

The (in)effectiveness of a healthy default nudge in influencing food choices: the role of cognitive load

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With rising obesity rates, promoting healthier food behavior becomes increasingly important. Nudging, which subtly steers individuals in a particular direction, gained attention as an effective strategy throughout the years. However, recent research identifies potential boundary conditions and even questions its effectiveness, encouraging a reevaluation and deeper understanding. A field experiment involving 128 students investigated the impact of a healthy default nudge (versus control) on snack choices, under differing levels of cognitive load. Results show that a healthy default nudge did not significantly influence snack choice, challenging the effectiveness of default nudges in stimulating healthier behavior. Moreover, cognitive load did not moderate the effect. These findings advise against reliance on default nudges (only) for promoting healthier food behavior. The study acknowledges limitations and suggests future research to offer a more nuanced understanding of (default) nudges and to consider a multifaceted approach in tackling the obesity problem.

Keywords: Default Nudges; Consumer Behavior; Food Choices; Obesity; Cognitive Load