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It is not all about information! Sensory experience overrides the impact of nutrition information on consumers' choice of sugar-reduced drinks

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Motivation and behavior change (SIG)

Objective

Excessive sugar intake is a global public health concern, and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) represent one of the main sources of added sugar in the diet. In this sense, the inclusion of front of pack (FOP) nutritional schemes and food reformulation are strategies that could contribute to reduce sugar consumption and improve population health status. The aims of this work were to evaluate adults and children's choice of sugar-reduced drinks in the context of the implementation of FOP nutrition labelling under different evaluation conditions, and to compare the influence of two FOP nutrition labelling schemes: the traffic-light system (TLS) and nutritional warnings.

Methods

For that, 400 adults and 400 children (6-12 years old) divided in 2 groups (n=200) each chose samples of grape nectar or chocolate flavoured milk (control and two sugar reduction levels) featuring different FOP nutritional schemes, under three experimental conditions: (a) blind, tasting the samples without any information, (b) expected, looking at the packages, and (c) informed, looking at the packages and tasting the samples. In each experimental condition, participants were asked to choose one of the three products.

Results

Both FOP schemes encouraged adults and children's to choose for healthier products under the expected condition. In the case of adults, nutritional warnings outperformed the traffic light system in the task involving grape nectars. However, when participants tasted the products (blind and informed conditions), choices were defined by their sensory characteristics and the control samples without sugar reduction were the most frequently selected.

Conclusions

These results indicate that consumers' hedonic experience overrode the effect of FOP nutrition labelling and suggest that this public policy is unlikely to have a real effect on consumers' choices if there are no healthy alternatives that meet their sensory and hedonic expectations.