Title: Prevalence of health-related claims on pre-packaged foods: a five-country study in Europe

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Abstract

Introduction/Objective

The European Union (EU)-funded project Role of health-related CLaims and sYMBOLOs in consumer behaviour (CLYMBOL) aimed to determine the prevalence of symbolic and non-symbolic nutrition and health claims found on food and drink products across five different European countries.

Method/Design

Food and drink products were sampled based on a randomised sampling protocol, using store lists or a store floor plan. Data collection took place in 2013, across five countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and the UK), in three types of stores (large supermarket/national retailer, discounter and neighbourhood store).

Results

A total of 2,036 products were sampled and packaging information was analysed. At least one nutrition or health claim was identified in 26% of the total products sampled (528/2,036 products). This was represented by 94% non-symbolic and 6% symbolic claims. The majority of all claims were nutrition claims (64%), followed by health claims (29%) and then health-related ingredient claims (6%). The most common health claims were nutrient and other function claims (47%). Disease risk reduction accounted for 5% and children’s development and health claims 8% of identified health claims. The category of foods for specific dietary use (baby foods) had the highest proportion of both nutrition (78%) and health claims (70%).

Conclusion

The prevalence of symbolic and non-symbolic nutrition and health claims varies across European countries and between different food group categories. This study provides baseline data for regulators and food industry to monitor and evaluate the use of claims in food information to consumers. It is also the basis for subsequent phases of CLYMBOL involving consumer understanding and use of such information in purchase and consumption behaviour. Furthermore, the protocol designed and used in this study, particularly the addition of the health-related ingredient claim may assist future research in this area.

Key Words: nutrition claims; health claims; health symbols; CLYMBOL