The Influence of Front-Of-Pack Nutrition Labels on Consumers’ Food Choices At the Point of Purchase and the Point of Consumption

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This article assesses whether front-of-pack nutrition labeling is effective in stimulating healthy food choices. A projective photo-elicitation study and a laboratory experiment were conducted. The results show that labels – if noticed – influence choices at the point of purchase but are disregarded when consumers prepare and eat their family meal at home.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Front-of-pack labels on food products commonly feature on major food manufacturers’ products. Grunert and Wills (2007, 385) state that they are an attempt to provide consumers “with information about the nutrition content of individual food products, in order to enable consumers to choose nutritionally appropriate food.”

The goal of this article is to assess whether front-of-pack nutrition labeling is effective in stimulating healthy food choices. This is highly relevant for two reasons: First, most buying decisions with respect to food items are conducted habitually or impulsively and take just a few seconds, with little or no cognitive control (Hoyer 1984; Moorman 1996; Rook 1987). Thus labels have to be designed to attract consumers’ attention and provide them with clear information. Second, past attempts to trigger healthier choices by providing additional information on the packages—such as back-of-pack labeling, nutrition or health claims—were either unsuccessful or even counterproductive in stimulating healthier food selection and consumption (Balasubramanian and Cole 2002; Roe, Levy, and Derby 1999; Wansink and Chandon 2006).

As part of our investigation, we carried out an initial qualitative study aimed at analyzing both conscious and unconscious, habitualized aspects of consumers’ food choices with respect to different front-of-pack nutrition labeling schemes. In the study we employed a projective photo-elicitation technique. This method was chosen for three reasons: to assess differences in the use of nutrition labels at the point of purchase and the point of consumption; to reduce the social desirability bias (Rook 2006); and to investigate unconscious aspects of human behavior (Kassarjian 1974; McClelland, Koestner, and Weinberger 1989). We took photographs of ten families at different stages of the family lifecycle at both the point of purchase (during a shopping trip made by the main person responsible for meal planning) and the point of consumption (during a family meal at home). We used selected photos as stimuli for photo elicitation and conducted autodriving interviews, which we recorded and analyzed using a holistic approach. Four themes emerged from the data: perceived time pressure at the point of purchase; the relevance of nutrition information for making inferences with regard to the healthiness and tastiness of products; consumers’ trust in nutrition information; and their use of this information at the point of purchase or point of consumption. The results show that nutrition labels influence consumers’ food choices only at the point of purchase, if at all; people generally disregard them when preparing and eating a family meal at home. At the point of purchase, people appreciate labels, particularly those that provide precise information about the main nutrients without overly limiting their freedom of choice. Examples of such systems are Guideline Daily Amount systems (GDA systems).

In a second study, we investigated the effectiveness of two different labeling schemes in stimulating healthy food choices at the point of purchase: the traffic light color-coded (TL) GDA and the monochrome (MC) GDA systems—both of which were characterized as particularly helpful systems by consumers in study 1. We proposed six hypotheses about consumer decision-making processes, relating to the awareness and automatic processing of labels, the degree to which labels permit accurate information processing, the direct effect of labels on actual choices, and determinants of future choices. A laboratory experiment examining actual product choices for ready meals with 209 participants shows that TL-GDA systems generate higher awareness and tend to more positively impact healthy product choices than MC-GDA systems, but only if consumers are aware of the label. Although nutrition labels are not the main reason for choosing a product, consumers refer to labels employing the TL-GDA system more often than to those using the MC-GDA system. Consumers also find it somewhat easier to interpret labels that use the TL-GDA system, especially in forced exposure conditions. Study 2 extends previous attempts to compare different nutrition labeling systems (Feunekes et al. 2008; FSA 2009a; Jones and Richardson 2007; Kelly et al. 2009; Kümpel Nørgaard and Brunsø 2009; van Kleef et al. 2007) by analyzing actual product choices in close-to-real-life environments and minimizing the tendency to evoke socially desired responses.

In the two studies we focus on nutrition labels and showed that two types of GDA systems impact on consumers’ food choices, making them more likely to choose a lower-calorie diet. In reality, however, we need to consider a range of other marketing factors when evaluating the potential of front-of-pack nutrition labeling for supporting healthy diets. These factors include the store environment, product prices, package and portion sizes, shapes and other front-of-pack stimuli such as images of slim models and athletes. We also need to consider consumers’ emotions and cognitions relating to food, such as their tendency to regulate their affect, self-control and conscious or subconscious goal conflicts. Nevertheless, the results of our study provide both insights into the relevance of front-of-pack nutrition labeling and important directions for future research.