

# Guiltless gluttony: Misleading size labels lead to overeating

November 15 2010

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People are easily fooled when it comes to food labels, and will eat more of something if they believe it's a "small" portion, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Nilufer Z. Ayinoglu (Koç University, Istanbul) and Aradhna Krishna (University of Michigan) found that inconsistent portion sizes contribute to people's uncertainty about the appropriate amount to eat. "In this context of large portion sizes and consumer uncertainty about appropriate food intake, we show that size labels chosen by food and drink vendors (such as 'small-medium-large') can have a major impact on consumers' purchase and consumption behavior," the authors write. "As such, food providers' choice of size labels has many potential legislative and liability-related implications."

The researchers conducted five studies that included actual food consumption. They demonstrated that the use of different size labels for the same product affects the amount people consume.

When people consumed a large item that was labeled "small," they felt less guilty; the authors call this effect "guiltless gluttony." "An implication of our results is that consumers can continue to eat large sizes that are labeled as smaller and feel that they have not consumed too much. This can result in unintended and uninformed over-consumption, which is clearly ridden with significant health ramifications, and size labels could be contributing to the rampant obesity problems in the United States."

The authors found that the biasing effect of size labels was most pronounced when people's concern about accurate nutrition intake was not high and when people's ability to process was limited—in other words, situations not unlike everyday life.

"Stricter size labeling laws and more vigilant monitoring of marketers' use of size labels may be needed, especially considering the limited cognitive resources available to consumers for routine [food](#) choice and consumption behavior during their other everyday endeavors," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Nilufer Ayinoglu and Aradhna Krishna. "Guiltless Gluttony: The Asymmetric Effect of Size Labels on Size Perceptions and Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2011 (published online October 27, 2010). For further information, see [ejcr.org](http://ejcr.org)

Provided by University of Chicago Press Journals

Citation: Guiltless gluttony: Misleading size labels lead to overeating (2010, November 15) retrieved 17 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-11-guiltless-gluttony-size-overeating.html>

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