (e.g., WTP, taste, likelihood of trial) will be compared across the groups. Results from Study 1 are expected to be replicated whereby participants whose motivation to practice vegetarianism is more health related will rate the food item more favorably than those participants who have a moral motivation for practicing vegetarianism. However, for those participants who viewed the incongruent food label and were given a means to resolve the conflict (i.e. donation to the hunger organization), we expect the evaluation measures to be significantly more positive than those in the incongruent condition who were not offered a resolution (see Figure 2: Expected Results) when comparing the morally motivated vegetarians. In other words, when participants practicing vegetarianism for moral reasons are confronted with the incongruent food label, offering them a resolution to the conflict will result in more positive evaluations of the product in comparison to not offering them a resolution. Therefore, providing means to resolve the conflict with the incongruent food label attenuates the negative evaluation of the item for morally motivated vegetarians.

Preliminary Data & Analysis

We have already run an experiment for Study 1 and collected preliminary data. We were able to collect data from 185 undergraduate students at a northeastern university. Out of our student sample only five participants were vegetarians. This makes our dataset incomplete to accurately test our hypotheses. As our manipulation check for our product titles does not show a

significant difference between the perceived congruency of the Vegan Ribs condition and the Vegan Bites condition. Some preliminary findings from our non-vegetarian participants does not show a significant difference between both conditions in willingness to pay, likelihood to purchase, or any of our other dependent variables.

Discussion

From this research, we hope to explore the primary motivations for vegetarianism and how these motivations can sometimes create conflicting effects in response to incongruity. Past literature on incongruity has indicated both positive and negative effects. We propose that those who are primarily motivated by health reasons to become vegetarians, respond positively to this incongruity, while those who are motivated by ethical or moral reasons respond less favorably to this incongruity. The potential implications of this research are both theoretical and managerial. The findings from this research could extend the burgeoning incongruity literature to food labeling. While most of the prior literature has focused on incongruity in advertising and product extensions, this research considers incongruity in a new context. Additionally the niche literature on vegetarianism in marketing has not considered the influence of “mock meat” labeling. The results of this research have the potential to be applied to labeling beyond just vegetarianism and beyond the realm of food and nutrition.

Limitations and Future Research

The major issue with our research thus far is our limited data. The small size of our experimental group makes our analysis difficult. Ideally it would be best to analyze these different motivations in a population of vegetarians. In the future we would like to extend our study beyond just a student sample and collect data from online participants (i.e. Mechanical

Turk). Additionally we would be interested in expanding the scope of this research to a field experiment. Our manipulation check also suggests that the labeling of the stimuli, vegan ribs vs. vegan bites, may not have been significantly different enough to ensure a difference in congruity. It may be wise in future experiments to use different labels to accurately depict incongruity. In the future we would also look to design experiments that could provide different resolutions that could attenuate the negative effects of incongruity on morally motivated vegetarians. For instance if morally motivated vegetarians were told that some of the money they spent was donated to an animal right cause or other related charity, would they be less negatively affected by label incongruity? Also could scent or other sensory appeals play a factor in the evaluation of such incongruity? We also could test this label incongruity outside of a vegetarian context and apply it to other incongruent food labeling scenarios.

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