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A qualitative assessment of the role of socio-economic status on use and application of food labels in the retail setting

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Given the potential to communicate nutrition information and inform dietary choices, food labels have received considerable attention in recent years. A wealth of research on various aspects of food labelling has been conducted; however, the impact of socio-demographic status on food label usage and understanding remains inconclusive⁽¹⁾. The current study aims at investigating differences in the use and application of food labelling information between participants from the least and most deprived areas of Scotland using a qualitative methodology.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were informed by a preliminary quantitative survey⁽²⁾ and were employed to elicit a detailed perspective on label comprehension and usage. A non-probabilistic sampling strategy was employed with participants purposively recruited to include those from the most and least deprived locations. Eight pre-existing groups (e.g. church, parent and community groups) were recruited across Scotland. A short (two-page) questionnaire, including demographic items, was distributed to focus group participants (*n* 61; fifty-three females, eight males). Postcode data were converted into SIMD categories⁽³⁾ to obtain a measure of socio-economic status (SES). Of the eight FGD, three were considered less-affluent (high deprivation); three were referred to as more affluent (low deprivation) and two were considered mixed (with participants from areas of low and high deprivation). A combination of analytic frameworks were utilised for data analysis.

Overall, findings from the FGD indicated that motivation (to read labels and eat a healthy diet) was a key determinant of nutrition label reading behaviour regardless of SES. Knowledge of nutrition, time pressures and practical aspects (e.g. format and position), were reported barriers to reading and using food labels. Participants who reported using labels described doing so to make 'healthier' food choices and compare similar products. Nutrition information on food labels were readily discussed in less-affluent groups; however, these participants were more likely to describe using the information on product utilization, e.g. durability, storage and preparation information. The impact of product price on label reading behaviour varied between groups. Less-affluent groups described selecting the cheapest option, compared with mixed and affluent groups who discussed purchasing the 'best' option for both value and quality. Quantitative Ingredient Declarations (QUID), fair trade and organic information on labels were often reportedly used to assess product quality in mixed and affluent groups. Price was often considered a key barrier to both purchasing 'healthy' products and for engaging with label reading practices in less-affluent groups.

In conclusion, there are a number of variables which influence label reading and the subsequent purchase decisions thereafter. While food labels are recognised as potentially influential in the consumers purchase decision they are not the only influence and for many less-affluent consumers' financial restrictions may play a larger role in determining their dietary outcomes. Furthermore as time pressures and practical aspects are reported barriers to label reading, there is a need for labelling that is accessible quickly and easily understood by the consumer.

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1. Drichoutis AC, Lazaridis P & Nayga RM (2006) *Acad Market Sci Rev* 9

2. Mackison D, Wrieden WL & Anderson AS (2010) *Proc Nutr Soc* 69, OCE6 E416

3. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Available at <http://www.sns.gov.uk>