

Lights and Shadows of Food Label: Is it the Appropriate Tool for a more Healthy Diet?

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Received: June 01, 2017; **Published:** July 25, 2017

Trends in food consumption changed rapidly in the last decade. The increased demand for food with health-related attributes suggests that consumers give always more importance to what they eat. Nonetheless, the global and constant rise in diet-related diseases indicates that this increased interest in food-related issues is not sufficient to lead individuals towards more healthful diet choices. Indeed, over the last 20 years overweight and obesity rates have significantly increased. Obesity reached epidemic dimensions in many developed and developing countries and in 2015, 19.5% of the adult population was obese. OECD also predicts that obesity rates are projected to increase further by 2030 [1].

A large spectrum of policies to tackle obesity have emerged in the OECD countries over the last years, from pricing and fiscal measures to more traditional communication policies such as information campaigns, advertising regulations, nutritional education programs in schools, and so on [2]. Among these measures, food labelling (the only source of information available to the consumer at the point of purchase) plays a crucial role in empowering consumers to make more informed food choices. Food labels represent a tool to convey to consumers information on the product characteristics that would otherwise be unknown [3]. However, the potential positive effect of labelled information is strictly dependent on the extent to which consumers actually use them and to the extent to which they process and understand its contents [4]. Research on consumer understanding of different label formats is crucial considering that food labels represent an important tool for reducing communication asymmetry on the market and make consumer more aware during their purchase decision. Such information asymmetry exists because information about the nutritional food content mainly resides in the domain of food producers and cannot be directly perceived nor verified by the individual consumer. Indeed, imperfect and asymmetric information leads to inefficiencies in the economic system and to market failure, which ultimately affect society. On the one side, asymmetric information makes consumers unable to make optimal choices leading to a reduction in utility, on the other side, additional expenditures can occur for society (health-care) [5]. Indeed, diet-related chronic diseases constitute a major public concern not only from a medical point of view, but also in economic terms as they are linked to sizable sanitary costs (Rosin, 2008).

Providing consumers with nutrition-related information is of primary importance important, but there is still open debate on how to effectively convey such information to consumers. Despite the fact that scientific knowledge on the relationship between diet and health is increasing, a gap still exists in the communication of such information to the public.

Consumers are exposed to different label formats, from the nutrition facts panel, which reports the detailed nutrient content of food products to nutritional and health claims that represent other kind of labels used to convey to consumers nutrition-and health related information [6]. A better understanding of how much people use labelled information represents a challenge for scientists, policy makers and marketing actors and is essential to find proper

tools and communication strategies which can be effective in guiding consumers towards healthier food choices.

Moreover, studies show that knowledge and motivation are the major barriers in accessing this type of information source and limit the nutrition declaration's impact on health [3,7,8]. Indeed, without nutritional knowledge background the majority of information does not reach the target audience or may be misinterpreted. Thus, interpreting nutritional information in a proper way requires knowledge on the product's attributes and their benefit.

This scenario implies new developments in communication policies considering new easy-to-understand schemes of food labelling accompanied by educational programs or nutritional campaigns in order to make consumer more knowledgeable about food properties. All of these actions will contribute to changing consumer preferences towards healthier diets and improving public health in the long-run.

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Volume 1 Issue 3 July 2017

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