

Consumers' food preferences have led to a worldwide overweight rate of 35% in 2008. It is a matter of fact that overweight is closely linked to unhealthy eating habits. Most existing nutrition labels contain reference information in the form of aspirational levels such as the Percentage Daily Value or traffic lights. Those labels often contain information thought to provide a reference against which consumers can compare nutritional contents of food products. An alternative to these labels is the disclosure of summary information in the form of Category Average Reference Points (CARPs). CARP displays the average amount of calories and/or key nutrients in one category and therefore qualifies otherwise meaningless nutrition information such as "contains 200 calories."

This dissertation investigates the effectiveness of CARPs and explores the mechanisms that link this summary information with preferences for more and less healthy food. More precisely, this thesis comprises three papers and one working paper on references and preferences in food decision making. In the first paper the effects of CARP disclosure on choice behavior are examined and the underlying process leading to changes in choice are investigated. This paper serves to introduce the notion of CARP and demonstrates its effectiveness in affecting choice. In the second paper, the previous findings are extended. Moreover, CARPs' effectiveness to change preferences is furthered. More precisely, the question is answered if CARP disclosure can suppress health halos induced by health claims.

While the first two papers provide a good understanding of the basic mechanism operating through CARP provision, the aim of the remaining two papers was to further extend knowledge about the interplay of reference points, individual goal pursuit, self-control, and perceptions of healthiness.

In the third paper, the hypothesis was raised that members of a product category can be seen as vices or virtues depending on their position towards a reference point. The new concept of 'degree of viciousness' was introduced and it was demonstrated how it impacts food preferences. In the fourth paper it is shown how reference points interact with abstract eating goals. Taken together, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of how references and preferences are linked in food decision making.