

Qualitative Research to Explore Peoples' Use of Food Labelling Information Executive Summary

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Social Science Research Unit
Food Standards Agency

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Unit Summary 5



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Executive Summary

1. Background and Objectives

The Food Standards Agency commissioned Ipsos MORI to provide an evidence base of what information people *actually* look at when shopping, as opposed to what they say they look at. The main objectives were to:

- Determine what information people refer to when shopping, and to what extent different types of labelling information effects purchase decisions
- To particularly explore behaviour around Country of Origin information
- Highlight any issues regarding the user-friendliness of food labels
- Investigate how people interact with labels in the home
- Develop insights based on advanced technologies such as eye-tracking

2. Method

Research was conducted across the UK in **five phases**, which built upon the work undertaken in the previous stage(s):

	Method	Purpose
15	Accompanied shops	Understanding through observation the impact & usage of food labelling in a natural environment
36	Eye tracked shops	Understanding the effectiveness and standout of different food messages at point of sale from the shoppers' perspective, in real life context
15	Ethnographic accompanied meals (filmed)	To observe 'in situ' how food labelling is used during the preparation and consumption of a meal, and to allow a comparison of stated vs. actual behaviour
20	Tasked purchases in the Retail Lab (with field of vision glasses)	Focus in more detail on country of origin, expiry dates, and quality indicators
6	Eye tracked tasked purchases in the Retail Lab	Focus in more detail on country of origin, expiry dates, and quality indicators - eye tracking allowed us to analyse the line of sight
	Semiotic Analysis (desk analysis)	To assess the role of the signs, symbols and messages and explore literal vs. culturally influenced assumptions influencing choices



3. Key findings

Very low engagement with food labels for habitual purchases.

As a minimum requirement people need and want to see clearly the food's description, the brand, the use by/ best before date, and the price.

Consumers know that words lie, pictures mislead, and marketers tell stories. Consequently, the overriding principle of the product description and food packaging is to let the product offer direct sensory evidence of its appearance and qualities. In the supermarket the sight of food is the primary indexical evidence available to the customer. Transparency/visibility becomes an overriding goal in food packaging because it enables direct, sensory product evidence; validation of quality claims; comparison to competitor product; and imagined consumption.

The accompanied and eye-tracked shops demonstrated that consumers are very tactile with food where they can be – e.g. with fruit and vegetables - and the transparency of meat packaging was especially important and used by consumers as a shortcut for judging food quality.

Price can eclipse other aspects of the label, especially for lower income consumers. Those with high income displayed different attitudes to those with lower income in terms of the perceived options available to them. Consumers in lower paid jobs paid more attention to special price offers, and thus respectively paid less attention to food labelling directly.

Individual dietary requirements are key in determining the use of and engagement with different elements of food labels.

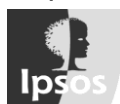
The level and extent of information required is often driven by specific dietary needs or underlying health conditions – e.g. health (allergies, high blood pressure), religion (kosher), or morals/choice/lifestyle (vegetarian, vegan, dieting), and thus a need to hone in on particular information.

Consumers avoid reading the back of food packs by using words or symbols on the front as 'beacons' to quickly guide shopping.

Any particular consumer has his or her own agenda and is unlikely to be interested in the totality of labelling. The consumer's goal is to exercise their selective attention, securing key elements of information, while ignoring the broad mass of material (i.e. they develop 'shortcuts' to information).

Some participants reported struggling with the volume of information provided on food packages suggesting that there was simply too much. The challenge is that different consumers think that different elements are superfluous, and that different individual elements constitute overcrowding or overshadowing to different consumers.

Because it serves a range of descriptive tasks (e.g. detailing food ingredients and constituents, explaining how to cook the food) food labelling is a hybrid text, presenting a



range of different vocabularies and sets of assumptions. Some of the component messages may be patronizingly simple whereas some descriptions of ingredients and constituents may presume a level of knowledge that the general consumer may lack. For example how-to-use instructions can seem simplistic and patronizing. A soup can carry the advice:

Check that the product is hot before serving
Stir halfway through
IMPORTANT take care when removing hot liquids from microwave
Eat well
Microwave ovens vary

Elsewhere on the can, consumers are offered quantitative information about the nutritional properties of food in technical language they generally did not understand – e.g. the difference between ‘kJ’ and ‘kcal’. Consumers displayed an awareness of basic nutritional issues - they knew they should reduce their intake of salt and fat, and increase their intake of fruit, vegetables and fibre - but very few respondents understood the differences between saturated, unsaturated and monounsaturated fats, grasped the basics of cholesterol, or could say what omega oils are. Ingredient lists naming preservatives, sweeteners, colorants and other complex organic compounds often exceeded the comprehension of most consumers.

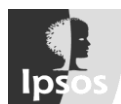
Non regulated marketing claims and graphics can mislead, overshadow, clutter, or disengage consumers with mandatory legislation.

Across different retailers and food manufacturers there are strong consistencies across food packaging, including the packaging solution, colour choices for background and text, ‘markers’ showing variations within the type, types of promotional claim, imagery, and types of brand name. This exposes the apparent paradox of competing retailers and manufacturers sharing the same packaging conventions, and thus, to an extent, co-operating with each other.

Food labelling has become a collage of disparate, sometimes competing messages. It is a mixed-motive medium - some product messages are cautionary in intent, enforced by regulation. But most are voluntary, exuberant, self-expressive and self-promotional.

Semiotic analysis offered some theoretical insight as to why the use of ‘British’ on a packet of chicken may not convey the country of origin to the consumer but may convey an implication of quality, and why ‘local’ can be understood to convey ‘organic’ or ‘high quality’ despite the actual definition of local differing from that of organic.

The packaging materials and colours used can have a strong impact in the way messages are interpreted. Whilst many of the consumers in the sample equated basic packing, thin unbleached cardboard (Tesco Value), lots of white space (Sainsbury’s Basics) with low quality goods, other consumers thought the use of more basic packaging signified a higher degree of eco-awareness and were thus higher quality products.



Large store brands reassure on safety.

There is an overriding assumption that the supermarket 'brand' guarantees a level of food 'safety', alleviating consumers of the responsibility to review labelling to ensure their safety.

It was noted that Scottish Co-op stores put lots of individual assurance aspects under their general Co-op 'do-good' umbrella – everything is fairly sourced, bought, farmed etc so consumers can buy what they want from one source. Across the UK as a whole, Waitrose and M&S are near to achieving something similar (e.g. M&S' free range umbrella). Fair trade and being locally farmed are yet to be included under large store umbrella reassurances.

Well known brands have a halo effect – signifying quality and safety, and distracting from other information

Because they are trusted well known brands benefit from a halo effect. Consumers assume that well known brands have reached and surpassed minimum standards with regard to the food's quality and safety. Information, or claims, about quality and safety provided on the packaging are not sought out by consumers because of this inherent assumed trust that the product meets or surpasses an appropriate standard.

The importance of food label information increases when buying for other people, particularly babies and young children

People spent the most time looking at baby food labels, and when buying for other people. Generally participants tended to look out for reassurance of specific qualities such as no E numbers, no caffeine, and low fat (or most frequently 'lite').

'Best before' and 'use by' are confused terms - Low understanding leads to relaxed attitudes towards date labels once in the home.

People use a minimal amount of food labelling in the home when preparing familiar or routine meals, using familiar ingredients or cooking methods. The information people say is important to them when buying food is not necessarily supported by what is actually in their cupboards, or how they actually use the information once in the home - particularly with regards to date labels.

There is a lack of understanding of the implication of the date label with regard to using, freezing and storing food, especially for opened pre-sealed foods.

There is less concern about date labels on canned and pre-frozen items, for example, consumers exert the attitude 'you can't go wrong with tins'.



Country of origin information is not a priority when shopping in the supermarket.

The majority of consumers are unaware that country of origin is defined according to *'location of last substantial change'*

When shopping, consumers are steered by ingrained preconceptions about where foods come from, predisposing them to notice text and symbols which reconfirm assumptions, for example, country flags.

Country of origin information impacts on different levels:

Safety

Safety is a universal priority for consumers, but they are easily reassured about safety. (i.e. supermarket umbrella assurances).

The label 'British' is an important benchmark, particularly for meat, and the British flag acts as a general umbrella assurance for food miles (referred to by consumers as air miles), farming standards, and even organic.

This results in lots of blurring of meanings (e.g. animal welfare is implicit in organic) and low engagement with specific formal symbols denoting quality such as the Red Tractor.

Animal welfare

Consumers are reassured by 'British', but engage more with terms such as 'organic'/'free range' if they are prioritising animal welfare.

Animal welfare can be important to people but is rarely a factor in choice as consumers feel they are not given the information.

Food (air) miles

Consumers are reassured by 'British' but food miles are low priority when shopping. Consumers say they are concerned about food miles, but their behaviour suggests otherwise.

Authenticity

Authenticity is important for products which are, in consumers' minds strongly associated with a particular country.

Country of origin information has greater influence in certain categories such as meat where some consumers feel more comfortable with locally sourced products.

Some consumers say they prefer to buy meat from the local butchers or farmers markets rather than the supermarket due to the connotations of freshness. However not all consumers who expressed this preference actually purchase their meat from local butchers or farmers markets.

