



# The process of making trust related judgements through interaction with food labelling



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 August 2015

Received in revised form 20 June 2016

Accepted 23 June 2016

### Keywords:

Consumer

Labelling

Food

Trust

Policy

## ABSTRACT

There is both empirical and theoretical research supporting the idea that consumers' interaction with food labelling impacts on their trust in the food system and its actors. This paper explores *the process by which* consumers' interpretation of, and interaction with, labelling results in the formation of trust related judgements. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 Australian consumers were conducted. Theoretical sampling was used to gather a wide range of consumer perspectives. Real food packages were used as prompts for discussion in interviews, with one interview section requiring participants to examine particular products while thinking aloud. Process and thematic coding were used in transcript analysis. Labelling was seen by participants as a direct and active communication with 'labellers'. The messages communicated by individual label elements were interpreted more broadly than their regulatory definitions and were integrated during the process of making sense of labelling. This enabled participants to form trust related judgements through interaction with labelling. Finally, product and consumer characteristics varied participants' judgements about the same or similar label elements and products. Divergence in consumer and regulatory interpretations of labelling creates a situation where labelling may be both fully compliant with all relevant legislation and regulation, and still be perceived as misleading by consumers. This suggests that the rational frameworks that policy seeks to overlay on consumers when considering food labelling regulation may be hindering consumer belief in the trustworthiness of labellers. Policy must recognise the different, yet equally legitimate, ways of interpreting labelling if it is to foster, and not undermine, consumer trust in the food system generally.

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## 1. Introduction

For consumers in many industrialised countries, personal encounters with food producers and regulators are a rarity. The operation of the food system is so far from everyday thought that the vast majority of consumers are unable to even name the bodies responsible for its regulation (FSANZ, 2008). Yet the entire cycle of food production and consumption is a high risk endeavour (Speybroeck et al., 2015). Food consumption involves both high vulnerability to, and uncertainty regarding, food risks for consumers (Verbeke et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2012). Thus with very little relative personal control to manage perceived risks in practical terms (Dixon and Banwell, 2004), trust in the food system is essential. Food labelling is one of the primary methods of contact with

the food system for most consumers (FSANZ, 2008) (see Fig. 1 for relevant definitions), with industry and government primarily seen as 'labellers', or the face of the food system (Tonkin et al., 2016). Thus gaining an understanding of *how* food labelling influences trust in food system actors is important. This paper reports an exploratory, qualitative study investigating *the process by which* consumer interaction with food labelling influences their trust related judgements about labellers.

That consumers interpret labelling information in an effort to come to a purchasing decision is axiomatic. Consumers seek and utilise factual information relating to product characteristics, for example ingredients lists, in making food choices. However a further role of labelling, unrelated to food choice, has been suggested; one made possible by locating food labelling at the interface of consumers and the food system. Einsiedel (2002) proposes that food labelling is an avenue for building and restoring consumer confidence in food systems. Similarly, in a Government commissioned report on food labelling in Australia Blewett et al. (2011)

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Fig. 1. Definitions of labelling and label element.

explicitly state that food labelling reinforces consumer knowledge of, and trust in, the food system. As such, this paper explores the dimension of labelling interpretation that does not relate directly to consumer attitudes or purchasing decisions. Herein we take a novel perspective and examine *the process by which* the interaction consumers have with labelling influences their trust related judgements about labellers. We use 'interpret' to define occasions where consumers read and generate a simple message from a label element. 'Interaction' refers to the much larger meaning making process, where other factors influence the meaning consumers make from this interpretation.

In conceptualising trust this paper predominantly utilises the perspective of Lewis and Weigert (1985). Lewis and Weigert (1985) emphasise trust is a social concept, and not a purely psychological construct as presented in much psychometric research aiming to measure trust. Therefore in its social context, it is often too simplistic to frame trust as a dichotomy of 'trust' and 'distrust', but rather trust is a generalised social reality that can be strengthened or weakened through social interaction (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). As such, trust is not a variable but a multidimensional and complex process that is reflexively worked on in the maintenance of social relations (Khodyakov, 2007).

In this conceptualisation, trust is seen as having multiple bases; 'It has distinct cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions which are merged into a unitary social experience' (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). The cognitive base for trust can be thought of as our choice to trust and our reasons for doing so—our 'evidence' of trustworthiness. Complementary to the cognitive base of trust is the emotional base; this affective foundation for trust is the emotional bond between the trustor and the person, group or system in whom they place trust (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). The delineation of the affective and cognitive dimensions is not meant to suggest however that the affective aspect is not cognitive; affective states can be founded on cognitive components (Jones, 1996). The cognitive and emotional bases of trust are interconnecting and reciprocally supporting (Mollering, 2006), but individually more or less relied upon in different social situations (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). As such, we might suggest trust in the food system is more reliant on the cognitive bases of trust given its relatively impersonal nature. However we can see that the emotional base is also foundational for trust in the food system through the outcome of its violation – the emotional indignation, often resulting in outrage,

with which the public responds to perceived breaches of trust in food systems. An example of this is that supermarket and grocery stores consistently rank in the top 10 industries for consumer complaints to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)<sup>1</sup> (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2015). 'Trust in everyday life is a mix of feeling and rational thinking, and so to exclude one or the other from the analysis of trust leads only to misconceptions that conflate trust with faith or prediction' (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p. 972, emphasis in original).

While not wholly explaining trusting behaviour, indicators of perceived trustworthiness influence these bases for trust and therefore are important in the formation and maintenance of trusting relations (Barber, 1983; Mollering, 2006). Mollering (2006, p. 48) suggests a trustworthy actor is someone who 'is able and willing and consistent in not exploiting the trustor's vulnerability' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Poppe and Kjaernes (2003, p. 89) state that 'without much doubt, truth-telling is a valid trust dimension'. Perceived abuses of trust, such as manipulation or deception of trustees, influence how trustworthy a social actor is seen to be (Khodyakov, 2007; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Therefore here, we encompass consumer judgements of credibility, truthfulness, honesty and willingness to be trustworthy (or absence of this in the form of deception and manipulation) with the phrase 'trust related judgements', and identify these as judgements which impact assessments of the trustworthiness of social actors (herein labellers). While we can never completely know whether the trusted party is indeed trustworthy, and as such trusting always requires a leap of faith (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979; Simmel, 1978), trust is dynamic and trust related judgements can be updated and reflexively considered when new information is presented, for example through social interaction (Hobbs and Goddard, 2015; Mollering, 2006). Importantly, this may not always take the form of analytical and systematic consideration, with affective responses that 'occur rapidly and automatically' an important and useful pathway for decision making (Slovic et al., 2004, p. 312). As consumer encounters with food labelling may be thought of as social interactions, here we focus on *the process*

<sup>1</sup> The ACCC is responsible for enforcing the Competition and Consumer Act 2010, which promotes fair trade in markets to protect consumers and businesses. Complaints and inquiries may relate to unfair trading or unsafe products. Misleading and deceptive conduct in food labelling is addressed by the ACCC.

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