

To Examine Perceptions and Associations of Shock Food Labelling and to Assess the Impact on Consumer Behaviour: A Quasi-Experimental Approach

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Abstract : Shock and fear tactics have been used to encourage consumer behaviour change within the UK regarding lifestyle choices such as smoking and alcohol abuse, yet such measures have not been applied to food labels to encourage healthier purchasing decisions. Obesity levels are continuing to rise within the UK, despite efforts made by government and charitable bodies to encourage consumer behavioural changes, which will have a positive influence on their fat, salt, and sugar intake. We know that taking extreme measures to shock consumers into behavioural changes has worked previously; for example, the anti-smoking television adverts and new standardised cigarette and tobacco packaging have reduced the numbers of the UK adult population who smoke or encouraged those who are currently trying to quit. The USA has also introduced new front-of-pack labelling, which is clear, easy to read, and includes concise health warnings on products high in fat, salt, or sugar. This model has been successful, with consumers reducing purchases of products with these warning labels present. Therefore, investigating if shock labels would have an impact on UK consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions would help to fill the gap within this research field. This study aims to develop an understanding of consumer's initial responses to shock advertising with an interest in the perceived impact of long-term effect shock advertising on consumer food purchasing decisions, behaviour, and attitudes and will achieve this through a mixed methodological approach taken with a sample size of 25 participants ages ranging from 22 and 60. Within this research, shock mock labels were developed, including a graphic image, health warning, and get-help information. These labels were made for products (available within the UK) with large market shares which were high in either fat, salt, or sugar. The use of online focus groups and mouse-tracking experiments results helped to develop an understanding of consumer's initial responses to shock advertising with interest in the perceived impact of long-term effect shock advertising on consumer food purchasing decisions, behaviour, and attitudes. Preliminary results have shown that consumers believe that the use of graphic images, combined with a health warning, would encourage consumer behaviour change and influence their purchasing decisions regarding those products which are high in fat, salt and sugar. Preliminary main findings show that graphic mock shock labels may have an impact on consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions, which will, in turn, encourage healthier lifestyles. Focus group results show that 72% of participants indicated that these shock labels would have an impact on their purchasing decisions. During the mouse tracking trials, this increased to 80% of participants, showing that more exposure to shock labels may have a bigger impact on potential consumer behaviour and purchasing decision change. In conclusion, preliminary results indicate that graphic shock labels will impact consumer purchasing decisions. Findings allow for a deeper understanding of initial emotional responses to these graphic labels. However, more research is needed to test the longevity of these labels on consumer purchasing decisions, but this research exercise is demonstrably the foundation for future detailed work.

Keywords : consumer behavior, decision making, labelling legislation, purchasing decisions, shock advertising, shock labelling

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