

**LARA SPITERI CORNISH**  
Coventry Business School, United Kingdom

## **THE IMPACT OF NUTRITION LITERACY AND SOURCE CREDIBILITY ON RESPONSES TO HEALTHY EATING CAMPAIGNS**

### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the impact of flawed or limited nutrition knowledge on the perception of healthy eating, healthy foods and subsequent dietary behavior. Nutrition can be seen as the end result of many pushes and pulls, and a response to multiple forces that create an overall nutrition environment (Blaylock et al. 1999). One such pull is the rise of healthy-eating communications and social marketing campaigns devised by policy makers, who seek to encourage healthier dietary habits among consumers. Indeed, the dramatic rise in obesity in recent years (Finkelstein et al 2012; Stevens et al 2012) has prompted academic discourse to assist the development of interventional public policies (Andreasen 2012), along with a number of healthy-eating campaigns (e.g. "Eat4Life" and "5-a-day Campaign" in the UK). This pull, in turn, has resulted in a push response by the food industry in the form of creating brand new foods marketed as healthier or healthy (Wansink 2007; Menrad 2003; Kleinschmidt 2003; Diplock et al. 1999; Lahteenmaki 2003), to convey a better fit with the new healthier eating paradigm without necessarily being healthier than their alternatives. Such push has also meant new ideas and concepts about healthy eating and healthy foods (Nestle 2007; Pollan 2009; Block et al. 2011).

This push-pull dynamics has caused increased consumer awareness of the importance of eating healthily (Zaninotto et al. 2009; COI/Department of Health 2009). However, it has also created much scope for consumer confusion. In fact, despite increased consumer awareness of the need to eat healthily, dietary patterns have not improved (Produce for Better Health Foundation 2009; European Food Information Council 2012). Concerns about unhealthy dietary patterns have led to a growing literature in consumer behavior relating to the impact of food communication on food consumption (Verbeke 2008; Hornik 2007; Fitzgibbon et al. 2007; Randolph and Viswanath 2004; Jebb et al. 2003; Snyder 2007). A number of negative psychological consequences of healthy-eating communications which might lead to resistance to comply with desirable nutrition behavior were identified (e.g. denial, excess fear), and recommendations were made with regard to how campaigns can be modified to result in increased uptake of the desired behavior (e.g. Peattie and Peattie 2009; Evan and Hastings 2009). The implicit assumption in this literature is that the high level of consumer awareness regarding healthy-eating communications, combined with the lack of positive change in healthy eating, means that these messages are failing to persuade consumers to implement the compliant dietary behavior (Guttman and Salmon 2004; Hornik 2002; Evan and Hastings 2009; Girandola 2000).

This paper moves away from this assumption and seeks to answer the following question: is consumer confusion regarding nutrition information affecting nutrition knowledge and literacy, and what are the impacts of poor nutrition literacy on consumer perceptions of healthy eating, healthy foods, and consequent dietary behaviors? In order to address this research question, the paper draws on consumer confusion theory (Mitchell et al. 2005; Mitchell and Papavassiliou 1999), and argues, as do Block et al. (2011), that having nutrition knowledge is not sufficient to change consumers' food consumption. Consumers need appropriate nutrition literacy and it goes beyond having healthy-eating knowledge; it encompasses having the 'right information' (i.e. legitimate knowledge), the ability to understand such information (i.e. nutrition self-efficacy), as well as the

opportunity and motivation to use such nutrition knowledge in order to make healthy food choices that lead to overall healthier diets (Block et al. 2011). This research presents an alternative explanation as to why consumers are failing to implement healthy dietary behaviors. The authors discuss how often consumers do respond to healthy-eating communications, but they do so from their level of nutrition understanding. Many consumers are confused due to limited or flawed nutrition knowledge, resulting in poor nutrition literacy and the implementation of dietary changes that contravene the intentions of health messages. This paper offers a new perspective on the impact of healthy-eating communications and food consumption, and leads to relevant implications for nutrition researchers, policy makers, and marketing managers, at a time when healthy eating is high on the policy-making agenda (Scammon et al. 2011).

**Keywords:**

Nutrition literacy; nutrition knowledge; source credibility; confusion