



Unclarity confusion and expiration date labels in the United States: A consumer perspective



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Expiration dates
Unclarity confusion
Semi-structured interviews
Thematic analysis
Dynamic consumer response framework
Hermeneutical interpretation

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses findings from a qualitative study about the role played by unclarity confusion related to expiration dates in the purchase of perishable grocery products from the perspective of consumers in the United States. Participants emphasized that expiration dates provide important point-of-purchase information that facilitates consumer decision-making at the shelf when tasting or smelling the product for freshness is not an option. Issues related to understanding the meaning of expiration dates, confusion caused by varying formats and how this confusion produces affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences are also highlighted. Based on these findings, this paper presents a conceptual framework explicating the role of unclarity confusion surrounding expiration dates on the consumers' path to purchasing perishable grocery products. We expect that our findings and proposed framework will allow for more exploration of the use of expiration dates, highlight the consequences faced because of unclarity confusion caused by expiration dates, and call attention to opportunities for retailers and manufacturers to play a larger role in ensuring consumers can make better informed decisions at the grocery shelf.

Labels can help some people sometimes in some cases, if they have the knowledge or motivation to use the information, which may or may not be in a format they can understand (Rotfeld, 2009, p. 375).

1. Introduction

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) holds the responsibility to ensure that food sold in the United States is safe, wholesome, and appropriately labeled to guide consumers while making purchase and consumption decisions. Food Policy in the United States includes several rules and guidelines about different types of food labeling requirements such as net quantity of contents, ingredients, food allergens, nutrition labeling, manufacturer/distributor information, country of origin, flavors, colors, and nutrition claims that influence food well-being (Block et al., 2011). Nonetheless, food policy mandated by the FDA does not include universal regulations for date labels

signaling the freshness of perishable grocery products.

An expiration date ² label provides valuable information for consumers by serving as a freshness indicator. Consumers feel safe consuming fresh products that do not contain disease-inducing microorganisms and other pathogens (Fortin et al., 2009). Checking expiration dates reduces the risk of purchasing a stale, degraded product, which could potentially affect a consumer's health negatively. For retailers and marketers, expiration dates can influence product acceptability (Wansink and Wright, 2006), inventory management, store image, and the consumer's confidence in the brand (Harcar and Karakaya, 2005). However, there is unclarity around expiration date labels, due to a lack of uniform display and format ³ from manufacturers and marketers (Harcar and Karakaya, 2005; Tsiros and Heilman, 2005).

Further, food policy in the United States governs food production and pricing systems (agricultural policy), food production, storage, and transportation systems (food safety policy), and information about nutrients that contribute to a healthy diet (nutrition labeling policy)

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² According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2015), expiration dates "refer to best quality and are not safety dates. Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome, and of good quality if handled properly".

³ The USDA also provides the following definitions for various types of expiration date formats: sell by (date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires); best before (date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date); use by (date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product) (USDA, 2015).

(Block et al., 2011). However, there is no federal food policy related to expiration dates of perishable grocery products (except for infant formula) in the United States. On the other hand, the key European Union (EU) legislation for food date labeling (Directive 2000/13/EC) defines two types of durability indicators: (1) best before, i.e., the period within which the food will not be stale, which signifies freshness or quality of the food, and (2) use by, i.e., the period within which the food will not have harmful microbiological activity that could lead to food poisoning, which signifies safety (DEFRA, 2011). The EU also has mandatory labeling requirements such as making labels clear, conspicuous, legible, and indelible.

Further, a product cannot be sold after its use by date has passed, whereas a food past its best before date is considered safe to consume, but might not be at its best quality. In the EU, the manufacturer is responsible for setting the appropriate dates along with proper storage instructions. Altering or removing a date label or selling food after its use by date is an offense. The EU directive also requires manufacturers to follow a date format, i.e., best before day/month/year or use by day/month/year. Moreover, the date label should appear within the same field of vision as that of other legally required information. Overall, unlike the United States, the EU directive provides a very clear and systematic legal approach to date labeling. This can reduce confusion around it and allow for more informed decision-making at the shelf, minimizing uninformed decisions and potential risks that come with lack of information or clarity.

Despite the lack of a federal food policy in the U.S. specifically related to expiration dates on perishable products and the confusion surrounding freshness and safety of food products, few scholarly attempts have tried to explain how this can impact a consumer's grocery shopping experience. Many questions remain unanswered. The purpose of this research is to fill one such research gap, that is, to understand inconsistencies of the expiration date labeling in the United States, the confusion it can cause, and the consequences of this confusion based on consumer experiences with expiration dates. By using Pluzinski and Qualls's (1986) dynamic consumer response framework and unclarity confusion literature as a guide, we propose a generative conceptual framework that explains the challenges associated with expiration date labels in the U.S., the confusion they cause, and the resulting consequences. We believe the findings will draw the attention of policy makers to the importance of uniformity in food date labeling and consumer education about the role of expiration dates in the purchase, consumption, and proper storage and handling of perishable grocery products. This can eliminate or reduce confusion, help consumers to make informed decisions when it comes to purchasing perishable grocery products, and, as a result, alleviate dissonance and dissatisfaction. In short, the study highlights that existing expiration date labels can impede the decision-making process at the grocery retail shelf, largely due to unclear meanings of freshness and food safety. This further causes consumer confusion and unfavorable consequences. This qualitative study also extends consumer confusion literature into the grocery shopping context and confirms arguments from previous quantitative research that expiration dates pose issues to consumers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perishable grocery products and expiration dates

There is a small, emerging field of research that aims at understanding the role of expiration dates in consumer behavior. Few studies (Cardello and Schutz, 2003; Harcar and Karakaya, 2005; Miranda and Kónya, 2006; Wansink and Wright, 2006) have focused attention on consumers' awareness and perceptions of expiration dates. One significant contribution, from Tsiros and Heilman (2005), investigates the consumers' frequency of checking expiration dates and their willingness to pay (WTP) for perishable grocery products as they

approach their expiration dates. They found that consumers' date-checking frequency increases with an increase in the functional, performance, and physical risks associated with purchasing that product. That is, WTP varies with the product category and the consumers' experience with it. In addition, consumers' WTP also depends on consumers' demographic factors and post-purchase efforts to slow down the food aging process. Thus, Tsiros and Heilman developed a base for future research in this field by investigating consumers' WTP for an aging perishable product and the impact of perceived risk on this behavior. Likewise, Sen and Block (2009) went a step further by examining the role of endowment in the consumption of products past their freshness dates. They posited that holding the differential costs implicit in ownership constant, consumers are more likely to consume a product past its freshness date when they own it and thereby provide an insight into why people consume expired products. These contributions helped to extend expiration dates from a purely purchase behavior role to one of importance in overall consumer behavior.

Furthermore, Gruber et al. (2016) recently offered a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of food waste and the role of expiration dates therein from the store manager's perspective, mainly in the European context. They found that managers experience a moral burden and discomfort when food is wasted and that autonomy and flexibility could be solutions to this issue. They also found that managers' struggles with food waste arise not only from the retail environment, but also from the larger regulatory and societal environment, of which, the legal aspects related to food date labeling are crucial. Nevertheless, there is still a gap in the literature about understanding consumer experiences with the ambiguity associated with expiration dates, the confusion it causes, the associated consequences, and the resulting policy implications in the context of the United States. Accordingly, the present research uses qualitative interpretive research to explore consumer experiences, perspectives, and opinions about expiration dates and the confusion surrounding them.

2.2. Consumer confusion

Consumer confusion is an "uncomfortable state of mind that primarily arises in the pre-purchase phase and which negatively affects consumers' information processing and decision making abilities and can lead to consumers making sub-optimal decisions" (Walsh, 1999, p. 24). Consumer confusion has been investigated in several areas and markets such as, telecommunications (Leek and Chansawatkit, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2000), personal computers (Leek and Kun, 2006), wine (Casini et al., 2008; Drummond and Rule, 2005), watches (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1997); higher education (Drummond, 2004), online hotel booking (Matzler and Waiguny, 2005), and nutrition labels (Spiteri Cornish and Moraes, 2015). However, the role of consumer confusion has not been investigated in the context of expiration dates and grocery shopping.

Further, consumer confusion is driven by similarity confusion, overchoice or overload confusion, and unclarity confusion (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2005; Walsh and Mitchell, 2010). Similarity confusion is caused by similar brand or product attributes, whereas overload confusion is caused by overly information-rich environments or the availability of a wide choice of alternatives (Mitchell et al., 2005). Unclarity confusion is caused by ambiguous, complex, and conflicting information (Mitchell et al., 2005). Several researchers have investigated the role of confusion caused by similarity, overload, and/or overchoice of products and information (for example, Casini et al., 2008; Drummond, 2004; Drummond and Rule, 2005; Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1997; Turnbull et al., 2000); however, there is still a need for more research in the area of unclarity confusion.

Expiration date labels on perishable grocery products are indepen-

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