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MINI REVIEW

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Mini review: Impact of branding on consumer perception of adulterated foods

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ABSTRACT

This mini-review examines the critical relationship between branding and consumer perception, particularly in the context of adulterated foods—products altered to enhance appeal or shelf life, often at the expense of consumer health. Branding significantly shapes consumer beliefs, with strong brands often obscuring the harmful effects of food adulteration. The review highlights the ethical issues of deceptive branding practices, such as misleading packaging and false health claims, which erode public trust and endanger consumer welfare. By analyzing case studies of brands like Coca-Cola, Maggi, and Cadbury, the review demonstrates how robust branding can influence consumer perceptions, even amidst quality concerns. These cases also reveal how strategic crisis management and ethical branding can aid in reputational recovery. Conversely, examples like the Johnson & Johnson baby powder controversy and Patanjali's Coronil case illustrate the damaging effects of unethical branding and regulatory failures. The findings emphasize the necessity for stronger regulatory oversight and the establishment of global standards to manage the challenges posed by modern branding practices. The review identifies research gaps, particularly the need for studies on the long-term impact of deceptive branding, and proposes policy recommendations and best practices for ethical branding that ensures consumer protection and industry integrity.

KEYWORDS

Branding ethics; Food adulteration; Consumer perception; Regulatory oversight; Crisis management

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

Branding is essential for differentiating products and building consumer trust. However, its impact on consumer perception becomes particularly significant when considering adulterated foods—products deliberately tampered with to enhance appearance, taste, or shelf-life, often at the cost of consumer health. Understanding how branding influences consumer perception of such products is crucial for various stakeholders, including consumers, regulatory bodies, and the food industry. This study aims to explore this relationship, highlighting how branding can sometimes mask the adverse effects of food adulteration and mislead consumers [1].

This mini review will cover several key areas: definitions and conceptual frameworks of branding, adulterated foods, and consumer perception; the historical context and evolution of food adulteration and branding practices; and a synthesis of previous research exploring the interplay between branding and consumer perception. Additionally, it will delve into specific case studies to illustrate real-world implications, discuss ethical challenges, and propose future research directions and policy recommendations [2].

The primary objectives of this review are to:

1. Define and contextualize the key concepts related to branding and food adulteration.
2. Analyze contemporary examples to understand the evolution of these practices.
3. Examine the existing literature to identify how branding affects consumer perceptions of adulterated foods.
4. Highlight the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with this issue.
5. Provide recommendations for future research and policy interventions to ensure consumer protection [3].

Background and Literature Review

Adulterated foods are products intentionally altered by adding or substituting ingredients to deceive consumers, often compromising safety and nutritional value. Branding involves creating a unique image and identity for a product through various marketing strategies, aimed at establishing a distinctive presence in the consumer's mind. Consumer perception encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and impressions that consumers hold towards a product, influenced by factors like branding, advertising, and personal experiences [4].

Several studies have examined the relationship between branding and consumer perception, especially in the context of adulterated foods. Research shows that strong branding significantly influences consumer trust and perceived quality, even when the actual product quality is compromised. For example, consumers are more likely to overlook potential food safety issues in products from well-established brands compared to lesser-known or generic brands. Branding can create a "halo effect," where the positive attributes associated with a brand extend to all its products, regardless of their actual quality [5].

Moreover, consumers often rely on brand reputation as a heuristic to make quick purchasing decisions, sometimes neglecting to scrutinize product labels for potential adulteration signs. While branding plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception, it can also lead to a false sense of security regarding product safety and quality. By synthesizing

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these studies, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how branding impacts consumer perception of adulterated foods. The findings underscore the need for increased awareness and regulatory oversight to protect consumers [6].

The Role of Branding in the Food Industry

Branding strategies

Branding strategies in the food industry are multifaceted and aim to create a strong, positive image of the product and company in the minds of consumers. One common strategy is product differentiation, where companies highlight unique features or benefits of their product, such as organic ingredients, superior taste, or health benefits. Packaging plays a crucial role, with visually appealing designs, logos, and colors that attract consumers and convey the brand's message. Storytelling is another strategy, where brands share their origin stories, values, and missions to build an emotional connection with consumers. Celebrity endorsements and influencer partnerships are also effective, leveraging the popularity and credibility of well-known personalities to boost brand image and trust [7].

Brand equity

Brand equity refers to the value a brand adds to a product, often seen in the form of consumer preference and loyalty. It encompasses brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. High brand equity means that consumers are more likely to choose a product because of their familiarity and positive associations with the brand, rather than just the product's intrinsic qualities. This can lead to premium pricing, where consumers are willing to pay more for a branded product, and competitive advantage, helping brands stand out in a crowded market. For instance, a brand like Coca-Cola commands high brand equity due to its consistent branding efforts and strong market presence [8].

Case study 1: Coca-Cola's branding strategy and consumer psychology

Coca-Cola's branding strategy is a masterclass in leveraging consumer psychology, combining global consistency with localized adaptation, emotional engagement, and continuous innovation. Coca-Cola's consistent marketing has created a universally recognized brand, with campaigns like "Taste the Feeling" and global events such as the FIFA World Cup reinforcing a cohesive brand image. These campaigns, grounded in themes of happiness and togetherness, resonate across cultures, fostering trust and loyalty [9].

The brand's iconic packaging, particularly the contour bottle and red-and-white colour scheme, further cements its identity, making Coca-Cola instantly recognizable worldwide. This distinctive design, coupled with strategic product placements, ensures the brand stands out in a crowded market.

Emotional storytelling is a cornerstone of Coca-Cola's success. Campaigns like "Share a Coke," which personalized bottles with names, and "Taste the Feeling" have created personal and emotional connections with consumers, driving social media engagement and embedding the brand deeply into consumer lives. Coca-Cola's global adaptation strategy balances uniformity with local relevance by tailoring its marketing to fit cultural contexts. For example, in India, the brand's advertisements during Diwali emphasize themes of family and festivity, enhancing its appeal [10].

Coca-Cola has diversified its product line to include healthier options like Diet Coke and Coca-Cola Zero, responding to evolving consumer preferences. The brand's investment in sustainable packaging and digital marketing ensures it remains relevant to younger, environmentally-conscious consumers. While Coca-Cola enjoys widespread success, it has faced challenges such as health concerns over sugary drinks and environmental criticisms. The brand's commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, including recycling campaigns and water conservation efforts, has helped mitigate these issues and strengthen its brand equity [11].

Consumer Perception of Adulterated Foods

Psychological factors

Consumer perception of food quality and safety is heavily influenced by psychological factors such as trust, familiarity, and loyalty. Trust is built over time through consistent quality and positive experiences with a brand. Familiarity with a brand reduces perceived risks, as consumers believe that well-known brands are less likely to sell harmful or adulterated products. Loyalty develops when consumers have repeated positive experiences, leading them to stick with a brand they trust [12].

Brand influence

Branding significantly impacts consumer perception of adulterated foods. Strong brands can often mask underlying issues, as consumers may assume that well-known brands are synonymous with quality and safety. For instance, if a trusted brand faces an adulteration scandal, loyal consumers might be more forgiving or skeptical about the allegations, attributing them to isolated incidents rather than systemic issues. Conversely, lesser-known or generic brands might face harsher scrutiny and quicker rejection in similar situations. This phenomenon was evident in the case of Nestlé's Maggi noodles scandal, where despite initial backlash, strong brand loyalty helped the product recover in the market after rigorous safety reassurances [13].

Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour differs markedly when exposed to branded versus non-branded adulterated foods. Studies have shown that consumers are more likely to overlook minor quality issues in branded products, attributing them to rare lapses rather than habitual practices. In contrast, non-branded or generic products do not enjoy this leniency, as consumers are less likely to have established trust or loyalty with these products. This phenomenon is evident in markets where branded products continue to thrive despite occasional scandals, whereas non-branded products may see significant drops in sales following similar issues [14].

Case study 2: Maggi noodles and brand resilience

In 2015, Nestlé's Maggi noodles, a popular staple in Indian households, encountered a significant crisis when reports surfaced about excessive lead content and mislabelling of monosodium glutamate (MSG) in its products. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) imposed a nationwide ban, resulting in product recalls and a temporary halt in production. This incident severely shook consumer trust and led

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to a sharp decline in sales, with Nestlé losing significant market share [15].

Despite the intense backlash, Maggi's strong brand loyalty was pivotal in its recovery. Consumer skepticism about the validity of the allegations helped mitigate the damage. Nestlé responded swiftly by conducting extensive product testing, reformulating the noodles, and launching a transparent communication campaign to reassure consumers. The company also engaged in a legal battle to overturn the ban, which was lifted after a few months following safety clearances from various government bodies [16].

Upon its return to the market, Nestlé implemented an extensive marketing campaign emphasizing product safety, supported by government-approved certifications. This campaign, coupled with targeted outreach on digital platforms, successfully restored consumer confidence. Within six months, Maggi regained approximately 60% of its pre-crisis market share, underscoring the resilience of its brand.

This case highlights the importance of strong brand equity in crisis management, demonstrating how established brands can leverage consumer trust and effective communication to navigate challenges. Additionally, the Maggi crisis underscores the role of regulatory bodies, the impact of consumer perception, and the competitive landscape during such events [17].

Case Studies and Examples

Positive example

Case study 3: How Cadbury dairy milk overcame a brand crisis in India

In 2003, Cadbury Dairy Milk faced a serious crisis in India when reports surfaced of worms being found in its chocolate bars, leading to widespread consumer fear and a sharp decline in sales. This incident threatened the reputation of one of India's most beloved chocolate brands, causing significant damage to consumer trust [18].

Cadbury's response was strategic and multifaceted. The company quickly launched an internal investigation, identifying that the contamination was due to improper storage conditions at the retail level. To address the issue, Cadbury introduced new airtight packaging, ensuring that their chocolates remained safe from external contamination. This packaging innovation was crucial in rebuilding consumer confidence. Cadbury also engaged in a robust communication strategy, featuring Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan, who reassured consumers of the product's safety. This campaign was critical in restoring the brand's image, as it leveraged a trusted public figure to convey Cadbury's commitment to quality [19].

In addition to these measures, Cadbury worked closely with regulatory bodies to ensure compliance and transparency. The company also enhanced its distribution and storage protocols to prevent future incidents. While the crisis had an immediate negative impact on sales, Cadbury's proactive and transparent approach led to a swift recovery. The brand successfully regained consumer trust, and Dairy Milk quickly returned to its position as a market leader in India. This case highlights the importance of effective crisis management and the power of strategic branding in overcoming significant challenges [20].

Negative example

Case Study 4: Johnson & Johnson baby powder controversy in India

In 2018, Johnson & Johnson, a brand synonymous with baby care, faced a severe crisis in India when its iconic baby powder was reported to contain asbestos, a known carcinogen. This controversy was part of a larger global issue, where the company faced thousands of lawsuits worldwide. The crisis in India began when the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ordered tests on Johnson & Johnson's baby powder after safety concerns were raised. The tests allegedly revealed traces of asbestos, leading to widespread panic and extensive media coverage. This revelation was a serious blow to a product that had been trusted by Indian households for decades [21].

The news significantly impacted consumer trust. Parents who had long relied on Johnson & Johnson's products for their children's safety began to question their continued use. This led to a sharp decline in sales, with many retailers pulling the product from their shelves. Reports suggested a significant dip in market share, reflecting the scale of consumer distrust. In response, the Indian government and regulatory bodies increased scrutiny of Johnson & Johnson's products, leading to multiple rounds of testing. The company was also involved in legal battles and had to adhere to stringent safety standards to continue operations in India [22].

Despite efforts to restore consumer confidence, including public assurances and enhanced safety measures, the damage to Johnson & Johnson's reputation was substantial. The controversy underscored the challenges even the most trusted brands face when confronted with serious safety allegations, and highlighted the crucial importance of maintaining product integrity in building and sustaining consumer trust [23].

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues

The use of branding to mask food adulteration presents significant ethical dilemmas. When companies leverage their branding to obscure the quality and safety issues of their products, they engage in deceptive practices that mislead consumers and violate ethical principles. For instance, certain companies have been known to use attractive packaging and misleading health claims to market products that contain harmful additives or inferior ingredients. This not only deceives consumers but also undermines public trust in the food industry. The long-term consequences of such practices include potential harm to public health and a gradual erosion of consumer confidence, which can be difficult to rebuild [24].

Regulatory challenges

Regulating branding to ensure consumer protection poses several challenges. The rapid evolution of branding strategies often outpaces regulatory frameworks, making it difficult for authorities to monitor and enforce compliance. For example, regulations by bodies like the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in the U.S. or EFSA (European Food Safety Authority) in Europe are continually updated to address new marketing tactics. However, the global nature of food supply chains complicates enforcement, as different jurisdictions may have varying standards and enforcement capabilities. These

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challenges underscore the need for more agile and harmonized international regulatory frameworks that can effectively address deceptive branding practices [25].

Corporate responsibility

Food companies have a profound responsibility to maintain ethical branding practices. Beyond simply complying with regulations, companies should integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that emphasize transparency, honesty, and consumer welfare. This includes conducting thorough internal audits to ensure that marketing claims align with the actual quality and safety of products. Additionally, companies can engage in CSR programs that focus on sustainable sourcing and transparent labeling, which not only build consumer trust but also contribute to broader societal goals. By prioritizing ethical branding, companies can differentiate themselves in a competitive market and foster long-term consumer loyalty [26].

Case Study 5: The patanjali coronil controversy

In 2020, Patanjali Ayurved faced significant controversy over its product "Coronil," which was marketed as a cure for COVID-19. Co-founded by Baba Ramdev, Patanjali leveraged its strong brand loyalty to promote Coronil during the peak of the pandemic, claiming it was clinically proven to cure the virus. However, these claims lacked peer-reviewed scientific evidence and had not been approved by the Ministry of AYUSH, the regulatory body overseeing Ayurvedic products in India [27]. Following the product's launch, the Indian government and regulatory bodies raised concerns about the validity of Patanjali's claims. The Ministry of AYUSH clarified that Coronil could only be sold as an immunity booster, not a cure for COVID-19. Legal actions, including a public interest litigation in the Madras High Court, were initiated, challenging the company's misleading claims [28].

As a result, Patanjali had to retract its claims and reposition Coronil as an immunity booster. Despite these adjustments, the incident severely damaged the brand's credibility and eroded consumer trust. The controversy underscores the ethical and legal responsibility of companies to ensure that their product claims are truthful and scientifically validated. It also highlights the critical role of regulatory oversight in protecting consumers from misleading and potentially harmful information [29].

Future Directions and Recommendations

Research gaps

Despite the growing concern over food adulteration and deceptive branding, several research gaps remain. There is a need for more longitudinal studies that explore the impact of deceptive branding on consumer behavior and public health over time. Additionally, research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing regulatory interventions and exploring new methodologies for detecting and preventing food adulteration. Qualitative research involving consumer focus groups could provide insights into how branding influences purchasing decisions, while quantitative studies could assess the prevalence of adulteration in different product categories [30].

Policy recommendations

To better regulate branding and protect consumers, policymakers should consider implementing more stringent and specific regulations. This could include mandatory third-party audits of food products, stricter penalties for violations, and the establishment of global standards for product labeling and marketing claims. International cooperation among regulatory bodies is crucial to ensure consistent enforcement across borders. Moreover, investing in consumer education initiatives can empower consumers to make informed choices and reduce their susceptibility to deceptive branding practices [31].

Best practices

Food companies should adopt best practices that emphasize ethical branding and consumer engagement. This includes not only conducting regular audits of marketing strategies but also actively involving consumers in the branding process. For example, companies could publish transparency reports detailing the sourcing and production processes of their products, or create platforms for consumer feedback and dialogue. Additionally, companies should prioritize clear and honest communication, ensuring that all branding and marketing materials accurately reflect the quality and safety of their products. By adopting these best practices, companies can build stronger, more trusting relationships with their consumers and contribute to a more ethical food industry [32].

Conclusions

The review emphasized the ethical challenges associated with branding in the food industry, particularly regarding food adulteration. Unethical branding, such as misleading packaging or false health claims, deceives consumers and undermines public trust. The review also highlighted regulatory challenges, particularly the difficulty regulators face in keeping up with evolving branding strategies and the need for unified international standards. The importance of corporate responsibility was stressed, focusing on the necessity for food companies to align their branding with ethical practices. Additionally, research gaps were identified, pointing to the need for more studies on the long-term effects of deceptive branding and the effectiveness of regulatory interventions.

Branding significantly influences consumer perception, especially concerning adulterated foods. When used unethically, it can lead to widespread consumer deception and potential health risks. Transparency and honesty in branding are essential for maintaining consumer trust and ensuring ethical practices within the food industry.

Policymakers, regulatory bodies, and food companies must take decisive actions to address these challenges. Stricter regulations, enhanced monitoring, and a commitment to ethical branding are crucial for protecting consumers and upholding industry integrity. By working together, these stakeholders can foster a food industry that prioritizes consumer protection and trust.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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