
COMMENTARY

Nutrition labelling and the environment's impact on food choices: An experimental online supermarket research

Ruskin Mark

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ABSTRACT

Consumers can be helped by nutrition labels and ecolabels to make healthier and more environmentally friendly decisions. However, there is no data on how ecolabels perform in the context of nutrition labelling. This study's primary objectives were to determine whether ecolabels are helpful at encouraging sustainable purchasing behaviour when provided alongside nutrition labels, and whether nutrition labels are effective at encouraging healthy purchasing when presented alongside ecolabels. Participants (N=2730) were randomly assigned to view products with environmental effect labels only, nutrition (NutriScore) labels only, both environmental and nutrition labels, or (4) no labels when they visited an experimental online supermarket platform. The mean environmental

impact ratings (EIS; primary outcome) and health scores of the items in participants' shopping carts were compared across conditions using linear regressions. When environmental impact labels were provided alone (1.3, 95%CI: 2.3 to 0.4) or with nutrition labels (2.0, 95%CI: 2.9 to 1.0), there were substantial decreases in the EIS compared to the control (no labels), with no indication that either of these two circumstances was more successful. Both when nutrition labels were exhibited alone and when ecolabels were also present, there was no evidence that nutrition labels had any effect on the EIS or the healthiness of purchases. When combined with nutrition labels or used alone, environmental impact labels may be useful at promoting more environmentally friendly purchases. This strengthens the body of research on the viability and efficacy of environmental impact labelling as a key strategy to alter eating habits and enhance global health.

KeyWords: *Nutrition; Sustainable purchasing; Supermarket platform;*

INTRODUCTION

In order to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, we must switch to sustainable and healthful diets (Food & Agriculture Organization & World Health Organization, 2019). There will need to be significant dietary changes both in the UK and around the world, including significant decreases in the use of red meat and increases in the consumption of sustainably produced foods. Providing consumers with health and environmental information about food products at the point of purchase may encourage them to make decisions that support these objectives. Environmental effect information on product labels encourages consumers to choose more sustainable food options. Consumer interest in the environmental impact labelling (also known as ecolabelling) of foods and food items is growing, according to the World Resources Institute (WRI). Approximately 35% of 2000 respondents in a survey of UK adults conducted in March 2020 said it is crucial to know that the brands they are purchasing are "taking action to lessen the product's impact," up from only 24% of respondents in 2016. Additionally, according to a recent study by the

WRI, 75% of UK adults said they prefer to eat at establishments that list information about their environmental effect on their menus. Many nations already use labelling to promote healthy choices, and data from systematic reviews suggests that it is helpful. While the effects of a product on both human health and the environment do not always coincide (healthier foods do not always have a lower environmental impact than less healthy foods, and vice versa; for example, some nuts and fish have high environmental impacts while sugar-sweetened beverages have relatively low environmental impacts), research suggests that healthier foods tend to be more sustainable. Therefore, although this has not been fully investigated, it is plausible that nutrition labels are serving a dual role. Studies utilising experimental online marketplaces reflect evidence from a recent systematic study indicating ecolabels boost the selection of products with reduced environmental impacts (Potter et al., in submission). However, if customers are given information about both health and environmental impacts at the same time, as a result of the greater amount of information, or if the information is viewed as conflicting, these advantages may be negated (e.g. if a product is sustainable but

Editorial office, Journal of Food and Drug Research, South Hampton, United Kingdom.

Correspondence: Ruskin Mark, Editorial office, Journal of Food and Drug Research, South Hampton, United Kingdom

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Mark

unhealthy). Multiple health or nutrition labels have been used in the past, but research has shown that they are rarely helpful. There hasn't been any experimental study done to determine whether having nutrition labels and ecolabels together reduces the usefulness of either label. Two publications showcase collections of choice experiments that looked at consumers' decisions between certain foods and their sustainable and/or healthy alternatives (marked by text or a logo). However, only a relatively small number of products were used in these studies, including lasagne in the latter experiment and two samples of rice, beef, and tomato products in the former. One study exclusively highlighted "positive" benefits (i.e., options that were healthier or more sustainable), whereas the other consistently provided both health and sustainability information. Therefore, it was unable to evaluate whether viewing both labels or just one worked better when there was potentially contradictory information. Similar to the first two experiments, the other two affect-

-ed consumers' decisions when purchasing items for a single meal from an experimental online supermarket. Given that nutritional labels are already frequently present on packs and that ecolabels would therefore be presented alongside this information, the main goal of this study was to determine whether ecolabels would continue to be effective at encouraging the selection of more sustainable foods if presented alongside nutrition labels. We reasoned that providing ecolabels alongside nutrition labels would be less successful at encouraging sustainable consumption than presenting ecolabels alone. We also looked at whether showing both labels undermined healthy purchasing compared to just showing nutrition labels. We also looked into whether participant demographics affected how effective each label—eco, nutrition, or both—was at encouraging sustainable purchasing