

LABELLING FOR GOOD: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF NUTRITIONAL LABEL FORMAT AND DESIGN TO HELP CONSUMERS MAKE BETTER-INFORMED CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

Nutritional labels are commonly used on food packaging in Malaysia, but currently the standard format of nutritional label design in Malaysia are not defined to help better inform consumers. The lack of format determinants used by manufacturers was barely discussed. A very small amount of studies are done in the area of information design in Malaysia on the consistencies in the format of nutritional label. This paper aims to explore the aesthetic value and design attention as the prime commodities of a nutritional label to meaningfully convey about what is consumed to keep the consumers better informed. This paper will look at the nutritional label format and design on packaged food available in the Malaysian hypermarkets, and provide discussion of the new insights for better visual representation through information design. It will draw on the descriptive studies of nutritional label format and design that encompasses the existing format used on imported and local packaged food, which can be found in Malaysian hypermarkets. The findings will be supported and addressed with qualitative approach to provide rich information.

Keywords: Nutritional Labels, Food Packaging Design, Information Design, Design For Social Change, Malaysia Design.

INTRODUCTION

Strolling down the hypermarket aisles in Malaysia, the consumer is awash in a sea of product information. Boxes, bags and cans made of cardboard, plastic or metal (with paper label wrap) are stained with rainbow of colors intended to grab the attention of the consumers. There is however an extended zone of nutrition information that almost leaps out at the consumers due to its contrast with that colorful information on the food packages. This extended zone mostly austere in its white-on-black table format and science vocabulary summarizes the ingredients, nutrition facts or strategies to incorporate the product into a daily balanced diet. It is here that the consumers discover the conspicuously and inconspicuous information panel which is known as Nutrition Facts or Nutritional Label.

It is a description intends to inform the consumers of the nutrient content of a food (MOH, 2007) and assists them in making knowledgeable decisions about the food they purchase. Hence, nutritional label is seen as a diet-related health tools, consequently an important aspect of consumers' food purchase decision.

Although nutritional labels are highly applied across packaged food in Malaysia, it was found in the recent survey conducted in Malaysia that only 36% of Malaysian consumers look for, read and understood nutritional information in nutritional label in the buying process (2012). In some areas of Malaysia, there are 19.3% of consumers who do not read nutrition labels, as they are not aware of the nutritional facts labels that appear at the back or side of the packaging (Feunekes, G.I., Gortemaker, I.A., Willems, A.A., Lion R. and Kommer, M.V.D., 2008). As such, the current standard format is not defined to help better inform consumers. The lack of format determinants used by manufacturers was also barely discussed. This has often left consumers unaware of what is consumed and notably contradicts with the 10th Malaysia Plan to develop a healthy nation where people value health as an everyday practice.

Furthermore, there has been little in-depth design project with the goal of finding a well-informed nutritional label for the Malaysian market. Various forms of labels are instead independently used, revised and improved through various qualitative and quantitative studies using testing materials with different levels of graphic quality. Some early studies even suggested that numerical formats were superior to diagrammatic displays, while recent studies have proven the opposite (Synovate, 2005b). Consequently, design and the presentation of information on nutritional label could draw a significant change towards making a more conducive environment of well-informed choices. In particular, more emphasis of design to be put onto nutritional label can help consumers assess the contribution of food to the overall healthy eating practice.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

The main purpose of this paper is to explore a preliminary groundwork in context, using information design to look further into the link between the existing nutritional label format and design in Malaysia hypermarkets; and furthermore to establish Malaysian ways of doing as a common phenomenon. The key regulations of nutritional labelling format in Malaysia is followed to show the deficiency of aesthetic value and design attention which is the prime commodities of its function to meaningfully convey about what is consumed to keep the consumers better informed.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Despite the booming economy in Malaysia, being the third largest economy in Southeast Asia and ranked 12th out of 135 economies in the World Bank report (2013), Malaysia is however stuck in a middle-income trap. 40% of Malaysian workforce earning between RM2,300 – RM7,000 are the ones who form this group (Lee, 2013).

They are mostly the taxpayers and a vast majority of them drive consumer spending for the domestic economy. With a large population comes under the middle-income category, it is a common phenomenon among Malaysians' purchasing behaviours are often price-conscious (Munusamy & Hoo, 2008). While the government had run couples of good cause campaigns to remind consumers to spend wisely with their daily expenses, this social status has attracted many Hypermarkets to set foot into Malaysia which mainly sell products at affordable prices. This trend can be seen vastly in the urban areas when a report found 56% of Malaysians engaged in grocery shopping as one of the three common activities on a weekly basis (October, 2013) and an extensive 37% amount of their money is spent in hypermarkets (Ng, 2011).

Perrigot and Cliquet (2006) make a point that hypermarket means "everything under the same roof", which broadcast category or products linked to discount price policy or self-service and networking techniques. As the rising of cost living along the years, Malaysian consumers are giving more attention to paying appropriate prices rather than going for the best brands all the time where hypermarkets act as a under one roof platform to compare a wide selection of products. This has made hypermarket became a dominant format in the city as 45% to 60% as the main outlets for grocery shopping (Malaysia Exporter Guide Annual, 2010).

Major hypermarkets in Malaysia whom also sell homegrown brands such as Aeon Big – Top Valu; Giant – Giant; Cold Storage – First Choice, Tesco – Tesco; Mydin and Kedai Rakyat 1 Malaysia – KR1M. Some of these hypermarkets work very closely with SME (Small Medium Enterprises) entrepreneurs to buy their products and promote them under the homegrown brands. While the consumers are given vast amount of choices among the homegrown brands, these hypermarkets too are facing strong competition in sales. Hence, to urge consumers make quicker purchase decision, attention are put more on the promotions of the product and the sales rather than the nutritional label.

Over the years, regulators, advertisers, public health advocates, doctors, scientists and food manufacturers have together created an "information infrastructure" that attempts to give information consistency and meaning. Only in Malaysia the nutrition labeling is mandatory for under specific conditions such as specific dietary food, enriched or fortified food or when the products make a nutrition or health claim (MOH, 2012). Although numerous of amendments have been made to the regulations in requests of the food industry and consumer needs, there is no standardize nutritional label format is applied across all products in Malaysia hypermarkets. Situation like this can be found such as, the retailers could apply GDA system on their label but other manufacturers could start other front-of-package (FoP) formats (ILSI, 2010).

To add on, numerical or diagrammatic format is the common face to present nutrition facts in the existing nutritional labels in Malaysia hypermarkets. In general, they are mostly monochrome, designed with either very little attention focused on the information or, overloaded with multilingual information. Although consumers would prefer the largest amount of information offered, but often the preferred amount of information leads to poorer performance (Levy, Fein & Schucker, 1996).

As a result, when people are presented with more information than they can process, this can easily lead to confusion, misunderstanding and uncertainty (FSA, 2010). Moreover, the ability to purchase with better-informed information is reduced when consumers are given an overflow of information (Drichoutis et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2009; Nørgaard & Brunso, 2009). Nutritional labelling scheme is also hardly found on the FoP except for Aeon Big and Tesco's home brand products, however Ministry of Health has not endorse this scheme yet (ILSI, 2010). Having said that, the use of simplifying tools such as the per cent Daily Value (DV) to apply on the FoP may help translate consumer enthusiasm for the new label into improved food selection (Guthrie, Derby and Levy, 1999). On the same note, the Health of Choice Symbol (HCS) is yet to be established in Malaysia, but a couple of common HCS can still be found on the front label such as the Halal Logo, Buatan Malaysia (Made in Malaysia) logo and MeSti (Food Safety is the Responsibility of Food Industry) logo.

Notwithstanding several studies on improving nutritional labels are done over the years to seek a better way to educate consumers to understand the scientific terms or, finding out the sufficiency of data presented or to examine how consumers comprehend the meaning of the information but the core function of nutritional label is simply unclear anymore. Thus, this paper aims to examine the design of nutritional label and the value aesthetic presentation of information design, which is the prime commodity for a nutritional label to meaningfully convey about what is consumed to keep the consumers better informed.

METHODOLOGY

This research looks at the nutritional label format and design on packaged food available in Malaysia hypermarkets. It draws on the descriptive studies of nutritional label format and design that encompasses the existing format used on imported and local packaged food. Samples of existing nutritional labels are collected and examined (Figure 6) which eventually provide new insights for better visual representation through information design.



Figure 1: Infographics about this research



Figure 2: Top Valu Nutritional Label



Figure 3: Tesco Nutritional Label



Figure 4: First Choice & Giant Nutritional Label



Figure 5: KR1M Nutritional Label



Figure 6: Other Nutritional Label in Malaysian Hypermarkets

CONCLUSIONS

This paper sets out to look at the nutritional label format and design on nutritional label in Malaysia hypermarkets. It builds on descriptive studies through collecting samples of existing nutritional labels on the home brand in hypermarkets as well as imported brands. The main finding is that there is inconsistency of nutritional label format applied across the products. For example, Tesco and Top Valu offer a summary nutritional display on the front package (Figure 2 & 3), while the other home brands only display common nutritional labels at the back of the package. The nutrition list indicated on the nutritional label also shows a discrepancy on each home brand, some with 5 major scientific terms (Figure 5) while the others offer more information to consumers (Figure 4). Other composition such as the design and presentation of information is also less standardising or rather poor in visibility.

The analysis is not without caveats, nevertheless. We recognised that a larger sample and greater variation in the data along age would strengthen such descriptive studies. Having said that, the current finding provides enough variations in the data to allow the examination of this paper. As such, the finding suggests that if design of information can be taken seriously to apply onto the existing nutritional label, it would maximize benefits of its function while assisting consumers to gain useful information and make better-informed choices.

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