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Association between Nutrition Label Awareness and the Decision to Purchase Food Products among College Students at King Faisal University

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Abstract: Nutrition labels are essential in encouraging consumers to eat healthy food. However, poor knowledge about nutrition labels may lead to the consumption of unhealthy foods, especially among young adults. This quantitative, analytical study aims to measure college students' awareness of nutrition labels and their impact on their decision-making when choosing a food product. Data was collected through an online survey involving a sample of 228 college students distributed across four college degree programs. The findings revealed that the ability to read and understand the information on the nutrition label significantly affects college students' decisions to buy food products (p-value = 0.001, OR = 9.950). The majority (90.8%) of them claimed to be aware of nutrition labels, and their source of awareness was mainly from social media (80.7%). As high as 84.6% reported reading the nutrition labels prior to food purchase, while the remaining 15.4% (who do not read) claimed their lack of understanding (55.9%) about nutrition labels as the reason for not doing so. Furthermore, ascertaining the food product's manufacturing and expiry dates (82.3%) was the most reported reason for reading the nutrition labels. Lastly, significant relationships were found between awareness of nutrition labels and the decision to purchase food products (p-value = 0.001). This study provides relevant agencies and stakeholders valuable information in designing effective educational programs and awareness campaigns about the importance of understanding nutrition labels, especially for young adults.

Keywords: Nutrition label, Awareness of nutrition label, Nutrition information

1. Introduction

Nutrition labels, also known as food labels, are often shown as a panel and provide information regarding energy, fat, saturated fat, carbs, sugars, protein, salt, and other aspects of food manufacturing [1],[2]. The primary aim of nutrition labeling is to inform consumers of their food to help them make better choices [3]. Labeling that is detailed, honest, and accurate is required to tell consumers about the specific nature and qualities of the food product, allowing them to make more informed decisions.

The ability of consumers to choose their diets is influenced by the amount and quality of information accessible from a range of sources, including nutrition labels [4]. Several studies have investigated the relationship between the usage of nutrition label

information, health state, sociodemographic and economic status, and related consumer behaviors, with varying results. The use of nutrition labels, for example, was discovered to be inversely associated with a person's total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol intake [5]. Reading labels is linked to nutrition knowledge, the value of a healthy diet, and the idea that eating too much fat is unhealthy, according to another study [6]. Furthermore, Gender disparities in nutrition knowledge have also been found. with some research suggesting that older adult females had greater nutrition knowledge scores than males [7], [8] while others find the opposite [9], [10] Finally, it has been found that factors influencing the importance of nutrition labeling for consumers tend to be strictly related to the socio-economic and health status of the consumers [11].

Nutritional information on product labels effectively encourages people to make healthier choices when purchasing food products [12], [13]. But do consumers notice, read, and understand such labels and utilize them to make purchasing decisions? Several consumer research studies [14]-[16] attempted to shed light on these concerns. Consumers rarely read the nutrition information on product labels, despite being a vital source of nutrition information [4], [17]. In addition to that, the information on food labels is complex and does not always convey effectively, even though customers prioritize nutrition when determining which items to buy [18]-[21].

Although the aforementioned research sought explain some different of the sociodemographic, psychological, attitudinal elements associated with using nutritional labels, it is entirely unknown how frequently nutrition labels are utilized by young adults and their influence on their decision in choosing which food products to buy [22]. It is crucial to assess their knowledge of nutrition labels and its influence on their decision because most of them make independent food decisions for the first time in their lives [23] and some students adopt dietary habits in college, which remain throughout adulthood [24]. Consumer utilization of nutrition labels when making food purchases has decreased over the last decade, according to Todd and Variyam [25], especially among young persons under 30. They are subjected to various convenience foods, many of which are not part of their home environment. They are also more likely to make dietary changes than adults who have adopted dietary habits for many years [26], [27]. Thus, nutrition labels may be a significant preventive intervention for college students and young people by encouraging the development of typical behaviors that may significantly affect their future preferences and diet quality.

The use of nutrition labels improves significantly as a result of increased awareness [28]. Low knowledge of nutrition labels leads to higher consumption of unhealthy foods in the short term and hence to a higher vulnerability to chronic diseases in the long term [29]. The Saudi Food and Drug Authority [30] released a survey in 2018

finding that 55% of Saudis do not read nutrition labels, and 56% do not know the proper definition of portion size. In addition, a study at Taibah University (2020) [31] indicated that there might be a lack of knowledge on how to read nutrition labels or a lack of knowledge of the purpose of having nutrition information on the label among Saudi college students.

Although nutrition labeling and disclosure of nutrition information on food labels have been obligatory in Saudi Arabia since 2007, only a little research on food labels by Saudi consumers has been conducted [32]. There is a clear gap in the existing literature regarding how effective nutrition labels influence Saudi consumers. Thus, this further compelled the researchers to conduct a study that will determine the association of awareness of nutrition labels with a college student's decisions when buying products. Overall, the goal of this study is to add to the existing literature by offering recommendations that stakeholders (e.g., schools) can use to improve nutritional awareness campaign initiatives by integrating the promotion of nutrition label use in their educational activities.

2. METHOD

This study used an analytical, cross-sectional research design and was carried out at the College of Applied Medical Sciences at King Faisal University. The respondents were limited to the students enrolled in four college degree programs: Nursing, Public Health, Health Informatics, and Clinical Nutrition.

A simple random sampling procedure was used to select the sample and calculated based on 875 population, a 95% confidence interval, and a 5% margin of error. Two hundred twenty-eight students aged 18-24 years were distributed across the four college degree programs.

A three-part self-administered questionnaire was constructed. The first part dealt with the students' demographic profile regarding age, gender, civil status, academic program, and year level. The second part comprised six-item questions about students' knowledge of nutrition labels. Photographsof the different parts of nutrition labels (e.g., nutrition facts, health claims, and the expiration date) were featured, and asked respondents about their

awareness of the said parts. The final section, comprised of five questions, inquired about students' intentions to purchase food products.

Prior to finalizing the study questionnaire, experts were requested to validate the said questionnaire. A pilot testing was then initiated to test its reliability. Ethical clearance was also sought and granted by the College Review Committee before the data collection. All respondents were identified as volunteers aged 18 years and above. Together with the survey questionnaire, an invitation letter was also sent stating that their participation is entirely voluntary, with the certainty that all data will be kept confidential.

Data analysis was done using an appropriate statistical test such as Mean, Standard Deviations, Binary Regression for the relationship between variables, and Chi-Square for the significant difference. The independent

variable (awareness about nutrition labels) was adjusted for covariates. Odds ratio (OR) with 95% confidence interval (CI) were presented. Statistical significance was set at p<0.05. The above statistical tests were processed using the SPSS software version 20.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Profile Characteristics of the College Students

The profile characteristics of the college students revealed that more than the majority of these 228 respondents are female (54.4%), single (92.5%), and with a mean age of 20 years old. Almost half (48.8%) of them were from the Department of Public Health, followed by those from the Department of Health Informatics (21%), the Department of Nursing (18%), and the Department of Clinical Nutrition (13.2%), respectively. The majority were in their first year of study (48.2%).

Table1. Demographic characteristics of the responden	Table1. Demo	graphic chai	racteristics o	of the r	espondent
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Variables	Frequency	%	mean±SD
Age (Years)	•		20.43 + 1.290
18	6	2.6	
19	47	20.6	
20	88	38.6	
21	40	17.5	
22	27	11.8	
23	17	7.5	
24	3	1.3	
Gender			·
Female	124	54.4	
Male	104	45.6	
Civil Status			
Single	211	92.5	
Married	15	6.6	
Divorced	2	.9	
Academic Program			
Public health	109	47.8	
Health Informatics	48	21.1	
Nursing	41	18.0	
Clinical Nutrition	30	13.2	
Study level			
First	110	48.2	
Second	62	27.2	
Fourth	29	12.7	
Third	24	10.5	
Internship	3	1.3	

3.2. Awareness of Nutrition Label among College Students

Tables 2 and 3 shows the proportion of the statements that determine the college students' awareness of nutrition labels and their source(s) of information.

The majority (90.8%) of the college students recognized nutrition labels when shown photos of different samples of nutrition labels, e.g., nutrition facts, health claims, and expiration dates. Therefore, recognizing this information indicates an awareness of the nutrition labels.

Table2. Respondent's nutrition label awareness

	N	%	95% CI	
Yes	207	90.8	87.0	94.5
No	21	9.2	5.4	12.9

As shown in Table 3, the majority of college students who were aware of nutrition labels reported that they learned about nutrition labels from social media (80.7%), followed by friends (34.8%), Saudi Food and Drug

Authority (31.9%), Ministry of Health (23.7%), College (19.3%), WHO (14%), self-learning (6.8%), and in high school (6.3%), respectively.

Table3. Respondent's source (s) of information about nutrition label

Source	N	%	
Social media (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	167	80.7	
Friends	135	34.8	
Saudi Food and Drug Authority	66	31.9	
Ministry of Health	49	23.7	
College	40	19.3	
High School	13	6.3	
World Health Organization (WHO)	29	14.0	
Self-learning	14	6.8	

Tables 4 to 6 show the proportion of the statements determining college students who read and do not read nutrition labels and their reason(s) for reading and not reading it before buying the food product.

As shown in Table 4, the findings highlighted that most (84.6%) of the college students reported reading nutrition labels prior to purchasing the food products.

Table4. Proportion of respondents who read nutrition labels prior to buying food a product

	Frequency	%	95% Confidence Interval		
Not Read	35	15.4	10.67	20.03	
Read	193	84.6	79.97	89.33	

In addition, college students who reported reading nutrition labels were also asked about their reasons for reading them, as shown in Table 5. The concern on the manufacturing **Table5.** Reason(s) for reading the nutrition labels

and expiry date (82.3%) was the most reported reason college students read nutrition labels before purchasing a food product.

Reasons	Frequency	%
To ascertain the manufacturing and expiry date	158	82.3
To get data on what was to be consumed	110	57.3
To determine the fat content of the food	101	52.6
To ascertain the sugar content of the food	98	51.3
To determine the nutrition content of the food	94	51
To create the correct selection	73	38.2
To avoid shopping for unhealthy food	66	34.4
to see the ingredients within the product	60	31.4
to determine directions on the way to use the food	56	29.3
Health reasons	50	26.2
to ascertain if the food was an inferior product	49	25.7

More than half (55.9%) of the college students who reported not reading nutrition labels claimed that their lack of understanding about nutrition labels was the main reason for not reading them when buying food products. The **Table6.** Reason(s) for not reading nutrition labels

rest of the college students do not appreciate the need or importance of reading nutrition labels (50%). At the same time, some see them as time-consuming and hard to read (32.4%).

Reasons for Not Reading the Nutrition Label	Frequency	%
I do not understand it	19	55.9
There is no need to do so	17	50.0
Time-consuming	11	32.4
Labels are too small	11	32.4

3.3. Association between Awareness of the Nutrition Label and the Decision to Purchase Food Products among College Students

There was a positive and significant relationship (p=0.001, OR=9.950) between nutrition label awareness and the decision to purchase food items or products among college students.

Table7. Association between nutrition label awareness and the decision to purchase a food product

	p-value	Odds ratio	95% Confidence Interval	
The association between nutrition label awareness and the decision to purchase a food product.	0.001	9.950	3.053	32.428

The study's findings also demonstrated that awareness about nutrition labels was significantly and positively associated with reading food labels before purchasing the food products. In other words, those who are aware of nutrition labels are 8.3 times more likely to read nutrition labels before purchasing the food products than those who are unaware.

Table8. Association between awareness of nutrition labels and reading information on the label prior to purchasing a food product

	Odds ratio	tio 95% Confidence Interval		p-value
The relationship between awareness of	8.387	3.224	21.824	>.001
nutrition labels and reading them before				
purchasing the food products.				

4. DISCUSSIONS

The goal of nutrition labels is to provide dietary guidelines to consumers and to increase their awareness of their eating habits, quality of food, and daily meal requirements [33]. It's a way of influencing people's buying habits and their ability to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy foods [34]. Nutrition labeling, on the other hand, can only be beneficial if customers read it correctly and frequently. Consumers with better nutrition awareness are more likely to comprehend and use nutrition labels to assist them in making healthy decisions [35].

In our study, majority of the respondents claimed to be aware of nutrition label information. However, their source of awareness is mostly from the internet, especially on social media, and very few learned it from school. The internet has transformed our ability to get health information i.e., nutrition. However. distinguishing between trustworthy internet health information and health material that is not only incorrect but potentially hazardous can be challenging. A significant number of research have previously looked into and reported on the advantages and disadvantages of health-related information obtained from online sources [36]-[41]. One study found that many consumers searching for health information online trusted the advice and resources they received [42], even though 70 percent of studies in a comprehensive review of health website ratings indicated that quality was a concern on the Internet [43]. For these reasons that more efforts have to be made to disseminate information about the proper use of nutrition labels by the concerned agencies such as the SFDA and the Ministry of Health (MOH) through social media platforms.

The study also reveals that the majority of the college students claimed reading nutrition labels. However, those who reported not reading the nutrition labels stated that the lack of understanding of the information found in the label was the main reason for not doing so, which is consistent with findings by Yang et al. [44], where literate consumers were more likely to read nutrition labels than those who were illiterate.

Furthermore, a high percentage of the college students who do not read nutrition labels reported that there is no need to read them. This might indicate that they do not know the reasons for having nutrition information on the label. These findings might indicate the need to increase students' knowledge about nutrition labels by conducting more educational campaigns as they effectively improve students' knowledge about nutrition labels [45].

A significant relationship between nutrition label awareness and the decision to acquire and consume food products was also revealed among the students. De-Magistris et al. [46]

evaluated a theoretical model describing why people follow healthy eating practices and, in particular, determining how the utilization of nutritional labels influences this behavioral pattern. The findings revealed that people who understand and read nutritional labels more frequently have healthier eating habits, such as evading snacks between meals, consuming less salt, and avoiding fat. The factors that explain label use were shown to be significant: health knowledge, unhealthy condition, and awareness of the relationship between diet and health. Kreuter and colleagues [47] came to a similar conclusion after demonstrating a consistent association between patients' label reading and eating behaviors. These findings may imply that being aware of nutrition labels encourages people to examine the details on the labels before purchasing food items. Thus, increasing students' awareness about nutrition labels is a factor that should be considered to promote nutrition labels use. Thus, increasing students' awareness about nutrition labels is a factor that should be considered to promote nutrition labels use.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings revealed that awareness of the nutrition label and the ability to read the label information significantly affect students' decision to buy food products. Therefore, this study provides valuable information to relevant stakeholders in designing effective educational programs and awareness campaigns about importance the understanding nutrition labels, especially among youths or young adults.

The limitation of this study is that only students from one of the university's colleges were included giving only a tiny sample size. The results, therefore, were insufficient and not generalizable to college students in Saudi Arabia, and further studies are needed with a larger population, including students from all the other colleges and universities in the country. However, the study provides a good backbone for further research and provides some preliminary data on this subject.

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