Consumer use of food labels increases as “clean label” trend continues

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ABSTRACT

Background: The “clean label” trend has driven the food industry towards the production of new food products increasingly marketed to consumers looking for wholesome, nutritious, and minimally processed foods. While the number of “clean labels” continues to grow, the term has not been clearly defined and food manufacturers use a range of food labeling strategies to communicate that their products are “natural” and “free-from” industrial ingredients.

Objective: To better understand trends in “clean label” use and resultant food purchasing behaviors, this study examines consumer use of food labels to identify whether food label usage has increased in recent years, and which parts of the food label are used most often when evaluating packaged foods.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: Computer-aided telephone interviews were collected annually over four years (2017-2020) from a random, representative sample of Vermont adults (n=4,402).

Measurable/Analysis: Respondents were asked about their use of nutrition facts panels, ingredient lists, front of package claims (natural, low sodium), and labels related to food production practices (organic, non-GMO) when evaluating packaged foods. The Mantel-Haenszel test of linear trends (p<0.01) was used to determine whether use of each category of food label changed over time.

Results: The use of all four label categories significantly increased from 2017 to 2020, while the proportion of respondents stating that they did not read food labels decreased. Reading of ingredient lists (87%) and nutrition panels (85%) were more frequently reported compared to front of package (75%) and production practice (73%) label claims.

Conclusion: Food label usage is increasing in general, and consumers are increasingly reading both front of package claims (organic, natural, low sodium) and back of package information (ingredients, nutrition facts panel). As consumer demand for “clean label” products increases, more research is needed to better understand the health impacts of such products and the best methods for labeling them.

What is a “clean label”? • Consumers are increasingly interested in food production practices. (Asioli et al. 2017) • In particular, consumers desire products that are perceived as natural, wholesome, and free from industrial practices. • Consumers are increasingly seeking products with the following characteristics: 1. Front of package statements that the product is “free from” artificial ingredients 2. Short list of ingredients 3. Ingredients that would be found in home kitchens, rather than industrially produced ingredients 4. Sustainable production practices and certifications

METHODS

The Vermont Poll is an annual telephone survey of Vermont adult residents. Computer-aided telephone interviews were collected annually over four years (2017-2020) in a random, representative sample of Vermont residents (n=4,402). Respondents were asked about their use of food labels when evaluating packaged food products, and reported yes/no to indicate whether or not they used • ingredient lists, nutrition facts panels, front of package claims (natural, low sodium), and labels related to food production practices (organic, non-GMO) when evaluating food products. • Chi square and Mantel-Haenszel tests of linear trends were used to determine whether use of each category of food label changed over time. • In the 2020 Vermont poll, additional questions were added, related to the use of food labels.

DISCUSSION

Some food labels (such as “low sodium”) are well defined and regulated, while others (such as “natural” or “farm fresh”) are not clearly defined, and therefore consumers must sift through both factual and fictitious statements when evaluating packaged foods.

Food label use is associated with healthier diets (Anastasiou et al. 2019). • Food label use is highest in women, and groups with higher incomes and educational levels (Christoph et al. 2015). • Self-reported use of food labels is likely to be higher than actual use. Previous research finds that objective measures of food label use are correlated with self-reported measures, but consumers are likely to overestimate their actual use (Soderberg Miller et al. 2015). • Consumers are increasingly using food labels when evaluating the health and sustainability of packaged food products. Most recent data to date has focused on the use of nutrition information and ingredients, more research is needed to assess the use of sustainability labels.

As consumer demand for “clean label” products increases, more research is needed to better understand the health impacts of such products and the best methods for labeling them.

• Use of food labels is associated with consumer knowledge, demographics, and health-related attitudes. Food label use is also influenced by marketing, federal regulations, and behavioral economics.

CONCLUSIONS

• Food label usage is increasing, and consumers are increasingly reading all parts of the food label for information.
• The ingredients list is the most used part of the food label, followed by the nutrition panel.
• The vast majority of consumers prefer to purchase foods with “clean label” characteristics, such as a list of ingredients that is similar to those found in home kitchens.

REFERENCES


Did you know? The organic logo is clearly defined and regulated by the USDA.

All “natural” is NOT defined by the FDA, USDA, or any regulatory agency.

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