

Tick Tock: Time for a Change?

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Abstract

Issue addressed: New developments in front-of-pack nutrition labelling are substantially improving the nutrition information available at the point of purchase. This has led to a need to reconsider the role of other health logos such as the National Heart Foundation's 'Tick'.

Methods: Using a qualitative, exploratory approach involving 10 focus groups with adults and children, this study investigated consumers' attitudes to the Tick and its relevance to their purchase decisions.

Results: Both adults and children exhibited awareness of the Tick and its aim to indicate healthier product alternatives. Views on the effectiveness of the Tick were polarised, with some considering it a useful tool and others querying the basis of its licensing arrangements.

Conclusions: While the Tick has in the past played a role in assisting consumers make more informed decisions and encouraging favourable modification of the food supply, recent issues relating to its role and credibility indicate that its retirement may be imminent.

So what? After a quarter of a century in the Australian marketplace, the National Heart Foundation's Tick program is under review. The findings of the present study provide insight into consumers' views of the Tick and suggest that the emergence of more comprehensive food labelling initiatives may make other logo-based nutrition labels redundant.

Key words: nutrition, program evaluation, qualitative methods

Introduction

Recent years have seen major changes in the nutrition information that is available to Australian consumers at the point of sale. In response to a major review of food labelling laws (1), a new health star rating (HSR) system is being progressively implemented in the marketplace. The food industry has five years to demonstrate substantial uptake of the voluntary food labelling system, with an initial review after two years to assess the effectiveness of the voluntary approach (2). The HSR system aims to provide consumers with information to make more informed dietary decisions, especially in relation to weight control and the prevention of obesity-related diseases (3). It is based on an algorithm that considers both negative (e.g., saturated fat, sugar, and sodium) and positive (e.g., protein and fibre) nutrients to determine a rating that ranges from half a star to five stars (3). The HSR system will replace the existing daily intake guide that has been found in various studies to be less effective than other forms of front-of-pack labelling in terms of consumers' ability to understand and use the information provided (4,5).

In addition to the daily intake guide, a range of other nutrition labels have been included on food packages in the past. A prominent example is the National Heart Foundation Tick that was brought to the market in 1989 and has played a role in reducing the amount of sodium in the food supply (6-8). Sodium was identified as being of particular concern in the development of the Tick because of links to premature death (9). The advent of the HSR system has raised the issue of whether other front-of-pack labels remain necessary to assist consumers in their food choices. The Tick is currently under review to determine whether it will continue to be administered in the new HSR environment (10). This review is also timely given reputational issues resulting from (i) the Tick being awarded to some products

sold in fast food outlets that were deemed by various stakeholders to be unworthy of accreditation (11) and (ii) questionable impact on dietary choices in these contexts (12). The purpose of this brief report is to provide insight into consumers' current understanding of and attitudes towards the Tick to inform future decisions relating to this and other logo-based front-of-pack labels.

Method

As part of a larger study investigating consumers' responses to a range of nutrition information provision formats, 10 focus groups were conducted with 85 Western Australians aged 10 years and older. Participants were recruited via a social research company, with the groups segmented according to gender and age (10-13, 14-17, 18-25, 26-45, 46+ years). The focus groups were held in a range of locations across low and middle incomes areas in Perth. The focus on these groups reflects the relationship between socioeconomic status and rates of overweight and obesity and weight-related illnesses (13), and the resulting need for nutrition information to be delivered in a way that improves outcomes for disadvantaged groups (1). The focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and the transcriptions were imported into NVivo10 (QSR International), which is a software program that facilitates data management by allowing researchers to comprehensively code and analyse qualitative data. Ethics approval was obtained from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The focus groups commenced with general discussions about how shopping decisions are made and the in-store factors that influence choices. During these discussions, participants regularly mentioned the different forms of nutrition information contained on product

packaging. The findings reported below relate to participants' spontaneous mentions of the Heart Foundation Tick and its effects on their food beliefs and purchasing behaviours.

Results and Discussion

Overall, there was strong support from the participants for front-of-pack information that can assist them to make healthier food choices. The Tick was mentioned by participants in nine of the 10 focus groups, the exception being one of the children's groups (girls aged 10-13 years). Once the Tick was mentioned in a focus group, there appeared to be general awareness of the logo among other group members. Consistent with previous research (14, 15), this level of awareness suggests that the Tick is well-known in the community and has a considerable degree of salience across age and gender groups. The following quote illustrates how even some of the youngest participants had a reasonable understanding of the intended role of the Tick:

The Heart Foundation said it [a food product] probably won't give you heart cancer or heart attacks or anything bad to do with your heart. The Heart Foundation thinks that it should be good for your health (male 10-13 years).

While awareness was consistently high across the sample, greater variation was observed in reported use of the logo and perceptions of its trustworthiness. Overall, reported use was considerably lower than reported awareness, which is consistent with previous findings (14). However, rates of reported use appeared to be higher among female participants relative to males:

If it's got the health tick of approval, or says sugar free or something, you might be more likely to pick that over the box that doesn't have anything on it (female 14-17 years).

If I'm trying to decide between two things on nutrition and price and that are fairly equal, then you look for Fair Trade or Heart Tick or organic and that sort of stuff. It might be a tie breaker (female 18-25 years).

It comes back to that Heart Tick doesn't it? When I buy tins of tuna, I know if they've got that tick I'll do that (female 46+ years).

Males were more likely to exhibit a general awareness of the existence of the Tick without indicating that they would actually use it:

Facilitator: Anything else that you use on a product to tell you if it's healthier or not?

Male: Salt reduced or whatever, those sorts of things that promote a healthy lifestyle. Yeah, I'm not sure which one is - I don't really look at the label, but yeah. I guess like the heart healthy foundation or whatever ticked or approved by them. I don't really look at it, but I know it's on there (male 18-25 years).

The Heart Foundation - they put their stamp and sticker over food (male 26-45 years).

This difference by gender may reflect greater faith in the Tick and/or higher health concerns among females (16). Alternatively, it may be a function of the continuing role of females as the main grocery shoppers in Australia (17), and hence a greater likelihood for females to report actually using the Tick to guide their purchases.

Of note is that although the Tick was sometimes mentioned as a factor influencing purchase decisions, other factors such as taste, price, and brand received much greater attention during discussions. This is consistent with previous research that has illustrated the extent to which aspects other than health dominate food choices (18), especially among lower-income shoppers (19).

While gender appeared to be a factor influencing reported usage of the Tick, age emerged as especially relevant to perceptions of trustworthiness. In around half of the groups, and notably in all four groups with adults aged 26 years and over, concerns were expressed about the criteria used to determine whether products can feature the Tick on their packaging. These concerns were primarily focused on (i) the non-inclusion of sugar as an ingredient considered in the accreditation process and (ii) the need for companies to be able to afford the costs associated with applying to use the Tick. There were also mentions of the Tick being awarded to fast food companies, which was seen to be inherently contradictory to the purpose of the program.

Female 1: I have heard they can get paid to get that Tick, so that doesn't mean a whole lot anymore. It used to, but now it's how much money you've got, you get that Tick.

...

Female 2: You can't be too cynical of any kind of rating like that (females 26-45 years).

Female 1: All the Kellogg's stuff that's full of sugar, it's all Heart Foundation ticks, that sort of stuff.

Female 2: I wonder what the criteria is that you have to meet to...

Female 1: Well it's not sugar, that's for sure. It's other things. I think they look at salt maybe. [Laughter]

Female 3: Maybe money, it's like donations (females 46+ years).

Male: That's the thing, like it's organisations like the Heart Foundation who advocate for McDonalds. So it's like, 'Why am I listening to these guys?', you know? (Male 26-45 years).

I think it (the Tick) used to mean something, but I think they just stick it on everything these days. So I don't think it really - I think it's kind of lost its bearing, yeah (Male 14-17 years).

Conclusion

The frequent spontaneous mentions of the Tick in the present study indicate that the accreditation program has high levels of awareness among the general public, including

children. However, while the focus group participants were supportive of food labelling systems that can assist consumers make informed decisions at the point of purchase, concerns were expressed relating to the assessment criteria used to determine products' eligibility to use the Tick and the licensing arrangements that require companies to make a substantial financial investment in this process. These views indicate that once the HSR system is widely implemented, other nutrition information systems that are less comprehensive and inclusive may no longer be required (7). The Tick has served long and well, contributing to larger efforts to achieve favourable changes in the food supply (20). These achievements have assisted the evolution of the new HSR system through the provision of evidence relating to the potential efficacy of front-of-pack labels (1). The Tick could retire knowing that its positive effects will be felt for generations to come.

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