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# Promoting the Absence of Pesticides through Product Labels: The Role of Showing a Specific Description of the Harmful Effects, Environmental Attitude, and Familiarity with Pesticides

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**Abstract:** Few studies have analyzed the mechanisms of how environmental labels influence consumers' perception and consequent behavior. The present study puts forth specific questions of how pesticide-free products should be promoted through product labels. Data were collected via controlled experimentation. The results demonstrate that pesticide-free labels with specific information on the harmful effects of pesticides have a more positive impact on perceived value and purchase intention relative to pesticide-free labels with a general description of the harmful effects of pesticides. The results also show that the positive effects of promoting the absence of pesticides through product labels on perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention are stronger among individuals who are high in environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides. Policymakers, producers, and retailers could use these findings for better decision-making.

**Keywords:** product labels; pesticides; harmful effects; environmental attitude; promotion; food quality and safety

## 1. Introduction

The use of pesticides, including the use of old or obsolete pesticides that have been banned in some countries, has generally increased, becoming a major global environmental threat [1,2]. Although pesticides seek to benefit human life by increasing agricultural productivity, their adverse effects have outweighed the benefits associated with their use [1,3,4]. Pesticides are largely used by farmers and traders [1,2]. Pesticides have a damaging effect on both the environment and on the consumers' health. The use of pesticides and their effect on soil, air, water, and living organisms is a major global challenge [3,4]. Unfortunately, producers in many countries (e.g., the U.S.) have the freedom to choose whether or not to include information on pesticide usage.

Labeling diminishes the asymmetric information (e.g., information about pesticide usage) between producers and consumers [5]. Labels are recognizable symbols attached to the product or its packaging or situated in the product's immediate surroundings [6,7]. The presence or absence of pesticides is a key attribute for consumers [8–10]. However, little research has been conducted relating to consumers' perceptions and preferences for pesticide-free labels [9]. Borin et al. [11] show that products with positive environmental labels or eco-labels (e.g., pesticide-free labels) are viewed better than products with negative environmental labels. Pesticide-free labels could be a useful tool for promoting the absence of pesticides from the producer to the consumer [6,12].

Environmental labels (including pesticide-free labels) work with different standards in different countries. Hence, the consumers may take these as something the producer created and therefore perceive it as if the producer really cares about their effect on the environment and the consumers'

health. The environmental labeling benefits for both consumers and producers have led to plenty labeling schemes and initiatives. This has increased the awareness of the environmental impact of products, but not without some confusion for both consumers and firms [13]. Consequently, consumers are facing misperception in detecting and distinguishing green products [14]. Consumers may not differentiate green products from one another because there is no standardized evaluation of their ecological impact (e.g., product labels).

The motivation of consumption depends on the perceived quality (i.e., the overall subjective evaluation of a product from the consumer's perspective) and perceived value (i.e., the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given), both of which are important factors influencing consumers' purchase intention [15,16]. Therefore, the higher the perceived quality and the perceived value of products with pesticide-free labels, the greater the purchase intention of products with pesticide-free labels. Rarely have studies analyzed environmental labels' effects on influencing the perceived quality and perceived value [6].

Food consumption patterns have been changing due to the increasing concerns about food quality and safety, health benefits, and environmental effects [17]. If information about the harmful effects of pesticides is visibly presented, consumers could be more likely to perceive the quality and value of pesticide-free products more clearly. When more specific information about the harmful effects of pesticides is available for consumers, they are more susceptible to purchase pesticide-free products. If producers of pesticide-free products are more specific on how their products influence the environment and consumers' health, consumers will buy their products more. Therefore, pesticide-free labels with a specific description of harmful effects could make a considerable contribution to improve consumers' perceived quality (H1a), perceived value (H1b), and purchase intention (H1c) of products with pesticide-free labels.

Some consumers may respond better to pesticide-free products. The present study proposes that consumers with a high environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides could have a better response to pesticide-free products. Despite the large number of studies on market segmentation based on the level of greenness of individuals, only a small number of studies dealing with selecting target markets for green products have been identified [18]. If consumers have an environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides, they will have more confidence examining pesticide-free labels, directly affecting consumers' perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention. These consumers will be able to understand the damaging effects of pesticides fully [19].

The higher the environmental attitude, the higher the perceived quality and perceived value of products with pesticide-free labels. Therefore, the greater the odds that consumers will purchase these products over other options. Environmental attitude is positively associated with green purchasing behavior [20,21]. Green consumers understand that buying a product involves the whole production of it. They are more attracted to products that care for the environment and reduce their ecological impact. Individuals with higher environmental attitudes could pay more attention to products with pesticide-free labels because they believe human activities are responsible for environmental problems [22–24]. Therefore, the effects of promoting pesticide-free products on perceived quality (H2a), perceived value (H2b), and purchase intention (H2c) can be stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in environmental attitude.

Additionally, the attitudes each consumer takes when buying products with pesticide-free labels are affected by their familiarity with pesticides, which is gained through the lifetime [25]. Therefore, individuals who handle more information and facts regarding pesticides' environmental and health impacts are more likely to purchase products with pesticide-free labels. Many consumers have a certain familiarity with pesticides, but do not necessarily convert their expertise into behavior (e.g., purchasing pesticide-free products). Consumers improve their familiarity with pesticides through intentional and incidental learning [19]. Pesticide-free labels intend to make it easy to take environmental and health concerns into account when shopping. The familiarity with pesticides necessary to interpret information about pesticides is relevant [26]. Therefore, the effects of promoting pesticide-free products

through product labels on perceived quality (H3a), perceived value (H3b), and purchase intention (H3c) can be stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in familiarity with pesticides.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of showing specific descriptions of the harmful effects, consumers' environmental attitude, and consumers' familiarity with pesticides in the perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention of products with pesticide-free labels. These findings will serve policymakers, producers, and retailers looking to develop appropriate strategies for promoting pesticide-free products.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Data were collected via controlled experimentation. A total of 195 undergraduate students at a Chilean university participated in the web survey. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of five scenarios. The product (apples) and price (an average local price) were identical in all scenarios. In Chile, apple is an important crop and pesticides have demonstrated to play a major role in the apple industry. Pesticides have been used for more than 40 years in the country. In the early 1980s, when the export boom in the agricultural, fruit and forestry sectors began, there was a notable increase in pesticides' import and production. It is estimated that in Chile, more than 63 thousand tons of pesticides are used annually and that each year there are more than three thousand cases of poisoning of workers being exposed to pesticides [27].

Table 1 provides detail on the five different scenarios developed to conduct the study. All descriptions include in labels were taken from Borin et al. [11]. In the first scenario, there is no message. The second scenario presents the absence of pesticides and a general description of the harmful effects of pesticides. The third scenario presents the absence of pesticides and a specific description of the harmful effects of pesticides. The fourth scenario presents the presence of pesticides and a general description of the harmful effects of pesticides. The fifth and last scenario presents the presence of pesticides and a specific description of the harmful effects of pesticides. The structure and design (size, color, and layout) were the same in all labels.

**Table 1.** Product labels used in the experiment <sup>1</sup>.

	Label 1	Label 2	Label 3	Label 4	Label 5
Message 1		Pesticide free	Pesticide free	Grown with the use of pesticides	Grown with the use of pesticides
Message 2		Pesticides are harmful chemicals	Pesticides can cause harm to humans, animals, or the environment because they are designed to kill or otherwise adversely affect living organisms	Pesticides are harmful chemicals	Pesticides can cause harm to humans, animals, or the environment because they are designed to kill or otherwise adversely affect living organisms
Coding (1 = Yes, 0 = No)					
Information about pesticides	0	1	1	1	1
Pesticide-free product	0	1	1	0	0
Specific description of harmful effects	0	0	1	0	1

<sup>1</sup> All scenarios include the same product (apples) and price (an average local price).

After viewing the scenarios, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention. Environmental attitude, familiarity with pesticides, and product familiarity were also measured. All measurement items were drawn from the literature [11,16]. All measurement items used in this study are indicated in the Appendix A.

### 3. Results

SPSS 23 was used to perform the statistical analysis. The results of the hypotheses tests are shown in Table 2. Proposed hypotheses were tested with three regression analyses predicting perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention. The independent variables used in the study were mean-centered before generating the interaction terms to diminish multicollinearity. The variance inflation factors (VIFs) for each regression coefficient ranges from a low of 1.110 to a high of 2.036, suggesting that the VIFs are at satisfactory levels. Since no strong multicollinearity between the independent variables was found, all independent variables were included in the model [28,29].

**Table 2.** Regressions predicting perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention <sup>1</sup>.

	Hypothesis	Perceived Quality	Perceived Value	Purchase Intention
Information about pesticides (Info)		−0.248 **	−0.208 *	−0.168 *
Pesticide-free product (Pesticide-free)		0.456 **	0.404 **	0.400 **
Specific description of the harmful effects (Specific)		−0.145 *	−0.086	−0.139 *
Environmental attitude (EnvAtt)		−0.069	0.036	−0.114
Familiarity with pesticides (FamPest)		0.087	0.102	−0.044
Product familiarity (ProdFam)		0.024	−0.110	0.012
Info × EnvAtt		−0.211 *	−0.226 **	−0.191 *
Info × FamPest		−0.156 *	−0.101	−0.132
Info × ProdFam		0.071	0.089	−0.014
Pesticide-free × Specific	H1: +	0.110	0.165 *	0.196 **
Pesticide-free × EnvAtt	H2: +	0.147 *	0.176 *	0.175 *
Pesticide-free × FamPest	H3: +	0.194 **	0.240 **	0.194 **
Pesticide-free × ProdFam		−0.012	−0.030	−0.082
Specific × EnvAtt		−0.033	0.019	−0.034
Specific × FamPest		0.105	−0.033	0.041
Specific × ProdFam		−0.044	−0.019	−0.004
R <sup>2</sup>		0.366	0.338	0.329
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.309	0.279	0.269
F		6.432 **	5.691 **	5.457 **
N		195	195	195

<sup>1</sup> Note: Standardized regression estimates are reported, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . H1. Pesticide-free labels with a specific description of harmful effects could make a considerable contribution to improve consumers' perceived quality (H1a), perceived value (H1b), and purchase intention (H1c) of products with pesticide-free labels. H2. The effects of promoting pesticide-free products through product labels on perceived quality (H2a), perceived value (H2b), and purchase intention (H2c) can be stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in environmental attitude. H3. The effects of promoting pesticide-free products through product labels on perceived quality (H3a), perceived value (H3b), and purchase intention (H3c) can be stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in familiarity with pesticides.

Pesticide-free apples have a higher perceived quality (0.456,  $p < 0.01$ ), perceived value (0.404,  $p < 0.01$ ), and purchase intention (0.400,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results are in line with prior literature [9,11]. The effect of promoting pesticide-free products with a specific description of the harmful effects on perceived quality was positive, but not statistically significant (0.110,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, H1a is not supported. The results suggest that promoting pesticide-free products with a specific description of harmful effects have a more positive impact on perceived value (0.165,  $p < 0.05$ ) and purchase intention (0.196,  $p < 0.01$ ) relative to promoting pesticide-free products with a general description of harmful effects. Therefore, H1b and H1c are supported. The results suggest that promoting pesticide-free products with a specific description of the harmful effects has greater effects on perceived value and purchase intention than perceived quality. This result could be explained because part of the benefits of pesticide-free products for consumers is contributing to the environment. These environmental benefits can be more easily integrated into the product's perceived value than the product's perceived quality.

The results also show that the effects of promoting pesticide-free products on perceived quality (0.147,  $p < 0.05$ ), perceived value (0.176,  $p < 0.05$ ), and purchase intention (0.175,  $p < 0.05$ ) are stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in environmental attitude. Therefore, H2a, H2b, and H2c are supported. The results also show that the effects of promoting pesticide-free products on perceived quality (0.194,  $p < 0.01$ ), perceived value (0.240,  $p < 0.01$ ), and purchase intention (0.194,  $p < 0.01$ ) are stronger among individuals who are high rather than low in familiarity with pesticides.

Therefore, H3a, H3b, and H3c are supported. These results confirm the hypotheses proposed in this research: consumers with a high environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides may present a better response to pesticide-free products.

#### 4. Discussion

The results suggest that producers and retailers should include pesticide-free labels with a specific description of their harmful effects. The findings also suggest that policymakers should consider requiring producers and retailers to disclose the presence or absence of pesticides and their specific influence on both the environment and on the consumers' health.

The results also suggest that an undifferentiated or mass marketing strategy (i.e., the producer or the retailer ignores segment differences and goes after the whole market with one offer) is not effective and that different marketing strategies should be used for each consumer segment. The findings suggest that pesticide-free products may target individuals high in environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides as their prime targets. Internet (e.g., social media) can help producers, retailers, and official bodies to target these consumer segments better [30]. For example, all of them can target advertising on online channels (e.g., social networks), including products with pesticide-free labels considering users' interests (e.g., concern for the environment, knowing about pesticides). A similar process can be followed on websites tracking users' behavior information on the website. Such a case could be offering products with pesticide-free labels to users who have requested information on pesticide-free products or environmentally friendly products.

Previous studies have shown that consumers' environmental attitude is linked to environmental education [31,32]. Policymakers could incorporate environmental education in schools to increase the response to pesticide-free labels. This can be achieved by introducing specific courses or incorporating content in existing courses in schools, universities, and other educational levels. Without a doubt, it will be essential to cover this content through the teachers and the various materials (e.g., books, teaching cases, videos) that they use in their courses.

Policymakers can also improve consumers' environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides through several communication channels to display advertising and public relations (e.g., newsletters, events, media relations), such as news media (e.g., TV, newspapers), websites, and social media (e.g., Instagram, YouTube) [19]. For example, through associations with influencers who, using their large social media following, generate content, contests, and challenges that can quickly go viral, which would allow for an increase in environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides.

#### 5. Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

There are three main limitations to this research. First, the generalizability of the findings is yet to be confirmed. It is important to examine whether the conclusions apply to other products, other harmful ingredients/processes, and other countries. In future research, samples from a broader pool of products and harmful ingredients or processes (e.g., water usage in food production) in several countries can be collected.

Second, future research could integrate other moderating factors, such as product availability, price, and consumers' product involvement, which were not included in this study, but could also play a role in the effectiveness of promoting pesticide-free products through labels [24,33]. Additionally, in this research, the variables perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intention were used as dependent variables. Future research may include other dependent variables such as perceived risk, customer retention, and word of mouth [34,35], which allow a better understanding of the effects proposed in this research.

Lastly, this study's findings were obtained from a sample of undergraduate students belonging to a younger generation. The present investigation decided to use a sample of undergraduate students from Chile for convenience due to the easy access to these participants. However, this limits the ability to generalize the investigation results to other populations of other ages and other countries. As an

illustration, younger generations tend to be more prone to environmental issues [36], which could translate into presenting a different response from other population segments. Perhaps age could moderate the effects of promoting pesticide-free products with a specific description of harmful effects, environmental attitude, and familiarity with pesticides on consumer response. On the other hand, Chile is characterized by a lower income level in the population in relation to developed countries [27]. The income level of consumers could also moderate the effects proposed in this research. Demographic variables such as age, gender, and education can influence the preference towards green products [36,37]. Cultural differences between countries could also influence the results [34]. For example, consumers' level of uncertainty avoidance could moderate the results due to the recalling of risk that pesticides generate. Therefore, future research may include other countries and other consumer segments to analyze the moderating role of demographic (e.g., age, income level) and cultural (e.g., uncertainty avoidance) characteristics of the consumer on the effects proposed in this research.

Future research should consider these variables to exhibit whether and how strong these impact the results found in the present study. Including all these variables in future research will help identify which segments and how to offer pesticide-free products more accurately.

## 6. Conclusions

Few studies have focused on investigating the mechanisms of how environmental labels influence consumers' perception and consequent behavior [6]. The present study puts forth specific questions of how pesticide-free products should be promoted. The results demonstrate that pesticide-free labels with specific information on the harmful effects of pesticides can make an important difference in consumer evaluation of pesticide-free products. The results also show that the positive effects of promoting pesticide-free products through product labels on consumers' perceived quality, consumers' perceived value, and consumers' purchase intention are stronger among individuals who are high in environmental attitude and familiarity with pesticides. Policymakers, producers, and retailers could use the findings of the present study for better decision-making.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

Questionnaire	
Perceived quality	The quality of this product is ... (1 = very low, 7 = very high)
Perceived value	Compared with other products in the market, the value of this product is ... (1 = very low, 7 = very high)
Purchase intention	1 = I definitely would not buy this product, 7 = I definitely would buy this product
Environmental attitude	I prefer to buy environmentally friendly products I believe human activities are a major reason for global warming I separate trash into recyclable and non-recyclable piles I'm willing to pay 10 percent more for environmentally friendly products I prefer to buy products from environmentally friendly companies I would support a college course on sustainability for all college students (7-point Likert scales, Cronbach's alpha = 0.80)
Familiarity with pesticides	Please rate your degree of familiarity with pesticides (1 = very low, 7 = very high)
Product familiarity	Have you purchased apples in the past six months? (1 = Yes, 0 = No)



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