

# Reality of uncertified food labels and claims



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Upon entering any grocery store, most consumers immediately start seeking information about food products available in order to ensure their health needs are met and that a certain product is consistent with their values and/or beliefs. Nowadays, grocery stores contain *endless* aisles of food products and an overwhelming variety of food options. For that reason, food labels are used to provide consumers with information and nutrition facts that can help them decide what to choose as part of an eating plan (Knezevic, 2017). Specific categories such as “all natural” and “non-GMO” are placed on food items in order to appeal to certain costumers. As a result, food labelling is seen as some type of “minimal” protection, a misconception that may take many consumers down the path of food labelling traps (Mayes, 2014). A vast amount of grocery store products make promises or *claims* that are misleading and the sad reality is, these food labels are often placed for the benefit of the producers as opposed to the consumers (Knezevic, 2017). To address this commodity issue, this paper aims to discuss the socioeconomical, mental and physical factors influencing those consumers guided by uncertified food labelling methods used by many food companies. Moreover, it discusses food labeling issues related to misleading health and nutrition claims and the negative impact this could have on consumer perceptions.

### The Impact of Misleading Labels on Consumer choice

To gain a deeper understanding of how certain factors concerning food labels interact and persuade consumers, it is first important to understand the fact that “profit” is the most significant component of a capitalist economy (Koç, 2017). The need to *increase* profit significantly impacts the food

environments we partake in every day. The majority of consumers are unaware of the fact that food companies use an assortment of eye catching food labels and tactics to drive in consumerism and the purchasing of various food products (Koç, 2017). Thus, different categories of product labelling arise; words and even colors chosen to describe a product may target individuals with different interests such as health enthusiasts or young children. For this reason, a vast number of methods and tricks are used to make food items seem more “ appealing” to target consumers thus enabling food companies to gain competitive advantage (Linden. V, 2001).

Discretionary food labels are designed to help consumers make healthier food choices. On the contrary, it seems as though many of these claims have a “ halo” effect (Brown et al, 2016). Some labels are simply thrown around in order to make consumers *think* a certain food product is “ healthy” or “ low in fat”, yet upon close investigation this is not always the case and so these labels tend to influence consumer perceptions (Louden et al, 2009).

The misconception of food labels started shortly after the front-of-package labeling system (FOP) (Brown et al, 2016). The main purpose of FOP labeling programs is to ensure that food products contain labels or symbols that can be identified at-a-glance (Brown et al, 2016) . Such labels include “ zero trans-fat” or “ all natural” which are placed at the very front of food items. The problem is, certain terms are unregulated and lack formal definition by the FDA (food and drug administration). This means that food companies can claim a certain product is “ all natural” and will be able to get past all regulatory requirements as long as their product does not contain artificial color, flavor or synthetic substances (Louden et al, 2009). This informal

regulation leaves customers in the dark, not knowing whether or not certain claims can be trusted. Oftentimes “ natural” can be a superfluous term and so one should not assume that a product deemed “ natural” is also nutritious or wholesome, because that *same* product may be very high in calories or saturated fats (Louden et al, 2009).

A prime example of such assertions is: Skippy’s Natural peanut butter, which claims to be “ all natural” however the ingredient list on the back states the contrary. This peanut butter contains added sugars, hydrogenated palm oil and excess salt. Although these ingredients are labelled as “ natural”, this does not mean that they are “ healthy”. Apart from the peanut’s used, Skippy’s Natural peanut butter contributes almost zero health value.

Furthermore, health experts claim that palm oil has a high level of LDL cholesterol, which is also known as “ bad” cholesterol because it increases the risk of heart disease and inflammation (King et al, 2014). These ingredients may also induce cravings, so consumers are left wanting more and thus become trapped in a never-ending cycle of purchasing a certain food item over and over again, ultimately contributing to an increase in long term sales (King et al, 2014).

There are several other examples of food items displayed on supermarket shelves that portray inaccurate or even misleading labels and one of these is “ trans-fat free” foods. Trans fat has gotten a bad reputation over the past few years as it contributes to certain health risks and cardiovascular disease (King et al, 2014). Several Research studies show that there’s definitely good reason for that, however just because a food product is deemed as “ trans-

fat free”, does not mean it’s in anyway healthy or nutritious (King et al, 2014).

A prime example of this is: Quakers Cookies `n Cream instant Oatmeal. The vast majority of consumers and especially parents, may *assume* that oatmeal is a healthier food alternative as opposed to other breakfast foods. Quakers Cookies `n Cream instant Oatmeal claims that it contains “ zero trans-fat”, and this might give consumers the extra *nudge* to purchase this brand of oatmeal. However, a closer look at the ingredients list will reveal that this product contains canola oil, corn syrup solids and hydrogenated palm oil among other ingredients. Ingredients like these might leave many people questioning whether or not the government and food companies really *care* about the overall health and wellness of their consumers. Many parents cannot fathom the idea of an ingredient like “ hydrogenated palm oil” in an innocent plate of oatmeal, yet somehow it managed to make its way into Quakers Cookies `n Cream instant Oatmeal.

Another example of unregulated food labelling is the non-GMO project verified seal. The non-GMO project was funded in 2001 and is a “ voluntary” form of labelling where producers may choose to label certain products with a “ Non-GMO” verified seal (Roff, 2008). On the contrary many believe that this is nothing more than a clever marketing tactic and has little to do with genetically modified ingredients (Roff, 2008). Canada does not have a certification process for GMOs and so these GMO-free claims are not being verified by a third party, yet somehow this seal is plastered on thousands of food items around the country. There is no real “ proof” that food items with

the non-GMO verified seal *really* contribute to any health benefits or advantages (Roff, 2008).

These food labels confuse consumers and can also make a perfectly healthy food item seem suspicious. Consumers may start to contemplate simple things like for instance whether to purchase “regular” apples or “non-GMO” verified apples. The non-GMO verified apples may cost an extra dollar, leaving customers to wonder whether a higher price means better quality. However, that’s not always the case. These food labels trick some consumers into purchasing products solely based on whether this product falls into a certain category. There is danger in misunderstanding food labels especially for low income families and those who are food insecure (Knezevic, 2017). These food labels can be overwhelming and the “halo” effect around labels such as “non-GMO” only make matters worse!

Approaches to help reduce the impact of food label compliance

It is clear to see that a vast majority of consumers fall for misleading food labels. One trip down the grocery aisle and consumers are bombarded with hundreds of confusing labels and so-called “assurance” from food companies, claiming that their product will meet health requirements. A potential approach to help reduce the impact of food labeling compliance is to prohibit labels perceived as misleading (Brown et al, 2016). This approach may help ensure that food companies are following all federal mandatory labelling requirements. An additional approach is for consumers to simply *avoid* packaged or processed food items (Knezevic, 2017). Although for

many this is much easier said than done, especially for low income families and those who are food insecure (Koç, 2017).

Furthermore, some consumers may be at a greater risk than others, like for instance those with minimal knowledge about food labeling tactics or those with an interest in healthier, more nutritious food options. Thus, a final suggestion is to implement complementary campaign programs to help educate and guide consumers (Brown et al, 2016). Raising awareness on how misleading some food labels may be will ensure that consumers aren't *blindly* falling for certain food products because of a specific claim or label. To conclude, consumers should also be encouraged to read the nutritional facts or the list of ingredients prior to purchasing certain food items to ensure that a more educated decision is made upon closer investigation!

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