Assessing Consumer's Awareness of Food Labeling in Sunyani Municipality

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to investigate consumer’s awareness of food labels in the Sunyani Municipality. Cross sectional survey was employed and questionnaire was used to gather primary data from 80 consumers who were found purchasing packaged foods in selected supermarkets in Area Four, a settlement in Sunyani Municipality with the most supermarkets. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The study found that consumers’ awareness of food label was high and that most perceived importance of reading food labels were list of ingredients, expiry date, health reasons whereas nutritional value of the product, health consciousness, religious beliefs, preference of some food ingredients, food allergy were the main factors that motivate consumers to read food labels. The study also established that unfamiliar language other than English, small font sizes, when in hurry were some of the barriers encountered by consumers in reading food labels. The researchers recommended that stakeholders of food labeling should work on the reported barriers encountered by consumers in reading and ensuring that packaged food labels are presented in a manner that can help a consumer to make an informed choice.

Keywords: food label, packaged foods, consumer awareness.
INTRODUCTION

Food labelling is a legal requirement which has to be fulfilled by food manufactures for the consumer’s better health and safety (Ababio et al., 2012). In view of that, countries across the world are now enacted policies to enforce food manufactures to put food label information on packaged foods. In international market it is an offence to give wrong misinformation about food label. In Ghana too, according to food law, it is an offence to sell packaged food without food label (PNDC L 305B).

Food labelling enables consumers to make informed decision when purchasing and consuming food products. By paying attention to the information on foods labels, consumers can ensure they and their families eat the correct amount of nutrients and also avoid over eating unhealthy foods and keep known allergens from themselves and their families. Another advantage of reading food labels also prevents consumers from choosing counterfeit products which can be dangerous to their health.

In addition, the food manufacturer on the other hand grows in business. This is because, food manufactures in their quest to remain in business and to build consumers’ confidence in the usage of their products makes wild claims about the health benefits of their food products but some of these information can be misrepresented. This makes food labels very important to be observed by consumers before they make relentless patronage of such food product (Wardlaw, 1997).

Research have however shown that factors such as time, familiarity, lack of understanding and lack of conductive point of purchase are some of the impediments that affect consumer’s ability to observe food labels before purchase and consumption (Deede, 2009).

Although food manufacturers display food label information on food packaged products, it is worth deliberating consumers’ awareness of this information, and it importance to consumers. This study sought to provide some baseline information on awareness of food labels and it importance by consumers living in the Sunyani Municipality (within the Brong - Ahafo region of Ghana). It is hoped that the results that are obtained from this study will provide recent data in consumer behaviour and contribute to the facilitation of reading and use of food labelling in the region.

In recent times, there have been a tremendous increase in consumption of packaged of food items/products. This may be due to an increase of working mothers. With the change in lifestyle and consumption pattern, food safety standards are becoming important from public policy perspective. In view of that, countries across the world are now enacted policies to enforce food manufactures to put food label information on packaged foods.

The reason being that both consumers and food manufactures have immerse benefits from food labels. The consumer on one hand use food labels to make informed decision as to what to buy and what not to buy and the manufacturer on the other hand grows in business.

In addition, there are basic information by law on what must be found on food labels such as the name of the product, name and address of the manufacturer and the expiry date of the
product and the nutritional value of the product. All these information must be written in the language that consumers will understand in order for them to make informed decisions on their choice of food product for better diet and better health.

However, literature attested that in most of our communities consumers are not used to reading packaged food labels (Coveney, 2007, Mahgoub et al., 2007, Sunelle et al., 2010, Philip et al., 2010, Darkwa, 2013). This might unknowingly predispose them into buying expired food items, foods with undesired ingredients and among others.

Additionally, the literature review indicates that the issue of consumer awareness about usage of food labelling information attracted little research attention in Ghana. However, little is known in Sunyani Municipality about the level of awareness in food labelling information and its importance to consumers. It is upon this, that researcher want to join the debate and contribute his quota on the issue of food labelling. This study, therefore seeks to explore the level of awareness among consumers in Sunyani Municipality. The outcomes of the study will help to understand the complexity of issues involved in food labeling, its importance and how it influences consumers choice.

The main aim of the study is to assess consumer’s level of awareness on food labels in the Sunyani Municipality. Specifically, the study aims at the following objectives:

- Identify consumers’ knowledge on food labels.
- Analyse consumers perceive importance of reading food labels.
- Ascertained the factors that influence consumers to read food labels.
- Examine the barriers to reading food labels before purchase.

The findings of the study will help Ghana Food and Drugs Board to know consumers level of knowledge on the importance of reading food labels in order to bridge the gap through their educational activities.

The study will also help manufactures to know the kind of information consumers expect to find on a packaged product before purchase.

Furthermore, the findings of the study will be significant to policy makers who will become aware of issues surrounding food labelling.

It is expected that the study will provide new and recent data related to the use of food labels by consumers in Sunyani Municipality.

METHODOLOGY
Research Design
Survey design was employed for the study. The choice of this design was guided by the research objective which sought to assess consumer’s level of food label awareness. This therefore requires gathering information from the respondent out there about their opinions, attitudes and perceptions and hence justify.
Population
In this study, the population is comprised of all persons aged 18 years and above who were found purchasing packaged food products from the selected Super markets within the Sunyani Municipality. This population was used because it was easy and convenient to reach since such shops contain lots of packaged food products and lot of people come there frequently to purchase these packaged food products.

Sampling Procedures
In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify Area Four, a settlement in the Sunyani Municipality of Ghana with the most popular supermarkets. The names of the supermarkets in Area Four (n = 11) were written on the piece of paper and the pieces of paper were put in a container and shuffled. Without looking at the container, the researchers randomly picked five shops. Also, sixteen (16) consumers from each of the five supermarkets were conveniently sampled. The researchers’ assistants approach any consumer who was found picking packaged food items for purchasing and accepted to participate in the study was given the questionnaire to fill in the store.

Instrumentation
Questionnaire was used to gather primary data from the respondents. The questionnaires consisted of well structured (close ended) multiplies choices questions which just required ticking the right answers by the respondent. It also consisted of unstructured (open ended) questions which allowed respondents to answer to the questions in their own words and freedom.
In this study, self-administered questionnaire was administered to the respondents in the various shopping outlets. Questions covered respondents’ demographics, knowledge of awareness, importance of reading, factors that influence and barriers of reading food label. Also, questions were read to illiterate respondents by the researchers’ assistants in Twi and their responses captured.

Limitations
The data was purposely selected from only five super markets and therefore affect the sample size and the results cannot be generalized. It is definitely a good idea to apply this study in different shops to ascertain the robustness of the results.
The selection of a sample that is convenient for the study may limit the findings to a broader population. For example, the convenience sample may not be representative of the population of shoppers that shop at other times or who shop at other supermarkets.

Ethical Consideration
In this study, a written permission to conduct the research was submitted to the managers or owners of the supermarkets (names withheld?) for approval prior to commencement of data collection.
However, based on the nature of the field environment (supermarkets), the researchers’ assistants approach consumers who were willing to answer the questionnaire. Respondents did not sign consent forms and therefore verbal consent was used.
Data Analysis
In this study, descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages, were used to illustrate the demographic profile of the participants and awareness of food labeling. The results were presented in frequencies and percentages. In addition mean and standard deviation were also, used to analyses consumers perceive importance of reading food labels, ascertain factors that influence consumers to read food labels and examine barriers to reading food labels before purchase with support of the Statistical Package for Service Solution version 20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: The demographics of respondents (N=80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and above</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary education</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey, 2017

Table 1 above presents socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Out of 80 respondents, 55% were males and 45% were females. This implies more males buy packaged food than females. Large proportion of respondents 51% in the age group 18 to 29 years while the smallest proportion 5% was in the age group 60 years and above.

In terms of educational attainment of the respondents, 48% of the respondents forming majority had attained secondary education, 36% had tertiary education while 10% had no formal education.

The sample composed of almost equal presentation of all genders thus enabled studying the influence of gender. The sample also composed of respondents with various education levels ranging from primary education to tertiary education thus enabled studying the influence of level of education. Also the sample composed of different aged groups of respondents which again enabled studying the influence of age in awareness and use of food labelling information.
Table 2: Awareness of labeling information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey, 2017

All the respondents indicated that they were aware of food label. This finding corroborates studies by Basarir et al. (2012) in the UAE and Darkwa (2012) where majority of the respondents were aware of food labeling. However, the finding of the current study contradicts what was found by Gwantwa (2012) and Washi (2012) where awareness of food labelling information was found to be low among consumers.

Table 3: Perceived importance of reading food labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food label information</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To ascertain nutritional value</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health reasons</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know quantity of the food by weight/volume</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know special storage needs</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know the expiry date of the product</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives names and address of manufacture</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives the list of ingredients used</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know shelf life</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives instruction on usage</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey, 2017

Scale range: 1.0-2.4=unimportant, 2.5-3.9=important

Table 3 above presents perceived importance of reading food labels by consumers before purchase of food product. Most of the respondents (2.92) perceived nutritional value as importance of reading food labels. This is in the line with Grunet et al. (2010) who reported that in the UK, most consumers looked at nutrition information before selection of food. Again, majority (3.38) perceived health reasons as importance of reading food labels before purchase of the product. Consumers of prepackaged foods are ought to make conscious choice of foods with respect to their health status and needs. Food labelling information is very important for people who are in special diet or with food/nutrition related health problems and diseases such as obesity, diabetics, cardiovascular diseases and various types of cancers as it helps them to make informed choices of food (Washi, 2012). Respondents did not perceived quantity of food by weight and special storage needs as importance of reading food labels. Findings of this study also showed that, in reading food labels, respondents’ paid great attention on expiry dates (3.44) and list of ingredients (3.46). The finding is consistent with the results of (Washi, 2012) where consumers paid much attention on expiry date of the products. This indicated their concern about risks that might appear from consuming expired foods or
foods with undesired ingredients. Although production and expiry dates are mandatory items on all food labels; the study reflected the increased importance given by the consumers to the necessity of including them on the food label. This indicates that the consumers are always concerned about the risks which might appear from consuming expired foods that may cause diseases. These results resemble what Mathew and associates (2012) revealed during an online survey conducted in the USA, whereby when consumers were asked about what information they check on food labels, 76% indicated expiry date and 51% indicated ingredients.

In addition, respondents perceived instruction on usage (3.68) and names and address of manufacture (2.74) as importance of reading food labels. Consumers also paid attention to the country of manufacturing and this indicates their concern about buying their food from preferred sources. Food labels provide information that give directions for using the product and information about its contents, product guarantees, nutritional value and potential hazards (Ababio et al., 2012). Food labelling was also considered important as it helps in traceability and marketing of pre-packaged foods.

Table 4: Factors motivated consumers to read food labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health consciousness</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Package design</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of the product</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious beliefs</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food allergy</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in nutritional value</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for some ingredients</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field survey, 2017*

The study revealed that respondents had different motivations to read information that is contained in food labels. As indicated in Table 4, most of the respondents (M=3.11) were motivated by the need to know nutritional value of the prepackaged food before purchase or consumption of the food. This was basically associated with perceived risks of consuming foods with undesired ingredients or poor quality. The finding is consistent with the results of a study carried out by Sunelle et al. (2010) and Mahgoub et al (2007) where consumers were motivated by health concerns and nutrition information as the major factor that motivated consumers to read food labels of specific types of foods to be purchased.

On the other hand, the finding is contrary to Grunert et al. (2010) study where only 27% of shoppers in the United Kingdom looked for nutrition information on food labels. Health consciousness motivated respondents (M=2.80) to read pre-packaged food labels before purchase of such foods. Findings of the study is also in agreement with Philip et al (2010), where consumers are motivated by safety, hygiene and quality of pre-packaged foods before purchase.
of such foods. Also, Rodoflo (1999) reported perceived health risks and the need to have healthy
diet, motivated consumers to read food labelling information in the USA.
Results in Table 4 above also revealed that religious beliefs motivate/influence respondents
(M=2.11) to read food labels while food allergy motivate respondents (M=2.38) to read food
labels before purchase of food product. The result, nonetheless confirms EdComs (2007) study
which found that mothers with high education levels read food labels due to food allergy and
religious beliefs.

Table 5: Barriers to read food labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When in hurry</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of the product</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with the food product</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small font sizes</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar language</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiteracy</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you trust where you shop</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As shown in Table 5, major barriers towards reading food labeling information were reported
by respondents. Unfamiliar language (other than English) was mentioned by respondents
(M=3.69) as the major barrier in reading food labels followed by the use of familiar with the
food product (M=2.55). The study is consistent with Grunert et al. (2010) and Donna et al. (2001)
who found, that use of unfamiliar language on food labels hinders consumers in reading and
understanding labelling information when deciding to purchase pre-packaged foods in
Australia and New Zealand. In addition, (M=2.40) purchased pre-packaged foods without
reading labelling information because they were in a hurry and small font sizes (M=2.46) as
barriers to read food labels by respondents of the study. The results strengthen the findings
of Sunelle et al. (2010) studies where consumers were not able to read label because they were in
hurry.

CONCLUSIONS

The sample of this study composed of almost equal presentation of all genders with various
education levels ranging from primary education to tertiary education and different aged
groups of respondents.
This study has also revealed that awareness and use of packaged food labeling information is
high among consumers in Sunyani Area Four settlement although due to its relatively small
sample these findings cannot be generalized to the rest of similar population in the
municipality. Findings showed that all respondents had high awareness on food labeling.
Additionally, the most perceived importance of reading food labels were the list of ingredients,
expiry date, health reasons, shelf life, instruction on usage and nutritional value. Consumers
were motivated to read labeling information by the need to know nutritional value of the food
in question, health consciousness, preference of some food ingredients, religious beliefs, food allergy among others.

It was also revealed that there were circumstances in which consumers did not read food labels because they were in a hurry (time constraints), purchased familiar foods, small font sizes and use of unfamiliar language other than English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that stakeholders of food labeling should work on the reported barriers encountered by consumers in reading and using the information presented on food labels and hence ensuring that packaged food labels are presented in a manner that can help a consumer to make an informed choice of the food.

It is also recommended that further research should be carried on more Ghanaian consumers is required to determine whether or not the results obtained in this study apply to the general Ghanaian consumer population.

REFERENCES


