

Consumers' Attitude towards Food Label Information: A Qualitative Overview

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Abstract

As the global food market is expanding and food choices are becoming complicated, consumers are becoming conscious about the food quality and safety. They wish to make an informed food choice (Campos et al., 2011). The most effective way to convey this information to the consumers is through food label information (Bhilwar et al., 2018) there is a growing demand of pre-packaged food items. 'food label', present on most packaged food items provides information about the contents, their nutritive value and other information that can help the consumer to make an informed choice. Few studies in India have assessed the consumer's knowledge and practices related to information on a food label.

Methods. We assessed the awareness, perceptions and practices related to the use of information on food labels among residents of an urbanized village of south Delhi. House-to-house visits were made and information gathered using a pre-designed, pre-tested, semi-structured questionnaire. Descriptive analysis was done and logistic regression performed to document the determinants of 'reading food label' by the study participants.

Results. A total of 368 individuals were interviewed. But, there is a gap in the information by the manufacturers and the consumers perception which is affected by the attitude of consumers towards food label information (Kim, 2018). The present study was aimed at studying consumers' attitude qualitatively using focus group discussions in five cities of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer, Kota and Udaipur in July, 2021. Though, there was a difference in the attitude of different focus groups, some common issues were related to technicality of terms, small font size & non-uniformity in display of nutritional facts.

Keywords: Consumer Attitude, Focus Group Discussion, Food Choice, Food Label Information, Qualitative analysis

With the increasing popularity of pre - packaged food products, food consumption pattern has seen drastic changes globally. A lot of changes have been recorded in India in the past two decades. Both, the demand side and the supply side of the food Industry has seen massive expansion. (Choicequality et al., n.d.)The reliance on packaged food products has increased over the years due to *intrinsic* properties of packaged foods like convenience, easy availability, better shelf life, assured quality, reduced cooking times etc. and *extrinsic* factors like expansion of nuclear family culture, working couples, increased working hours in private sector jobs etc. Food manufacturers from all over the world have found a place on the shelves of

grocers and super markets. This has led to a wide variety of food choices available with the consumers and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the food authorities, manufacturers and researchers to establish parameters for determining the food choices of the consumers (Grunert, 2005). Also, with the advent of so many food scares in the global market, consumers have become very conscious about the quality of the food products and are willing to make an informed purchase decision. (Vemula *et al.*, 2013). They want to collect information about the food they consume and the best way to convey all this information to the consumers is the Food Label Information (Koen *et al.*, 2016) including the promotion of a healthy diet through the provision of adequate nutrition information on food labels. However, in order for this type of intervention to be successful, it is important to have a better understanding of the consumer. This review focuses on the need for food and nutrition labelling (the section of information on a food label that specifically declares nutrient content.) Hence, the food authorities have become very vigilant towards the food label information provided by the consumers and a separate regulatory body, FSSAI has been constituted in India that issues guidelines for the food manufacturers to provide effective food label information on their products. But, many researchers have observed that though, the consumers claim to be using this food label information while making purchase decisions, they are not able to comprehend all of it due to technicality of the terms and limited knowledge and awareness of the consumers regarding food labels (Vijaykumar *et al.*, 2013). Thus, it has become a matter of concern for the regulatory bodies and the manufacturers to understand the attitude of consumers towards food label information. They can accordingly make necessary changes in the labelling guidelines for better effectiveness and usefulness in making purchase decisions. Thereby, a strong need to study the consumers' attitude towards food label information has been observed. But, one limitation while studying consumer behavior is that consumer attitude is neither measurable nor observable. It can only be inferred from what people say or do. As, this is a subjective concept, the best way to measure consumer attitude is by using qualitative techniques (Vemula *et al.*, 2013).

Various theoretical models have been suggested by different researchers to understand this concept. (Grunert & Wills, 2007) Understand, like and use nutrition information on food labels. Based on a search of databases on academic publications, Google-based search, and enquiries directed to a range of food retailers, food companies, consumer associations and government agencies, a total of 58 studies were identified. These studies were summarised using a standard format guided by a model of consumer information processing, and these summaries were subsequently processed using the MAXqda software in order to identify key findings and common themes across the studies. The studies show widespread consumer interest in nutrition information on food packages, though this interest varies across situations and products. Consumers like the idea of simplified front of pack information but differ in their liking for the various formats. Differences can be related to conflicting preferences for ease of use, being fully informed and not being pressurised into behaving in a particular way. Most consumers understand the most common signposting formats in the sense that they themselves believe that they understand them and they can replay key information presented to them in

an experimental situation. There is, however, virtually no insight into how labelling information is, or will be, used in a real-world shopping situation, and how it will affect consumers' dietary patterns. Results are largely in line with an earlier review by Cowburn and Stockley (Public Health Nutr 8:21-28, 2005) while doing their review of studies on consumer responses to food labels, arranged the different consumer responses in a hierarchical order as *search, exposure, perception, liking, understanding and use*. These dimensions were found to be dependent on factors such as interest, knowledge, demographics, label format, integration, evaluation and decision (Grunert & Achmann, 2016).

Search & Exposure

While search is considered to be an effortful activity of the consumer to access food label information available, exposure is an accidental or non-intentional seeking of information. Search seems to be more influential and its chances of affecting food choices are much higher than exposure. The factors affecting search can be availability of time, preferred brands, place of purchase etc.

Perception

Perception can be termed as how the consumers read the information and which part of the information did they read when they were exposed to and they searched for. It is different from understanding. Perception actually builds understanding. Also, perception could be conscious or sub-conscious. (Grunert & Wills, 2007) understand, like and use nutrition information on food labels. Based on a search of databases on academic publications, Google-based search, and enquiries directed to a range of food retailers, food companies, consumer associations and government agencies, a total of 58 studies were identified. These studies were summarised using a standard format guided by a model of consumer information processing, and these summaries were subsequently processed using the MAXqda software in order to identify key findings and common themes across the studies. The studies show widespread consumer interest in nutrition information on food packages, though this interest varies across situations and products. Consumers like the idea of simplified front of pack information but differ in their liking for the various formats. Differences can be related to conflicting preferences for ease of use, being fully informed and not being pressurised into behaving in a particular way. Most consumers understand the most common signposting formats in the sense that they themselves believe that they understand them and they can replay key information presented to them in an experimental situation. There is, however, virtually no insight into how labelling information is, or will be, used in a real-world shopping situation, and how it will affect consumers' dietary patterns. Results are largely in line with an earlier review by Cowburn and Stockley (Public Health Nutr 8:21-28, 2005.)

Understanding & Inference

Understanding is a cognitive process and involves assigning meaning to what has been read and perceived by the consumer. When they relate their perceived information with their previous knowledge and use it to infer its meaning, it leads to understanding (Grunert & Achmann, 2016).

Use

This dimension relates with the role of food labels in making purchase decision. Though most consumers say, they use food label information while making food choices, it has been observed that they don't actually use it very extensively. Use of food label information is found to be directly proportional between buying of new products and inversely related to time pressures.

Liking

Liking can be termed as the format, the color codes and the type of information preferred by the consumers on food labels. Liking may be attributed to ease of understanding and what does the consumer find appealing.

Evaluation & Decision

We can say that a food label information will be considered effective when the consumers are exposed to an information, they search for it and perceive it, they relate it with previous knowledge to develop understanding which in turn may lead to their use of this information to evaluate different products and make decision of purchasing or not purchasing a particular product (Grunert & Achmann, 2016).

Need for Qualitative analysis of Consumer Attitude towards Food label information

In many studies conducted on consumer attitude in the past it was observed that though the consumers stated that they understand the food label information and used it in making purchase decisions, it was observed that in practice the situation was far from what they stated (Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2008). The reasons attributed were their lack of understanding and the conceptual nature of the behavior pattern. Thus, in order to explore and understand individual and group meanings in a detailed manner and to learn more about the usage pattern, the liking of the consumers and the obstacles in their use of food label information, qualitative analysis could be very useful.

Material & Methods

Study Design

A primary study was conducted in the month of July, 2021 in the cities of Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer, Kota and Udaipur using Focus Group Discussions technique. This technique was used in order to obtain participants' point of view, their perception, attitude, motivation and obstacles. Due to the impact of COVID 19 and thereby the need for social distancing, the FGDs were conducted online using Google meet platform.

Sample Design

For the FGDs, a recruitment survey on interest in nutrition was sent to people on the basis of convenience sampling. The first part of the recruitment survey comprised questions pertaining to demographic details of the participants including age, gender, income & qualification. The next part of the questionnaire focused

on understanding their concern about the health aspect of the food they consume by means of questions like how concerned they are about the food they consume, its nutritional aspect, do they believe in a healthy lifestyle, do they read and trust food labels etc. Data was collected on 5 point Likert scale. In the final part of the questionnaire, their consent was sought to participate in Focus Group Discussions in online mode. Only adult respondents, majority responsible for decision regarding grocery shopping for the family were taken into consideration. The selected participants were divided into four focus groups:

- **Concerned Adults**

These participant showed high levels of interest in a healthy lifestyle, nutritious foods and trust in food labels and claimed to refer to food labels for purchase decision.

- **Non-Concerned Adults**

The participants in this category showed little interest in a healthy lifestyle and no concern for health aspect of food. They did not trust the information provided in food labels and seldom used them for purchase decision.

- **Less educated Adults**

This was the most interesting category of participants. The level of education was below graduate level. Though they had limited understanding of food label information, they showed interest in this information, provided it is explained to them.

- **People aged 18 - 22**

This group consisted mostly of students pursuing Higher education.

One FGD was conducted for each focus group in each city totaling to twenty FGDs in all with 10-12 participants in each focus group.

Conduction of FGDs

The FGDs were conducted using Google meet platform. The participants were unknown of the identity of fellow participants till the beginning of the session. The sessions were guided, moderated and monitored by the researcher. The session was directed with the help of three levels of questions put forward by the moderator:

- **Introductory Questions** aimed at evaluating the interest and importance given to food products in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- **Transition Questions** to understand the major determinants of food choices
- **Key Questions** to collect information about knowledge, search, understanding, liking & use of food label information in making food choices in a simulated environment.

For the creation of simulated environment for food choices, before putting forward the key questions, the participants were shown different food products including a packet of potato chips, a small tetra pack of packaged fresh fruit juice, a chocolate

bar, a ready to eat meal and a milk pouch which are easily available in local markets. They were asked to choose one product for themselves, one for a child or an elderly person, one that they felt was healthier and one that they had never bought before, stating the reasons for all the choices made.

Results & Discussions

The findings of the Focus groups were analyzed on the basis of the main theoretical dimensions viz. Interest, Knowledge, Search, Liking, Understanding, Use, Evaluation and Decision.

Interest

It was observed that the participants could relate food with health and were interested in getting the nutritional information about the food they eat.

While the *concerned adults* showed their concern for nutritional issues and had strong interest in information related to ingredients, calorie count and origin and preferred healthy food, the *non - concerned adults* though agreed upon the impact of quality food on a healthy lifestyle, they were not much interested in practicing one.

The *less educated adults* were very much interested in nutritional information but did not have much awareness and could not understand the information provided on food labels. Though, the *young participants* claimed that they understood the nutritional facts and preferred healthier lifestyle, neither were they using this information in a very proper manner nor were they actually practicing a healthy lifestyle.

Knowledge

The *concerned adults* were found to be quite knowledgeable. They could understand the nutritional facts well and utilized this information in a smart way to make food choices. The *non - concerned adults* claimed that they had knowledge about nutritional facts but it was found that they were not following a very healthy diet. The reasons attributed could be lack of time and interest.

The *less educated adults* claimed that they had some knowledge but were unable to interpret them correctly. They had certain misconceptions like salt is equivalent to sodium etc. Though, the *young participants* said that they had some knowledge, they were not using it in everyday life.

Search

The *concerned adults* looked for relevant and important information on food labels and could differentiate between credible & non-credible sources of information. But, the *non - concerned adults* generally did not search for food label information as they didn't value this information. The *less educated adults* also didn't search for food label information, but the reason was their limited understanding the technicality of the information. The *young participants* searched for specific information, mostly related to calorie count only.

Liking

The participants of all focus groups felt that a lot of textual information is avail-

able on the food labels and the information is quite technical. People felt that color coded and symbolic information is much easier to understand. They felt that the important and relevant information should be given on front of package.

Understanding

Understanding could be checked in terms of the gap between the information that the manufacturers wanted to convey and the meaning actually interpreted by the consumers.

While, the *concerned adults* found it difficult to understand some of the information, they managed to understand them by calculations and comparisons. Though some of them commented upon the difficulty in comparing products using different units of measurement of nutritional facts.

The *non - concerned adults* said that though, they understand the information provided on labels, they don't pay much attention to it as purchase decisions are mostly based on personal preferences rather than nutritional facts.

Both the *less educated adults* and the *young participants* found it difficult to understand and interpret the food label information. They found it very confusing and too technical.

Use

The *concerned adults* were using the food label information extensively in making their purchase decisions. The information mostly sought for was related to Veg/ Non-Veg marking, Expiry date, ingredients, Quality labels (Mostly FSSAI), nutritional information, MRP etc.

The *non - concerned adults* were mostly not using this information as they found it unimportant and some of them didn't trust the facts given on the labels. Some of them were using this information in exceptional cases of first time purchases only to check Veg/ Non-Veg mark and allergens, in case of any specific allergies prevalent in the family.

The *young adults* mostly check for calorie count on food packages for making purchase decisions.

The *less educated adults* weren't making use of the food label information at all while making purchase decisions.

Evaluation & Decision

The *concerned adults* generally compare and evaluate products on the basis of the information provided on them and make their purchase decisions accordingly.

Non - concerned adults don't evaluate products on the basis of food label information and rather make purchase decision on the basis of their personal preferences only.

Less educated adults generally evaluate products on the basis of reviews provided by their friends and relatives.

Young participants were not much particular about evaluation of food products ex-

cept for the calorie content and made their food purchase decisions accordingly.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study majorly focused on the understanding of the attitude of consumers towards food label information in a subjective manner. After conducting several focus group discussions with different focus groups, it could be concluded that consumers search, reading, understand and use food label information as per their interest in a healthy lifestyle and nutrition consciousness. While the first focus group of the study i.e. *concerned adults* were more health conscious and were extensively making use of the food label information but in making food choices, the second group comprising *non – concerned adults* did not find this information useful and did not pay much attention to it. The third group of *less educated adults*, though agreed upon the importance of food label information, were incapable of understanding and interpreting it for making purchase decisions. The last group i.e. the *young participants* had limited knowledge and were making use of food label information in a very sparingly manner for specific reasons like weight consciousness.

In general, the most sought information on food products were Veg/ Non-Veg marking, Expiry date, ingredients, Quality labels (Mostly FSSAI), nutritional information, MRP etc. But some common points of concern raised by all the focus groups were the technicality of terms, small font size, non – uniformity of units in nutritional facts, too much use of textual information etc.

From the above study, some common recommendations that can be suggested to both the regulatory bodies and the manufacturers for better use of the food label information by the consumers could be:

- Most of the important information should be displayed on the FoP (Front of Packaging).
- Font size of important information should be increased if possible.
- Textual information should be replaced with pictorial and color-coded information as much as possible.
- Technical terms used can be explained a little further.
- Some common guidelines can be issued for uniformity of display of nutritional information.
- Regulatory bodies can conduct some awareness drives for the consumers in order to improve their awareness and knowledge about food labels and increasing their confidence in the information provided.

All these measures may help build a positive attitude towards food labels and bridge the gap between the intentions of the regulatory bodies and manufacturers while providing this information and the actual understanding and use of information by the consumers for making food choices.

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