

Consumer perceptions of nutrient content claims in the Australian food supply: a qualitative study

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The promotion of food and drink products via food labelling plays an important role in influencing health. Nutrition content claims refer to the presence or absence of a certain nutrient or substance in a food or drink and may be voluntarily added by manufacturers. Content claims have been shown to increase consumer purchasing by 75% (OR: 1.74, 95% CI [1.29, 2.35]).⁽¹⁾ Consumer perceptions of content claims have been explored in the past, however findings from previous Australian research have been inconsistent.⁽²⁻⁴⁾ The aim of this study was to explore consumer perceptions of different types of content claims, barriers and motivations to use, and the potential influence content claims have on purchasing. Online focus groups were conducted, following a semi-structured guide. An inductive, reflexive approach to thematic analysis was taken. Six focus groups were conducted, comprising of $n = 26$ adults, eight (31%) males and 18 (69%) females. Four main interconnected themes were generated from the data, these included (1) there are many interrelated factors that influence food and drink purchasing, (2) content claims are regarded with scepticism, (3) the functional difference between content claims and health claims is unclear (4) most consumers are unaware of the regulation of content claims. Factors which were reported to influence purchasing were familiarity, variety, price, time, taste, packaging, health reasons, and cultural, religious or ethical drivers. These factors were interrelated, likely having influence simultaneously. When probed, participants would use content claims, they were generally viewed through a lens of scepticism and mistrust, with claims seen as potentially misleading and used as a promotional tool. This appeared to be underpinned by a general mistrust of product manufacturers and food industry, who were perceived to use content claims as an advertising tool to sell products. Product complexity was a factor likely to increase content claim use due to consumer uncertainty of the nutrient make up and ingredient content of complex products, such as ultra-processed foods. Most participants were aware that content and health claims were in some way regulated, however overall, they did not know any details, including who claims were regulated by. This research highlights a need for further education of consumers on the current regulatory processes for content and health claims, which in turn may increase trust and perceptions of transparency in claims made.

References

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