Qualitative Research to Explore Peoples’ Use of Food Labelling Information

Ipsos MORI

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Qualitative Research to Explore People's Use of Food Labelling Information: Final report
Prepared by, Gemma Enright, Hugh Good, and Nick Williams

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Executive Summary
Executive Summary

1. Background and Objectives

The Food Standards Agency commissioned Ipsos MORI to provide an evidence base of what information people actually look at when shopping, as opposed to what they say they look at. The main objectives were to:

- Determine what information people refer to when shopping, and to what extent different types of labelling information effects purchase decisions
- To particularly explore behaviour around Country of Origin information
- Highlight any issues regarding the user-friendliness of food labels
- Investigate how people interact with labels in the home
- Develop insights based on advanced technologies such as eye-tracking

2. Method

Research was conducted across the UK in five phases, which built upon the work undertaken in the previous stage(s):

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3. Key findings

Very low engagement with food labels for habitual purchases.

As a minimum requirement people need and want to see clearly the food's description, the brand, the use by/ best before date, and the price.

Consumers know that words lie, pictures mislead, and marketers tell stories. Consequently, the overriding principle of the product description and food packaging is to let the product offer direct sensory evidence of its appearance and qualities. In the supermarket the sight of food is the primary indexical evidence available to the customer. Transparency/visibility becomes an overriding goal in food packaging because it enables direct, sensory product evidence; validation of quality claims; comparison to competitor product; and imagined consumption.

The accompanied and eye-tracked shops demonstrated that consumers are very tactile with food where they can be – e.g. with fruit and vegetables - and the transparency of meat packaging was especially important and used by consumers as a shortcut for judging food quality.

Price can eclipse other aspects of the label, especially for lower income consumers. Those with high income displayed different attitudes to those with lower income in terms of the perceived options available to them. Consumers in lower paid jobs paid more attention to special price offers, and thus respectively paid less attention to food labelling directly.

Individual dietary requirements are key in determining the use of and engagement with different elements of food labels.

The level and extent of information required is often driven by specific dietary needs or underlying health conditions – e.g. health (allergies, high blood pressure), religion (kosher), or morals/choice/lifestyle (vegetarian, vegan, dieting), and thus a need to hone in on particular information.

Consumers avoid reading the back of food packs by using words or symbols on the front as ‘beacons' to quickly guide shopping.

Any particular consumer has his or her own agenda and is unlikely to be interested in the totality of labelling. The consumer's goal is to exercise their selective attention, securing key elements of information, while ignoring the broad mass of material (i.e. they develop 'shortcuts' to information).

Some participants reported struggling with the volume of information provided on food packages suggesting that there was simply too much. The challenge is that different consumers think that different elements are superfluous, and that different individual elements constitute overcrowding or overshadowing to different consumers.

Because it serves a range of descriptive tasks (e.g. detailing food ingredients and constituents, explaining how to cook the food) food labelling is a hybrid text, presenting a range of different vocabularies and sets of assumptions. Some of the component messages may be patronizingly simple whereas some descriptions of ingredients and constituents may
presume a level of knowledge that the general consumer may lack. For example how-to-use instructions can seem simplistic and patronizing. A soup can carry the advice:

- Check that the product is hot before serving
- Stir halfway through
- IMPORTANT take care when removing hot liquids from microwave
- Eat well
- Microwave ovens vary

Elsewhere on the can, consumers are offered quantitative information about the nutritional properties of food in technical language they generally did not understand – e.g. the difference between ‘kJ’ and ‘kcal’. Consumers displayed an awareness of basic nutritional issues - they knew they should reduce their intake of salt and fat, and increase their intake of fruit, vegetables and fibre - but very few respondents understood the differences between saturated, unsaturated and monounsaturated fats, grasped the basics of cholesterol, or could say what omega oils are. Ingredient lists naming preservatives, sweeteners, colorants and other complex organic compounds often exceeded the comprehension of most consumers.

**Non regulated marketing claims and graphics can mislead, overshadow, clutter, or disengage consumers with mandatory legislation.**

Across different retailers and food manufacturers there are strong consistencies across food packaging, including the packaging solution, colour choices for background and text, ‘markers’ showing variations within the type, types of promotional claim, imagery, and types of brand name. This exposes the apparent paradox of competing retailers and manufacturers sharing the same packaging conventions, and thus, to an extent, co-operating with each other.

Food labelling has become a collage of disparate, sometimes competing messages. It is a mixed-motive medium - some product messages are cautionary in intent, enforced by regulation. But most are voluntary, exuberant, self-expressive and self-promotional.

Semiotic analysis offered some theoretical insight as to why the use of ‘British’ on a packet of chicken may not convey the country of origin to the consumer but may convey an implication of quality, and why ‘local’ can be understood to convey ‘organic’ or ‘high quality’ despite the actual definition of local differing from that of organic.

The packaging materials and colours used can have a strong impact in the way messages are interpreted. Whilst many of the consumers in the sample equated basic packing, thin unbleached cardboard (Tesco Value), lots of white space (Sainsbury’s Basics) with low quality goods, other consumers thought the use of more basic packaging signified a higher degree of eco-awareness and were thus higher quality products.

**Large store brands reassure on safety.**

There is an overriding assumption that the supermarket ‘brand’ guarantees a level of food ‘safety’, alleviating consumers of the responsibility to review labelling to ensure their safety.

It was noted that Scottish Co-op stores put lots of individual assurance aspects under their general Co-op ‘do-good’ umbrella – everything is fairly sourced, bought, farmed etc so
consumers can buy what they want from one source. Across the UK as a whole, Waitrose and M&S are near to achieving something similar (e.g. M&S’ free range umbrella). Fair trade and being locally farmed are yet to be included under large store umbrella reassurances.

**Well known brands have a halo effect – signifying quality and safety, and distracting from other information**

Because they are trusted well known brands benefit from a halo effect. Consumers assume that well known brands have reached and surpassed minimum standards with regard to the food’s quality and safety. Information, or claims, about quality and safety provided on the packaging are not sought out by consumers because of this inherent assumed trust that the product meets or surpasses an appropriate standard.

**The importance of food label information increases when buying for other people, particularly babies and young children**

People spent the most time looking at baby food labels, and when buying for other people. Generally participants tended to look out for reassurance of specific qualities such as no E numbers, no caffeine, and low fat (or most frequently ‘lite’).

‘Best before’ and ‘use by’ are confused terms - Low understanding leads to relaxed attitudes towards date labels once in the home.

People use a minimal amount of food labelling in the home when preparing familiar or routine meals, using familiar ingredients or cooking methods. The information people say is important to them when buying food is not necessarily supported by what is actually in their cupboards, or how they actually use the information once in the home - particularly with regards to date labels.

There is a lack of understanding of the implication of the date label with regard to using, freezing and storing food, especially for opened pre-sealed foods.

There is less concern about date labels on canned and pre-frozen items, for example, consumers exert the attitude ‘you can’t go wrong with tins’.

**Country of origin information is not a priority when shopping in the supermarket.**

The majority of consumers are unaware that country of origin is defined according to ‘location of last substantial change’

When shopping, consumers are steered by ingrained preconceptions about where foods come from, predisposing them to notice text and symbols which reconfirm assumptions, for example, country flags.
Country of origin information impacts on different levels:

Safety

Safety is a universal priority for consumers, but they are easily reassured about safety. (i.e. supermarket umbrella assurances).

The label ‘British’ is an important benchmark, particularly for meat, and the British flag acts as a general umbrella assurance for food miles (referred to by consumers as air miles), farming standards, and even organic.

This results in lots of blurring of meanings (e.g. animal welfare is implicit in organic) and low engagement with specific formal symbols denoting quality such as the Red Tractor.

Animal welfare

Consumers are reassured by ‘British’, but engage more with terms such as ‘organic’/'free range' if they are prioritising animal welfare.

Animal welfare can be important to people but is rarely a factor in choice as consumers feel they are not given the information.

Food (air) miles

Consumers are reassured by ‘British’ but food miles are low priority when shopping. Consumers say they are concerned about food miles, but their behaviour suggests otherwise.

Authenticity

Authenticity is important for products which are, in consumers' minds strongly associated with a particular country.

Country of origin information has greater influence in certain categories such as meat where some consumers feel more comfortable with locally sourced products.

Some consumers say they prefer to buy meat from the local butchers or farmers markets rather than the supermarket due to the connotations of freshness. However not all consumers who expressed this preference actually purchase their meat from local butchers or farmers markets.
Background, Objectives, and Method
Background, Objectives & Method

1. Background

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a study to investigate what information people really look at on food labels, and why people look at particular pieces of information.

Several recent research projects have been conducted by the FSA which investigated peoples’ use and understanding of labels on food products. However these projects all used relatively traditional methodologies such as focus groups and questionnaires which, by their nature, explore what consumers say they do, rather than observing, and discussing, their actual behaviour. An FSA commissioned study in May 20081 investigated the potential of eye-tracking technology as a way of discerning what food packaging information shoppers really look at in a real world setting, rather than relying on what they say they look at. The study concluded that eye-tracking is feasible in the natural environment of the supermarket, and is capable of differentiating particular food labels amongst the wide range of information found on food packaging.

2. Objectives & aims of the research

Overall, the aim of the research was to find out what main shoppers think about and refer to when shopping for habitual and first time purchases, and how they behave according to the format and usability of labels.

The present study aimed to develop insights based on more advanced technologies such as eye-tracking, to investigate actual behaviour and establish what information people really look at (as opposed to what they say they look at). In particular, the aim was to determine what information on food labels people refer to when shopping, how much the information is used and to what extent different types of labelling information effect purchase decisions.

Whilst the primary focus was to study the use of non-nutritional labelling or information, the use of nutrition labelling was inevitably part of people’s behaviour and so is included in the report where relevant, and especially where it helps to illustrate the interpretation of other elements of the label. Particular focus was paid to country of origin labelling.

Specific objectives were to:

- Determine what information people refer to when shopping, and to what extent different types of labelling information effects purchase decisions
- To explore behaviour around Country of Origin information
- Highlight any issues regarding the user-friendliness of food labels
- Investigate how people interact with labels in the home
- Develop insights based on advanced technologies such as eye-tracking

1 Rawson, D., Janes, I., & Jordan, K (2008). Pilot study to investigate the potential of eye-tracking as a technique for FSA food labelling behaviour research. Prepared by Eye-tracker for and on behalf of the Food Standards Agency
3. Method

Research was conducted in five phases, which built upon the work undertaken in the previous stage(s):

- 15 non eye-tracked accompanied shopping trips (in real life context)
- 36 eye-tracked shopping trips (in real life context)
- 15 filmed accompanied meals (ethnographic home visits and interviews)
- 20 eye-tracked tasked shops in Ipsos MORI’s Retail Lab, and 6 ‘follow-up’ eye-tracked tasked purchases

Semiotic & packaging analysis

Participants were recruited for each phase of the research and were not involved in more than one phase.

Non eye-tracked accompanied shops

Non eye-tracked accompanied shopping trips were conducted with individual consumers. During the accompanied shop the accompanying researcher observed the consumer in real time, and where appropriate the consumer talked through their shopping process as they shopped. People can forget about or neglect to mention the small things that make a difference to their behaviour, and this ‘commentary’ with some more detailed probing helped to get inside the consumer’s frame of mind and decision making throughout the shopping process.

This ‘broad brush’ initial stage of the research acted as a useful steer for issues to develop in the subsequent eye-tracked shopping trips, and in framing the range of users. Non eye-tracked shops identified that consumers are influenced by price, use short cuts to information, and want to view meat products and handle fruit and vegetables. Following the shop the researcher would discuss with the participants their shopping behaviour and the reasons for that behaviour. The location for this de-brief varied, and depended upon participant preference with the majority taking place in a café or coffee shop near to, or in, the supermarket.

Eye-tracked shopping trips

Eye tracking was used in stage 2 of the research. Each eye-tracked shop was unaccompanied and participants undertook their main or top up shop as normal.

Eye tracking pinpoints and records precisely where shoppers are looking. Each participant wore a pair of eye tracking glasses which recorded onto a mini recorder the participant wore. Due care was taken to ensure that participants were able to shop as normally as possible and did not feel under time pressure to complete their shop. On returning from their shop the researcher...
talked through and explored their behaviour, whilst reviewing with the participants some of the
eye tracking footage of the shopping trip they had just completed. This discussion and review of
footage took place in a mobile viewing suite, parked in the supermarket’s car park or near the
supermarket.

Eye-tracking footage and subsequent interviews provided information to allow the further
development of the spectrum of users and the impact of habitual behaviour. This method
also clarified understanding of consumers’ interaction with country of origin information, and
enabled a fuller analysis of the use of ‘short cuts’ and the impact of price and its ability to
overshadow other aspects of labelling.

Filmed accompanied meals (ethnographic home visits and interviews)

Accompanied meals were conducted with consumers in their homes at meal times to explore
the use of food labelling when preparing food and at the meal table, and how this use of labels
at home might impact upon subsequent behaviour at the next time of purchase.

The researcher observed and filmed each family, couple or individual recruited for breakfast,
lunch or their evening meal, and noted how food labelling was used (or not used) during the
preparation and consumption of that meal. The researcher also made note of the contents of
participants’ cupboards and fridge – especially the contradictions between what people say is
important to them when they buy food and what they have already bought. After the meal, the
researcher asked questions about their observations. The ‘seriousness’ brought by the camera
encouraged participants to let the researcher explore their homes.

Accompanied meals identified when and how consumers put away shopping on return from
the shop, provided further insight into the spectrum of label users, and enabled exploration
of the variation between actual and reported purchase behaviour, by means of examining
cupboard contents following a discussion. Observations highlighted inconsistencies between
the importance of date labels when purchasing food in the store and consumers’ use of them
once in the home.

Tasked purchases in Ipsos MORI’s Retail Lab

Participants were tasked with specific questions in the Ipsos MORI Retail Lab.

The Retail Lab is a mock store which can be laid out to represent aisles within a variety of different
types of outlets. The layout of the store can be changed for different scenarios to allow different
types of tests. Whilst it is not a ‘real’ retail environment this method was chosen as it is an
ideal tool to use to assist in analysing more specific areas of food labelling.

Individually, participants were tasked with making
three selections from the shelves within the Retail Lab. Participants wore field of vision glasses
(a less sophisticated version of eye-tracking which tracks the line of sight) and after the
purchases were made, participants took part in an interview using the field of vision data to
unpick, discuss, and explore their use of food labels in their selection process.
The final **six tasked purchases** in the Retail Lab were eye-tracked, which enabled further and more detailed exploration regarding country of origin, best before dates, and wording/symbols perceived as denoting ‘quality’, which were highlighted throughout the progression of the study as areas requiring depth of exploration.

Tasked shopping questions in the Retail Lab were the following:

1. *Find a product that you consider gives you information about its country of origin*
2. *Find a milk product you can use every day next week*
3. *Find a ‘high quality’ and a ‘low quality’ cereal*

The tasked purchases allowed further development of the role of wider contextual issues and explore directly the actual impact this had on the use of labelling. The findings indicated that consumers often use preconceived assumptions about country of origin to guide their purchases, honing in on certain information such as country flags to reconfirm these assumptions.

**Semiotic analysis**

The final element of the project was a semiotic analysis of food labels, used to complete the picture with regard to the role and impact of food labelling at the final stage in this research.

Semiotics is a desk based approach to the study of systems of communication and their meanings within the wider context - both in terms of society as a whole, individuals’ own experiences, likes, dislikes, and their terms of reference. The individual elements of food labels are not only collections of text and images but they can be described as being ‘signposts’ or ‘signs’. These signs are formed through the society that creates them.

By looking at different labels it is possible to identify and analyse the relationship between the signs and symbols and messages used and the cultural context in which it is operating. This can result in a much clearer understanding of the conventions that are in use in that particular market segment.

It is also often the case that a semiotic analysis not only lays out existing conventions, but is able to point out where and how new opportunities exist to reach the same target audiences.

The semiotic analysis ‘frames’ and places in context the issues previously identified from other elements of the research. It is a useful building block in that it allowed exploration into the labelling issues the research had identified within their cultural context rather than in isolation.

Semiotic analysis has been used in the present study as a thread to pull together the analysis, and it helps frame the understanding of the ways in which consumers use food labelling. In broad terms the semiotic analysis is a development of the inquisitive thinking that has underpinned the research throughout this project looking for the meaning, importance and impact in the ‘cues’ that are picked up by consumers.

For example, semiotic analysis indicated that text that is small and thus difficult to read may be being drowned out not only by physical means (i.e. the surrounding text being bigger) but by text that has a ‘bigger’ message; a message that is more relevant to that individual consumer. This may help to explain why the use of ‘British’ on a packet of chicken conveyed an implication of quality as well as the country of origin; and why ‘local’ can be understood to convey ‘organic’
or ‘high quality’. Despite the actual definition of ‘local’ differing from that of ‘organic’ the bigger message is more relevant to the individual consumer and a non literal meaning is inferred.

For further detail on research methodology, questions and sample design, see Appendix 1.
For the full semiotic analysis report, see Appendix 4.
Attitudes towards, and usage of, food and food labels
Attitudes towards, and usage of, food and food labels

The accompanied shops and eye-tracked shops revealed that not all consumers behave in the same way whilst making their purchase decisions. Three broad spectrums emerged from the research\(^2\), which exemplify different approaches to food and the level of engagement with food labels. These spectrums were ‘non-readers’; ‘common sense approach’; and ‘detail seekers’. Distinct differences were observed within groups as well as between groups.

Within the overall sample there is a sense that the level of interest in and engagement with the information supplied by food labels corresponds to the level of awareness and knowledge of food and nutrition more generally. Within the overall sample the baseline usage of food labelling is quite low.

1. Non readers

Lack of time, interest or need
Consumers who spent the least time looking at food labels tended to feel they had particularly limited time for shopping, and therefore for reading food labels. These consumers also showed a general disinterest in food, a lack of awareness of which foods are ‘healthy’, or the information which is available to them about food products.

Some people said they perceived little need to seek information about food, describing instead a ‘trial and error’ approach to shopping based on their own and their families’ taste preferences. These consumers tended not to be serious dieters, or suffer from allergies or other medical conditions which require special dietary considerations.

Price can eclipse other aspects of the label
Some participants were observed making spontaneous purchases without looking at the food label (particularly top-up shoppers or people buying lunch in smaller stores) – and their subsequent interviews revealed that these were most often motivated by a special price offer. In some cases special price offers overshadowed information pertaining to health, quality, or usage information.

Some consumers adopted an attitude where buying low priced food was the priority. These consumers genuinely knew very little about food and were not interested in reading labels – the offer was too much of a bargain for them to be concerned with what was in the food.

Other consumers within the non-reader group displayed a rather more dismissive attitude towards reading labels explaining that this is their way of avoiding the ‘guilt’ of knowing too

\(^2\) NB: these categorisations have been developed to aid understanding for the purpose of presenting findings of this study only. They are not derived from rigorous numbers and therefore cannot be generalised to the wider population.
much about a suspected lower quality food, in order to justify buying the lower priced food. These consumers approached food labels with the attitude of ‘what I don’t know can’t/won’t hurt me’.

**Word of mouth by friends negates the need for reading the label**

Advice and recommendations of friends, family, diet clubs, television, magazines and books were perceived as highly credible and negated the need for label reading. The advice of a good friend was an acceptable ‘short cut’ for consumers with a perceived lack of time and interest.
2. ‘Common sense’ approach

Most of the sample fell within this group. Very few people dismissed food labels completely and for most, shopping tended to be guided by their existing common sense or ‘knowledge’ (even if this knowledge is based on misconception) and by specific conditions, allergies, and other dietary requirements, which force them to be aware of certain food information.

**Consumers were happy with their choices although can be misguided**

In most instances participants said they are satisfied with the information they obtain from food labels, however not all were interpreting the meaning of information entirely correctly.

For example; one participant bought particular bread because it stated ‘brown bread’ - mistakenly assuming ‘brown bread’ meant ‘wholegrain’. Another participant picked up a yogurt marked ‘reduced fat’ assuming this meant low fat.

Ingrained assumptions about food, and repeated purchase of food based on these assumptions, evidently influenced shoppers’ engagement with and interpretation of particular information on food labels.

**Shoppers use ‘beacons’ to guide their shopping**

Within the ‘common sense’ group participants used specific words or symbols to help them quickly identify ‘approved’ food items.

Participants explained how they had come to associate certain symbols with the information they want to know, which then act as ‘beacons’ on subsequent shopping trips to make shopping more efficient. Specific wording or graphical images become ‘short cuts’ to information for the consumer - encouraging habitual purchase, but also providing instant reassurance on the suitability of new products without the need for reading the label in detail.

For example; a previous member of *Weight Watchers* used the Weight Watchers logo as a broad tool for informing food choices, allowing for other information on the labels to be pushed down the hierarchy of importance, even if there happened to be other information on the label that at closer inspection would have given deeper relevant information – *e.g.* nutritional information, glycaemic index indication, other health claims etc.

**Case study: Reliance on short-cuts**

A male consumer was observed making a misguided assumption about a sandwich based on the description on the front of the packaging. The participant claimed he was allergic to mayonnaise but actually bought a “cheese sandwich”, which on close inspection, actually contained mayonnaise. He had assumed that because “mayonnaise” was not specified in the description on the front of the packet the sandwich would not contain mayonnaise.

The danger of relying on shortcuts to information is that the consumer may never assimilate the full picture because the short cut negates the perceived need to engage with other aspects of the food label, especially the back of the pack.

The result is that people may consume, avoid, prepare, or store incorrectly certain foods based on ingrained misconceptions.

**Case study: Misunderstanding of food labels**

A dieter in the sample was advised by her dieting group to look out for low fat foods. Knowing also that she must avoid calorific foods, she formed the assumption that that “low fat” must equate to low calories, subsequently glossing over indications of high calories on food labels (such as high sugar, high GI, portion sizes in relation to the amount of fat/calories etc.).
The present study also found that consumers draw assumptions about food products from stereotypes, which predisposes them to notice particular aspects of the label. Selective visualisation of the packaging serves to back up their assumptions – e.g. participants said it was logical to assume that pasta is made in Italy, therefore seeing an Italian flag on the packet complied with expectations and signified authenticity.

**The impact of special dietary requirements**

The majority of label reading was driven by selective attention to specific information pertaining to a particular health condition or dietary requirement.

Use of food labelling was largely driven by underlying health conditions / requirements, religious beliefs and lifestyle choices – e.g. allergies, high blood pressure, vegetarian / vegan, dieting. Health issues heighten knowledge and awareness of particular foods to consume or avoid, and the severity of the condition determines the sophistication of information sought.

For example; a sufferer of high blood pressure wanted to know the actual salt content of the food and consulted the nutrition information chart; an individual of Muslim faith wanted to check the list of ingredients for gelatine; a less strict vegetarian was reassured on the suitability of a food product by simply seeing the green certified ‘V’ symbol.

“I need to be mindful of the balance between protein and carbs at all times. I’m a chocoholic but I can only eat a very specific amount after some carbohydrate (like Fudge or a Freddo). It’s really important that the quantity is displayed clearly, in grams”

(A diabetic, female, pre-family, Cardiff)
3. Detail Seekers

Food is central to well-being

Detail seekers were a small portion of the sample, and were differentiated from the majority by their passion for food, understanding of food labels, and stated need for a sophisticated level of information. These consumers stated a preference for buying food from farmers markets and local butchers, and mentioned various non-supermarket sources they interact with in order to find out about food, such as the internet, TV cookery/documentary programmes, nutrition and recipe books. Food plays an important role in their lives and is directly related to well-being, and during the purchase decision, price was secondary to the perceived quality.

Of the detail seekers, some understood labelling thoroughly, almost to the point of questioning the authenticity of all packaged food and favoured local farmers markets or smaller independent sources (e.g. farm shops, butchers, growing their own vegetables). Consuming high quality food revolves around the sense of worth associated with considering animal welfare, supporting local farmers, and eating truly authentic food.

Others within the detail seekers group were highly motivated to understand the information on food labels, with health and optimal nutrition as the focal point. For example, one participant reported browsing the detail on the labels of products to check for GM or artificial ingredients.

High awareness of information, but not always evident in behaviour

Detail seekers were highly aware of food labelling, and gave detailed rationalisations of purchases, but label reading was not always manifest in observed behaviour. For example; there was high awareness of the issue of food miles but observations in participants’ cupboards and in-store eye-tracking footage, revealed little evidence of considering food miles when shopping.

During the eye-tracked shops, detail seekers were not observed looking at food labelling necessarily more than other consumers, but they were able to articulate and explain the reasons for their food choices in the subsequent interviews in greater detail, and the selection process where they had read aspects of the label in the past.

Increasing media coverage of food issues – such as recent reporting of nutritional benefits of organic vs. non organic foods, Jamie Oliver’s healthy food in schools campaign, issues regarding European farming standards (e.g. battery hens) – and government encouraging healthy lifestyle messages (e.g. 5-a-day) were mentioned spontaneously by participants. This may mean that media coverage may eventually engage more people with information about food, and that they will use this information to make more informed food choices.
Detailed Findings
Detailed Findings

On the whole shoppers had low engagement with food labels in the store environment, and paid attention to only a minimal amount of food labelling when shopping.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a lack of perceived time, the distraction of special offers, trust in recommendations, or consumers’ own assumptions, can lead to this low engagement with food labels. The following sections in this chapter discuss consumers’ interaction with food labels in more detail.

1. Low engagement with food labels when shopping

The minimum information

The minimum amount of labelling consumers tended to look for and notice was the brand, a description of the product (such as the texture or the taste), the price, and the date label.

In post eye-tracked shopping interviews, many shoppers could not recall a single piece of labelling they attended to in-store, aside from very basic pricing and product brand labelling.

Consumers reported being satisfied with the information on the front of the label and felt they didn’t need to read any further, therefore making them unlikely to engage with other information on the back of the label.

The impact and interest in further food labelling information was determined by individual food needs and motivations, which linked to the participants’ knowledge of and interest in food, awareness of the information available on food labels, and the level of information required.

The impact of habituation and time on food purchasing

Many purchases made when shopping for food were habitual - both in terms of product, the time of day purchased, and shopper paths through a store - and the tendency and likelihood of reading labels on new/spontaneous food items varied depending on the consumers’ interest in and knowledge of food.

Shoppers making repeat purchases were unlikely to stop and consider information on a label, often having already ascertained the item’s suitability. In some cases this ‘prequalification’ of items had been carried out by someone else associated with the consumer at some point in the past e.g. the consumer’s parent who traditionally purchased a particular brand or product. It would therefore be deemed by the participant that this regularly purchased product is safe/ even potentially healthy, negating the need for the consumer to investigate the product’s labelling as the product is a ‘trusted family favourite’.

A perceived lack of time influenced the number of habitual vs. new purchases made. For example; consumers under time pressure, such as rushing in to buy their lunch or shopping with children, were less likely to browse for new foods and hence less likely to feel the need to evaluate food labelling. Especially within the convenience store eye tracking sample, shoppers were spending an absolute minimum amount of time evaluating food labelling.

“I never use labels in the morning, when I’m rushing to work and just popping in for lunch. I buy the same sandwich and fizzy drink every day”

(Female, Pre-family, Glasgow)
2. Selective attention to food labelling

It was evident that all aspects of food labelling were important to some degree, but few aspects were equally important to all consumers. The implication of this is that it is virtually impossible to describe a general approach to reading and engaging with food labels (and there is possibly a limited practical benefit of doing so due to such diversity of usage). However, there are numerous individual examples from the research demonstrating how specific aspects are used and understood, and which give insights into areas where there is room for further educating people to allow them to make better informed choices.

Information short cuts

Consumers across the sample used specific wording or symbols as ‘beacons’ to help them shop quickly, by negating the need to read the back of the labels.

Shoppers generally wanted quick and easy information to make shopping easier, and did not want to have to turn over food labels to find the information they required. Many did not want to look at nutrition information in detail, but wanted to be quickly reassured on specific elements so they could pick up the product quickly.

Most shoppers had therefore developed information ‘short cuts’ to label reading, which helped them to select ‘suitable’ products quickly. Shortcuts could be any easily identified visual reassurance, which symbolised what the consumer wanted to know at a glance. The symbols used varied depending on the motivations for purchase and the level of information required (i.e. dependant on the specifics and the severity of specific dietary requirements).

For example; a casual dieter in the sample referred to broad statements such as ‘low’ / ‘reduced’ fat / ‘lite’ as her guides to ‘suitable’ products, whereas a participant with high cholesterol required more detail - ‘> 3% fat’, plus the proportion of saturated fat.

“I look for ‘lite’ – that usually means it’s OK for my daughter”
(Male, older family, Glasgow)

“Low fat’ and ‘low’ salt are not convincing on their own. It’s like ‘no hydrogenated fat’ on Digestive Biscuits – that’s fine but I need to see what else is in there too”
(Male, young family, Belfast)

“I buy Kosher food, and I have to look for ‘gelatine’ in the ingredients on new products”
(Female, empty nester, London)

Legislation versus marketing

The supermarket shelf is a competitive environment and accordingly manufacturers are keen to present their product in the best possible light.

Such marketing claims often supply quick reassurances without providing the full picture. These non-governed claims can either inform the consumer or can lead to misconceptions because consumers perceive that they negate the need to read the back of the label. For
example ‘farm fresh produce’ provides a reassurance of quality or about how healthy the food is, without providing any specific information.

Manufacturers must also comply with regulations, and consumers sometimes perceived that ‘unnecessary’ information clutters the food label. Because of the reassurance provided by the marketing claims, consumers consider mandatory information as unnecessary. This behaviour is at odds with the government view that this is important information which the consumer needs to know\(^3\).

\(^3\) See Semiotics analysis in Appendix for further explanation on the issue with separating legislation and marketing.
3. Quality

Consumers are very tactile when shopping

Consumers were very tactile when selecting food produce, and being able to see food through the packaging was very important and used by participants as a shortcut for judging food quality – especially for meat, fruit and vegetables.

Consumers use umbrella assurances

There is an overriding assumption that large supermarket ‘brands’ (e.g., Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Waitrose, ASDA, M&S, Morrison’s) guarantee a level of food ‘safety’, alleviating consumers of the responsibility to review labelling to ensure the food’s safety.

Consumers assume that supermarkets have an obligation to, and a vested interest in, complying with government regulations regarding food labelling.

“The supermarket won’t sell anything that’s unsafe for you, they have to follow regulations. Anyway, they’d have too much to lose not to”
(Male, pre-family, Harrow)

Thus, many consumers feel they can safely ignore the majority of food labelling information on food products in major supermarket chains, because the supermarket assures a certain level of quality.

“There is no need to worry about reading food labels as someone else is worrying about the quality/safety of the food for me”
(Female, young family, Cardiff)

This attitude is reinforced by generally positive experiences with food products purchased by the majority of consumers - not paying attention to food labelling is seen by consumers as having limited negative consequences.

Umbrella in-store signage such as M&S’s broad sweeping statement (above the tills in certain stores) saying that all of its products use ‘free range eggs’, quickly communicates several messages to the consumer pertaining to the quality of its offering at the same time – ‘free range’ equates to good animal welfare, good nutrition, and ‘healthy’, which all equate to high quality.

Well known brands have a halo effect

Trusted brands can steer focus away from other label information, and evoke assumptions that familiar brands signify safe, good quality ingredients.

Participants looked less closely at branded products in the tasked purchases in the Retail Lab, glossing over less healthy indications. Consumers tended to assume superior health value in branded products compared to own label and Value equivalents. For example, when asked whether a branded high sugar and salty cereal with low fibre is better or worse quality
than an own label box of whole wheat flakes, participants still perceived the branded cereal to be of higher quality, despite being able to decipher higher and lower nutritional quality within a branded range of cereals.

“I assume branded products taste better and have been produced in a more controlled way” (Female, Retail Lab)

Quality is also a learned behaviour, full of deep rooted personal associations and emotional bonds. Trusted family favourites carry emotional ties - childhood memories, nostalgic moments like an anniversary, birthday, or holiday. Brand is very strong in this, offering a degree of constancy and standardisation which can easily be applied to other products under the same brand, and has a big impact on the perception of quality - eclipsing other messages about the quality.

For example branded cornflakes were chosen over retailer’s own brand equivalent even though the respondent admitted the nutritional information said all the same things, and equally, branded chocolate cereal was chosen in preference to own brand bran flakes even though the participant knew that nutritionally the product is inferior.

“My mum gave me Rice Crispies when I was a kid, it must be good for you” (Male, Retail Lab)

Impact, and role of, packaging materials and colour

The packaging materials used and the colours used also had a strong impact on the perceived quality of a product. Whilst many consumers equated basic packing, thin unbleached cardboard (e.g. Tesco Value), lots of white space (e.g. Sainsbury’s basics) with low quality goods, other consumers thought the use of more basic packaging signified a higher degree of eco-awareness and were thus higher quality products. Other consumers signified a masculine meaning from the use of basic packing reflecting the different cultural contexts of those different consumers.
4. Practical and navigational difficulties

Reading small font

Whilst the use of small font sizes on packaging can be problematic from a practical point of view (i.e., consumers with poor eyesight having practical difficulty reading the information presented), the use of small font sizes also has an impact in terms of the prominence of the signs presented, and can increase the impact of overcrowding and the competition between competing signs on the label. Indeed, people are likely to acquire more health requirements as they age, but their ability to read the labels decreases as they age. Older shoppers within the sample reported needing assistance with obtaining important health information from the food labelling that they were using.

Overshadowing

Whilst the physical proximity of other signs (text or pictures) may overshadow a food package and obscure the messages therein, the signs present on a label can also be obscured by elements that are added to the packet or shelf. The most significant example of this is the special offer pricing label ‘any 4 for £2’ or ‘£1’. The message presented is ‘this is exceptional value’ and this sign and its message overrides the other messages present (with the exception of the core description of the pack content and the date label), and thus it can make other information (signs) redundant. It would seem that there is a link between the impact of the special offer sign and the shelf labelling both in terms of the price label or the name it is assigned i.e. ASDA’s ‘roll back’ acts as a signified ‘exceptional offer’ sign and also can act as a substitute for the secondary information about the product, i.e. it is baked beans and there is an ‘exceptional value’ sign; this is all the information the consumer feels they need.

Overcrowding

Some consumers reported struggling with the volume of information provided on food packages suggesting that there was simply too much. Their response suggests some messages become confused by the multitude of information. Just as a road sign may be obscured by foliage or perhaps by another road sign, the messages on packets are being obscured by other information which is perceived as superfluous by consumers. As previously mentioned, the challenge is that different consumers think that different elements are superfluous – aspects of the food label that are valued by one consumer might be considered useless by another. Unless the information is essential to the individual, it is deemed unnecessary. The cultural values, economic drivers, aspirations and levels of knowledge all influence the meaning assigned by consumers to each component of the label, with each component working as a sign conveying a signified meaning.

Case study: Shopper accompanied by text reader

A case in Cardiff where the impact of text size was obvious was encountered where an older shopper with poor eyesight and health complications limiting their intake of salt and saturated fat intake required a family assistant to shop with them who could navigate food labelling. The assistant accompanied the shopper, reading the packing fine print to ensure the products being purchased met with their dietary requirements.

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4 Anything on a food packet that carries meaning can be regarded as a ‘sign’.
Competing with dominant graphics

Pictures can have a dominant effect, sometimes creating a misleading impression of the product and disengaging consumers with other information. For example, a certain nutritional supplement drink was perceived (and dismissed) as a diet shake by one participant due to the graphical image of a pink liquid in a glass on the packaging. The consumer subsequently did not notice that the product stated it’s endorsement by health care professionals next to the image, and turned their attention away from the label (demonstrated by eye-tracking).

Fear of disrupting the food inside

Some consumers did not want to turn over certain products, preventing them from reading the back of the label – particularly with ready meals, where several participants explained that they were avoiding getting the product on the cellophane.

Lack of comparative measures

Having comparable measures are influential in the consumers’ engagement with the claims on a food label, and a lack of such measures can cause participants to ignore certain information.

For example; one respondent during a tasked purchase in the Retail Lab stated that a ‘strength’ indicator of ‘4’ on a packet of tea was meaningless because there were no other reference points to offer sensory or indexical evidence of the tea and its qualities.

Additionally, claims such as ‘30% less fat’ were attractive to some shoppers whilst others remarked that without a measure of what came before, in order to compare the reduction, this information is meaningless. Claims such as ‘70 calories per bar’ were received more positively.
5. Engaging labelling formats

Such a huge diversity of food label information usage makes it difficult to generalise about ways in which to engage people with food labels. However, the research highlighted several common influences on purchase decisions.

The shortcuts participants looked for during their shopping trips varied greatly, although all tended to be either in a large font, a recognisable symbol, or a familiar format. Large fonts had stopping power, and familiar brands / brand ranges were deemed a ‘safe bet’.

“I know the varieties with less fat – I look for the things that say ‘healthy choice’”
(Female, empty nester, Belfast)

“I saw the green recycling triangle. I’m trying to reduce the amount I’m putting in my black bin, and I’m teaching my daughter about it. This is something she can look out for”
(Male, young family, top-up, Belfast)

In general, strong visual cues, such as ticks, endorsements (i.e. by organisations perceived by consumers to be independent and knowledgeable) influence purchases by providing instant positive reassurance, enhancing the credibility of the packaging message.

“It caught my eye because it mentioned it won a slimming award”
(Female, older family, Glasgow)

Simplicity had a strong impact, because it allowed the information to stand out more prominently from the label, giving it more stopping power.

“The [cereal bar] label is good because it clearly lists in large print the 4 ingredients. It makes me want to buy it”
(Male, young family, Belfast)
6. Buying for other people

People spent a lot of time looking at labels on baby food - purchases were strongly influenced by: ages/stages, preparation, percentage of natural ingredients, and whether the product was organic. Consumers are highly influenced by advice from others, and looked for shortcuts to indicate the required information.

“I want to see ‘70% apple, 30% pear’ in really big font”
(Male, young family, Belfast)

Participants were also observed placing an increased importance on nutrition information when shopping for other people generally, and especially when buying for children. When buying for other people participants tended to look out for reassurance of specific qualities such as no E numbers, no caffeine, and low fat (or most frequently ‘lite’). Information pertaining to organic, animal welfare, or food miles was deemed to be less important, and participants buying for large families (especially with teenagers) tended to state more emphasis on price than participants in other life stages.
7. Country of Origin Labelling

Low priority overall when shopping in the supermarket

Country of origin information was generally not a priority when shopping in the supermarket, although the information had more of an impact for certain types of food.

“The only thing I care about country of origin is where my beer comes from”
(Male, pre-family, Tonypandy)

“I’m not bothered where it [bread] comes from, the look and feel is more important”
(Female, older family, Banbury)

“The look and feel of fruit is more important than where it says it’s come from”
(Female, pre-family, Cardiff)

“I’d never buy French beef”
(Female, pre-family, London)

The impact of country of origin information relates to consumers’ attitudes towards 4 elements of quality:

Safety:
- A fairly universal (though not totally universal) priority.
- High engagement with British flag – a general hygiene factor
- Essential for meat

Animal welfare:
- Rarely a factor in choice and low engagement with specific formal symbols denoting quality such as the Red Tractor.\(^5\)
- Reassured by ‘British’, although consumers look for ‘organic’ / ‘free range’ when prioritising animal welfare
- Top of mind for chicken and eggs

Food miles:
- Reassured by British
- Consumers say this is a priority, but their actual behaviour suggests low engagement

Authenticity:
- High priority for certain categories of food, and consumers engage with information which confirms strong associations with particular countries, i.e., country flags
- Mentioning local farmers had a high impact where authenticity was implied

The use of country of origin labelling is a particularly interesting example of the way in which a consumer may take away a message that is different from the literal wording evident on the food packaging, i.e. the use of ‘British’ on a packet of chicken may not convey the country of origin to the consumer but it may convey an implication of quality. The quality is

\(^5\) The Red Tractor logo means a food has been made by a member of a food assurance scheme overseen by Assured Food Standards. This means it has had to meet certain standards when it was being made.
not measured or considered in absolute terms but instead is a relative measure and suggests a higher quality than a similar product which does not specify ‘British’. This will not be the case for all consumers and is dependant upon the meanings they assign, whether they associate ‘British’ with quality, whether they are concerned about quality, or, if quality is an irrelevant detail when compared to value. The gap between the literal message and the conveyed message depends on the individuals own ‘cultural context’, i.e. their own set of individual values, associations and concerns. Thus the gap between the literal meaning and the conveyed message may vary according to the individual who is reading the label. Similarly, this can explain why ‘local’ can be understood to convey ‘organic’ or ‘high quality’ despite the actual definition of local differing from that of organic.

Exhorting provenance is a cue to safety

The British flag is often regarded as a benchmark signifying ‘local’ (which reassures on food miles); high quality farming practices (which reassures on animal welfare); good nutrition (which reassures on health); and fresh. Stating ‘British’/ ‘Scottish’/ ‘Irish’ on the label clearly communicated ‘quality’ to participants in the tasked purchases in the Retail Lab, in the accompanied shopping trips and the eye tracked accompanied shopping trips. This was evident across all regions (including England and Wales). However, Scottish participants in particular equated ‘Scottish’ labelling as an indicator of very high quality, reporting a belief that Scottish farmed meat, and fish labelled as Scottish, would be of a higher standard than meat from elsewhere, with wider associations of quality being derived from particular types of produce such as Angus beef and Scottish salmon.

Many consumers feel more comfortable with ‘locally’ sourced products

Whilst individuals found it hard to define what local actually meant, with suggestions ranging from a twenty mile radius to ‘national’, the conjecture of quality being inherent in ‘local’ stems from a widely held assumption that local products are the freshest, contain fewer preservatives, are farmed more ethically, and, if bought from a butcher or farmer’s market, are the most authentic. Meat, fruit and vegetables from a local butcher / farmer’s market were perceived as more authentic and therefore better quality than the supermarket – mentions of local farms had a high impact in terms of reinforcing the authenticity of British produce. Local also carries a connotation of being natural or organic, which in turn implies superior nutrition, safety and animal welfare, (rather than when compared to GM, for example). This could begin to explain the generally low engagement with organic that was apparent during participants' shops. Participants explained that there was no need for them to prioritise organic because ‘British’ embodies local and reassures on farming standards, food miles and animal welfare. Organic also indicated a higher price to participants, which was another stated reason for not prioritising it.

Country of origin information has the greatest influence in the meat category

Participants were very tactile – using their own quality measures when choosing perishable products and diluting the impact of many aspects of the label.
The country of origin of meat was evidently very important in the purchase decision and people recalled flags, and ‘British’, ‘Scottish’, ‘Irish’ to a high extent, and other information pertaining to health or nutrition to a much lesser extent. This was evident in the accompanied shopping trips, the eye tracked accompanied shopping trips, and the accompanied meals.

Participants stated that they were not looking for the Red Tractor symbol, and there was no evidence of engagement with the Red Tractor symbol from the eye-tracking. However, mention of local farms on packaging, especially the use of pictures, further reinforced the sense of being local and quality of the meat, making it more ‘authentic’.

A lot of participants reported a preference toward buying meat from a local butcher than from the supermarket, on the grounds that it is better quality. The perceived authenticity of the butchers creates a chain of (at times misguided) assumptions regarding the place of origin, healthiness and quality of the meat, despite many acknowledging that the supermarket does sell ‘British’ meat.

“Local is not relevant to supermarkets”
(Male, empty nester, Watford)

In-home observations (i.e. the accompanied meals), revealed however that this is idealism on the consumers’ part, and that participants did in fact buy most of their meat from the supermarket, favouring the packets marked ‘British’.

Interestingly, it was found that the supermarket fish counter was deemed to be equally as good quality as fish from a fishmonger, and participants placed more credibility on them, and were using them more than supermarket meat counters. It might be inferred that this is a result of less availability of fishmongers compared to butchers.

‘Supermarket guilt’ expressed by consumers is not always manifest in their behaviour

Many participants stated that they prefer to purchase seasonal fruit and vegetables and meat from local farmers markets and butchers, however their actual behaviour indicated they actually buy them from the supermarket.

There was some expression of guilt over buying food from the supermarket rather than local farmers' markets, demonstrating some awareness of food miles and their environmental impact. A minority of participants expressed a wish to support local producers, but few participants actually prioritised food miles when shopping. Follow up questioning indicated that the convenience of being able to buy all of a top up or main shop in one store frequently outweighed the motivation to support local producers or reduce food miles.

Participants said they felt it important to support their local farmers by buying seasonal produce from the farmers markets (regardless of whether they actually do), but also presume that seasonal fruit and vegetables in the supermarket will be local.

Mentioning specific local farms by name acts as a positive reinforcement – participants in Scotland, in particular, mentioned this spontaneously.

The umbrella assurance effect of the British flag generally gives the go-ahead, covering issues such as food (air) miles, although most admitted they don’t think about food (air) miles when shopping.
Country of origin had the least impact for tins and products with a long shelf life

Country of origin information held low engagement with participants when nutritional quality and safety was generally deemed less of a priority.

The impact of country of origin information reflects the point at which consumers will buy a ‘low quality’ item, which was partly related to the intended use of the food item (i.e. how it features in cooking), and partly dependent on the freshness of the food (i.e. the food safety risks of eating something which has perished; how ‘safe’ the food is).

For example; supermarket own brand / Value tinned tomatoes or own brand / Value flour were considered to be lower quality but ‘OK’ because they simply made up part of a recipe – i.e. ‘cooking staples’. Other measures of quality, such as brand name, also seemed to exert less of an impact for this category of food.

Pre-sealed tins, jars, and other non-perishables also carry a level of guaranteed safety due to the food processing involved, therefore diluting the need for other safety assurances denoted by country of origin.

“How wrong can you go with tins?”
(Female, pre-family, Belfast)

Meat on the other hand was described as the main ‘essence’ of a meal - where taste, presentation, and nutritional benefits are valued, as well as being able to perish (i.e. become unsafe for consumption) – and country of origin was much more relevant in these situations.

This can explain why consumers are much more tactile when judging the quality of meat and other perishable foods. Being able to see through the packaging was very important to participants, and many were observed taking a long time over physically checking for discolouration, signs of spoiling, excess fat, and size of the slice (the latter was also often checked against price to ensure best value).

Participants also (although less thoroughly) physically checked tins and packets for dents and signs of having been opened – demonstrating an awareness of food safety, whilst emphasising the greater importance placed on assuring the quality and safety of perishable food.

“I check the colour and the fat on the meat, and I check the lids to see if they’ve been opened”
(Female, young family, London)

Animal welfare is important for consumers when purchasing eggs

Recently there has been an increase in press coverage about battery chickens which has led to a special awareness and focus on animal welfare for chicken and especially eggs.

Consumers use the British flag as a symbol of general reassurance on farming standards, although the accompanied shopping trips in particular indicated that when animal welfare was top of mind, labelling terms such as ‘organic’ and ‘free range’ had more impact than ‘British’.

“I also think about minimal air miles. With food it merges into the buying British thing; but in my shopping I mainly take it into account with wine”
(Male, young family, London)
There was frequent confusion however, over the definitions of ‘organic’ vs. ‘free range’ and despite the majority of participants wanting to feel they were buying the best eggs for animal welfare, most were unable to recount a difference between the two terms and were reassured easily on what are ‘acceptable’ farming standards despite not understanding what farming standards symbols mean (e.g. the Red Tractor).

There was no prioritising of, and there was low engagement with, the Red Tractor quality assurance symbol as consumers did not know what it meant. Information relating to animal welfare specially was less obvious to participants.

“Animal welfare is important for me though is rarely a factor in choice because you aren’t given the information - I only take it into account really with chicken, where I do insist on free range for animal welfare reasons.
(Male, pre-family, London)

“Organic is kind of linked to that when it comes to meat - you assume organic meat is humanely farmed”
(Male, young family, London)

Certain categories carry prestige for not being local

Quality is implicit in the product’s authenticity. For example; during the Retail Lab tasked purchases, reference to Italy or ‘British’ reinforced links with traditional foods such as pasta or a stew and dumplings ready meal.

Manufacturers make references to countries in order to appeal to the consumer, making the product appear more authentic, but it is not necessarily where the ingredients are from. However, participants were not always able to distinguish between signified flavours and recipes, and where the actual ingredients are from.

Most are unaware of conventions around origin labelling and are guided by precursors

Country of origin was understood on a basic level – where it originated (where the pig was literally born and reared, or the apple grown) – as opposed to the ‘location of last substantial change’, which was not mentioned spontaneously.

Ingrained assumptions about where foods come from steers the use of food labels, predisposing shoppers to notice ‘reconfirming’ symbols.

Most adopted a ‘precursor’ or common sense approach to shopping, where they subconsciously referred to ingrained assumptions to guide their use of and engagement with country of origin signifiers. These assumptions would have been shaped over time by wider contextual associations and individual experiences, often based on stereotypes.

This seemed to predispose participants to notice specific aspects of the food label (particularly in the Retail Lab tasks) which reconfirmed their assumptions (country flags were particularly effective in this), and to gloss over information which did not comply with their expectations.
For example; in the Retail Lab these ingrained assumptions regarding country of origin resulted in few participants spontaneously noticing ‘100% British’ on a box of breakfast cereal. Consumers were not thinking of country of origin in any depth beyond that of their existing understanding (however, the tasked purchases in the retail lab demonstrated that this existing understanding may be based on incorrect assumptions or incorrectly remembered facts).

China, India and Brazil were mentioned as having particularly strong links with tea and coffee and any reference to these countries made on the packaging of such products immediately clouded the reception of other country of origin information on the front of the label.

Additional words such as ‘authentic’ strengthened confirmations even further.

“I saw “Authentic Italian” on the pasta and thought “it must be where it’s from”, although these things could be from Japan for all I know” (Female, Retail Lab)

If a food is strongly associated with a particular country consumers unwittingly dismiss information which does not comply with their assumptions.

In the absence of precursors to guide assumptions, country of origin information tended to have less impact. For example, the Fair Trade sign was noticed spontaneously when it was needed to confirm expectations that the product originates from a third world country (especially if there were no other obvious references to a particular third world country such as a country flag), but information such as ‘packaged in the UK’ was very rarely spontaneously noticed.

Participants assumed foods were packaged in the UK rather than reading information telling them this, occasionally over simplifying matters and equating country of origin with the nationality of the retailer.

For processed / pre-packaged foods such as crisps and pre-prepared sauces, references to countries were mostly perceived as where the recipe originates from, and did not imply the individual ingredients were made/packaged/ or originated in that country. For example, “Mexican” crisps communicated a convincing message about authenticity of the taste.

**Contextual clues are influential where more than one meaning is possible**

Contextual clues were very influential in the interpretation of references to particular countries, especially where there could be more than one possible meaning.

In one of the tasked purchases a participant perceived “Thai” rice to be a style of cooking rather than the country of origin. In this instance common sense told the participant that the rice could be from Thailand, but he attributed the description to the style of cooking the rice due to the fact that it was situated next to other packets of rice labelled as ‘risotto rice’,
‘basmati rice’ etc. The participant may have read the label differently without these contextualising clues.

This may also help to explain why wording relating to a country on some pre-prepared foods, such as crisps and ready meals (e.g. ‘Mexican’ crisps), signifies a flavour or recipe rather than the country of origin of the ingredients.

In a further example from the tasked purchase task; a noodle ready meal label stated ‘ASIAN 1, 2, 3’ in very large font on the front of the package: Most participants correctly identified this message as conveying the convenience of Asian style food (i.e. referring to easy step-by-step preparation instructions). To someone who had never come across a convenient ready meal style eating it could have been quite plausible that “Asian” was referring to the origin of the ingredients.
8. Use of food labelling in the home

What consumers say is important to them when buying food is not supported by what is in their cupboards.

Conducting accompanied meals in consumer’s homes revealed that the information people say is important to them when buying food is not necessarily supported by what is actually in their cupboards.

For example; Tesco Value products were noticed in one participant’s cupboard, after they had explicitly claimed to reject all value or own label products. Another participant had ‘New Zealand’ apples from Tesco in their fruit bowl despite claiming to take food miles into account when shopping.

As previously mentioned, these kinds of discrepancies were observed mainly for items participants referred to as ‘cooking staples’.

Actual purchases were influenced to a much lesser extent by food (air) miles and organic, despite consumers being aware of these issues.

Discrepancies in behaviour regarding date labels

In reality people use a minimal amount of food labelling when in the home and when preparing familiar or routine meals, or using familiar ingredients or cooking methods. Food labels were used more when cooking something unfamiliar or using new products.

During the accompanied meals, the accompanied shopping trips, and the eye-tracking work, participants stated that the use by / best before date serves as a reassurance of the food’s shelf life and helps them to plan how much food to buy, and which meals to cook. However, whilst essential in the store, there was little evidence of participants planning meals around date labels on food.

For example; researchers observed weekly menus and shopping lists, which participants explained were based on family requests and what they themselves liked to cook, rather than on using up ingredients from the fridge.

‘Best before’ and ‘use by’ are frequently confused terms, and low understanding leads to relaxed attitudes towards expiry dates once in the home.

For example; many participants eat eggs past their best before date, and others throw away meat before the specified date if they believe it is showing signs of going off – e.g. browning, smelling bad.

‘British’ is a powerful reassurance on farming standards, which is further reinforced by the assumption that supermarkets only sell ‘safe’ food – allowing people to relax their attitudes towards date labels once in the home.

“Poisoning doesn’t bother me in my purchasing, because of the high standards, and because I believe that food lasts a lot longer than consume by dates”
(Female, single retired, London)

Most participants used the term ‘use by’ date, and made no differentiation to ‘best before’. The exception to this usage was with fresh/perishable food, whereby most participants placed more importance on the ‘use by’ date. Their use of ‘best before’ and, in particular, ‘use by’ dates stemmed from a desire to maximise the food’s value, both in terms of
products lasting longer and, thus, providing better value for money, and to a lesser extent, maximising the food’s nutritional quality.

**Lack of understanding on the implications of date labels for freezing and storing**

Cooking instructions and storage information were low down on the priority list for participants when shopping. Generally participants were not looking at instructions or freezer stars, and were unaware of how long they could freeze something for.

A large proportion of the sample did not understand the meaning of the date label in terms of freezing, and said they would throw away something past the use by date despite it having been frozen within the date. People were also observed freezing and re-heating food such as rice, and were unaware of the potential risks to health of doing this.

Many do not read or assimilate information regarding ‘use within three days’ and were observed storing opened jars in the cupboard or fridge for weeks, rather than following the storage instructions on the label.

Consumers explained that they did not look for date information on tinned and pre-frozen items, because they are less concerned about food label information in general for tinned items.

“I don’t look at the date on frozen or tinned food, unless it’s kosher”
(Female, empty nester, Watford)
Conclusions and Implications
Conclusions and Implications

1. Conclusions

From conducting this research it can be concluded that:

Consumers demonstrate very low engagement with food labels for habitual purchases.

Individual dietary requirements are key in determining the use of and engagement with different elements of food labels.

Consumers avoid reading the back of food labels and use words or symbols on the front as ‘beacons’ to quickly guide shopping.

(Non-regulated) wording and graphics can mislead, overshadow, clutter, or disengage consumers from other information.

Price can eclipse other aspects of the label, especially for consumers with lower incomes.

Large store brands provide assurance of high food quality.

Well known brands have a ‘halo effect’ – signifying quality and safety, and can distract from other information.

The importance of food label information increases when buying for other people, especially babies/children.

‘Best before’ and ‘use by’ are confused terms - Low understanding leads to relaxed attitudes towards expiry dates once in the home.

Country of origin information impacts on different levels: Safety, animal welfare, food miles, and authenticity. ‘British’ acts as a general hygiene factor.
2. Implications

The main implication of the research is that all aspects of food labelling are important to ‘someone’, but no aspects are equally important to everyone. This means that it is virtually impossible to advise on improvements to the content and format of existing food labelling as consumers engage with different elements to varying degrees due to the different lifestyle factors involved in their motivations for purchasing different food products.

Shoppers’ use of shortcuts may result in information on food labels being pushed down the hierarchy of importance, even if there is information present on the label that at, closer inspection, would give deeper, more relevant information. There is therefore room for more education on various health claims so people can make better informed choices.

The research demonstrated that shoppers rarely engage with food labelling information, particularly for habitual purchases, with the exception of the description, the brand, the date and the price. Encouraging shoppers to engage with food labelling remains a significant challenge for the FSA. The consumers researched demonstrated a lack of awareness of: the content, origin, and shelf life of their food; where they can find this information; why this information is important; and how dismissal of certain elements of food labelling may affect individuals.

Within this report there are numerous case study examples demonstrating how specific aspects are used and understood. These case study examples give insights into areas where there is room for further educating people to allow them to make better informed choices, specifically:

- Branded umbrella assurances are the most likely to persuade consumers to buy products from a single source
- There is potential for high engagement with specific information pertaining only to animal welfare.
- There is potential for engaging people with food labels when they have young children.
- At present consumers are daunted by the back of the label - separating out legislation from marketing claims would help shoppers navigate the label.
- Consumers perceive food labels as overcrowded and important messages are being obscured by other information which is perceived as superfluous by consumers. The challenge is that different consumers think that different elements are superfluous.
- Education on best before/use by dates could potentially help to reduce food wastage.
- There is a need for clearer, more eye-catching messages around storage and date labels on tinned and pre-frozen items, where consumers are less concerned about food label information.
3. Suggestions for further research

The supermarket fish counter was deemed to be equally as good quality as fish from a fishmonger, yet meat from a butcher was perceived as better quality, more credible, and was considered preferable to meat from supermarket meat counters.

This sets a foundation for further research to explore the wider context of supermarket shopping versus independent shops/markets in more detail. Building on the findings of the present study and semiotic insights, further research exploring attitudes towards the quality and origin of the food in *ethnic stores* versus products displayed in the ethnic aisle in the supermarket would broaden the understanding of the use and role of food labels. This would seem particularly relevant given the increasing incidence of, for example, Polish and Asian shops in the UK.

Further analysis of the issues around local produce would be informative, as would exploring the impact of education and/or income on the use of food labelling, which have been beyond the remit of this research.
Appendices
Appendices

Appendix 1: Evaluation of methodology
Appendix 2: Research documents
Appendix 3: Sample frames
Appendix 4: The Semiotics of Food Labelling
Appendix 1: Evaluation of methodology

The research was conducted in rural and urban areas of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland in main retail supermarkets, and covered a range of life stages - pre-family, family, post family, and different shopping missions.

Sample considerations

All participants were main household shoppers (a mix of men and women, although the sample was skewed towards women due to tendency for them to fulfil this role)

Mix of urban and rural/semi-rural locations in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Split between pre-family (no children living at home), family (currently have children living at home and post family (no children currently at home)

An age spread of between 18 – 60 fell out naturally

Within pre-family we recruited a mix of individuals and couples

Within families we recruited a mix of younger families (oldest child less than 12 years old) and older family (children in family aged between 12 and 18 years old)

Mix of different stores across the sample (Tesco, ASDA, Co-op, M&S)

Based on where we were able to obtain permissions for conducting research in the store, and minimising the amount of within region travel between stores.

Mix of different in-store missions: main store shoppers, top up shoppers within main and smaller location top up shops

Mix of Social grade (ABC1C2D) and ethnicities across sample

Key questions around use of labels were:

How much time consumers spend referring to labels (both thinking and reading)

The order people look at certain pieces of information

Whether people find food labelling information user-friendly e.g. in terms of font size, colour and layout and language

Whether consumers find it difficult to use labels due to: small text; bad contrast between text and background; layout of the information; insufficient illumination in the shop, too much or confusing information

Whether the type of product, in terms of its size, shape, or materials used, affects the usability of the label

Understanding and interpretation of the information on labels

Why certain information on the label is not used

Differences by the different types of shop/shopping occasion
Difference between first time and subsequent/habitual purchase on use of the label
The effect of different types of products
How prior knowledge effects the use of labels
The effect of different people and/or key socio-demographic variables on use of labels
How labels are used in the home
How and why consumers use the information in purchase decisions and other decisions, such as how to use the product and when to use it? E.g. understanding of best before dates, use by dates, cooking instructions, etc

Non eye-tracked accompanied shopping trips (ASTs)

For the initial stage of the research, non eye-tracked accompanied shopping trips with individual consumers were conducted (4 in England, Scotland, and Wales, and 3 in Northern Ireland).

Overall as a research tool the accompanied shops worked very well, particularly as a first stage of research allowing broad brush examination with some more detailed probing. In broad terms shoppers’ behaviour patterns were easily identified and could be followed, understood, appraised and dissected relatively easily. When different behaviours were apparent for different types of product, or produce, this could be explored with participants and helped thinking to develop accordingly.

The ASTs allowed the research team to start developing the spectrum of shopper types and provided useful insight into all aspects of labelling use, in particular the use of short cuts and the role of pricing in overriding other labelling information.

Effective observation is core to the success of this approach. All the researchers working on this project are experienced in observing participant behaviour. Although an essential component of this approach, observation alone presented only a partial picture; the de-brief questioning was a key complimentary component in order to gain a fuller picture.

Two approaches to questioning were adopted during the accompanied shops. The first and most commonly used approach was to allow the shopper to conduct their shopping trip without any intervention from the accompanying researcher. The researcher followed the shopper around the store observing their behaviour, making notes. Questions were only asked after the shop had been completed, i.e. when loading the conveyor belt, or after payment for their shopping had been made. The shopper was asked why they had purchased certain items and for example, why a particular pack was chosen rather than another one they had considered. The researchers on occasions also took goods that had been rejected to the tills and asked participants to talk through why they had chosen one over the other. The location for questioning varied and depended upon participant preference, with the majority taking place in a cafe or coffee shop near to, or in, the supermarket.

This approach, of reserving the questions until the end of the shop, was used as the basis to seek to minimise any possible research effect whereby the asking of questions raises the priority of particular issues within the participants mind and they may then alter their behaviour as a result.

Some of the accompanied shops were longer full shops. If during these longer shops the researchers reached a point at which they were happy that they had identified the shoppers
behaviour patterns (with regards to a variety of different goods) and they felt there was more to be gained by asking the participant to talk through their actions, then this was done during the latter stages of the shop. This occurred in a limited number of shops.

Participants were asked to commentate or answer questions for a proportion of the shop - once the researcher had had sufficient time with the participant to have a better feel for the issues being observed, and thus had a baseline of observed behaviour from which to judge and assess the reported behaviour. If described behaviour was at odds with the data obtained from observation, additional questions would be asked to try and work out what was out of place. In such a situation it may be that nothing was out of place but that actually behaviour simply differed for different food types. Whilst the posing of questions does risk the aforementioned research effect, the researchers in the field felt there was more to be gained from the comparative analysis of observed and reported behaviour. Thus, where appropriate, this approach was used.

There was little regional variation in the non eye tracked ASTs. Within, on average, 2-3 minutes of the accompanied shop commencing, participants quickly forgot about the researcher’s presence, becoming subsumed by the routine of undertaking their shop.

A limitation of the non eye tracked approach is that an exploration of the fine detail of behaviour depends on detailed and targeted questioning by the researcher, who is identifying behaviour and then testing whether or not their hypothesis of the behaviour is correct by questioning the participant.

The non-eye tracked accompanied shopping trips helped to identify issues to develop further in the subsequent eye tracked shopping trips. These included:

- Provided information to allow the development of the initial version of the spectrum of users particularly those in the non-readers sample
- Provided insight into the impact of low income on the use of labelling
- Provided indicators of the use of what were subsequently called 'short cuts'
- Provided initial insight into the impact of price and it’s ability to overshadow other aspects of labelling
- Provided initial insight into the confusion around nutrition labelling - where data is provided ‘per 100g’, or ‘per portion’, or as a proportion of guideline daily amounts
- Raised the issue of habitual behaviour, and habitual use of the same shop, influencing shopping behaviour and thus the use of labels
- Highlighted confusion over country of origin

**Eye-tracked shopping trips**

For stage two of this research eye tracked shopping trips were conducted, across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (9 per region). Each eye-tracked shopping trip was unaccompanied and participants undertook their main shop, or top up shop, as normal. Each participant wore a pair of eye tracking glasses which recorded onto a mini recorder the participant wears in a small shoulder bag. Due care was taken to ensure that participants behaved as normally as possible and did not feel under time pressure to complete their shop.
On returning from their shop, the researcher then talked through and explored participant behaviour, reviewing with the participants some of the eye tracking footage of the shopping trip they had just completed. This discussion and review of footage took place in a mobile viewing suite parked in the supermarket’s car park or near to the supermarket. The interviews were recorded, and the researcher conducting the interview also took notes during each interview.

The eye tracked shopping trips were useful as they allowed a direct assessment of people’s use of food labelling, in that it was possible to accurately see where consumers were looking as they shopped. This allowed both further exploration of issues, approaches and habits identified in the non eye tracked stages, and also to see ‘from scratch’ what people were doing.

Using the eye tracked approach enabled a more detailed explanation of the different behaviours evident when purchasing different food types. As previously mentioned, a limitation of the non eye tracked approach is that exploring the fine detail of behaviour depends on detailed and targeted questioning, as the researcher is identifying behaviour and then testing whether or not that hypothesis of the behaviour is correct by questioning the participant. To a degree, the eye tracked approach circumvents this process by allowing the researcher to say, with certainty, “you were looking at X – why was this?” By being able to replay the tape showing the eye tracked shop with the participant in the de-brief immediately after the shop, it was possible to explore in more detail with participants not only what, but also the reasons why as we could identify exactly what was happening. With the non eye tracked shops the working out why relies more on the researchers skills in noticing, and then on the researcher’s skill in asking the correct question. With the eye tracking equipment, having to identify ‘what’ is made much easier but it is still up to the researcher to ask the correct questions to find out why and what that means.

The eye tracked accompanied shopping trips provided the following insights:

- Provided information to allow the further development of the initial spectrum of users
- Provided additional insight into the impact of low income on the use of labelling
- Enabled a fuller analysis of the use of ‘short cuts’
- Enabled further analysis of the impact of price and it’s ability to overshadow other aspects of labelling
- Clarified understanding of consumers’ confusion around nutrition labelling - where data is provided ‘per 100g’, or ‘per portion’, or as a proportion of guideline daily amounts
- Clarified the impact of habitual behaviour and habitual use of the same shop on shopping behaviour and consumers’ use of labels
- Enabled further analysis of consumers’ confusion over country of origin

Although it would have been possible to conduct the research without the non eye tracked shops (and just utilising the eye tracked accompanied shopping trips), it would have meant that the initial eye tracked shops would have been serving a boundary setting ‘finding focus’ role (in this project this role was fulfilled by the non eye tracked shops). Given the costs of using the technology the approach taken of using the non eye tracked shops as the initial stage and the eye tracked shops as the second stage ensured the best possible return from the cost intensive eye tracking stage. The research team felt that the robust findings that
were achieved from the eye tracking work meant that its use was both validated and vindicated.

If commissioning further research developing the findings of this work, the initial non eye tracked stage could be dispensed with as the focus finding stage has effectively been fulfilled by this research. But depending upon the focus of the work it is still recommended to conduct a limited number of non eye tracked ASTs prior to the eye tracked ASTs. The findings and insight gained from the non eye tracked ASTs were a useful steer in helping focus the subsequent eye tracked work, and helped frame the range of users (subsequently developed in the continuum of user types) and identify short cuts, the desire to view meat products, and the influence of price labelling in masking or eclipsing other labels. If subsequent work had an entirely new focus, it is strongly recommended to use non eye tracked ASTs, followed by eye tracked ASTs.

Filmed accompanied meals (ethnographic home visits and interviews)

Consumers’ use of food labelling is not restricted to their reading the label at the point of purchase. It is known from the wide range of retail consumer research, that their use of the labelling at home is also of interest and importance. Accompanied meals with consumers in their homes at meal times were conducted (4 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and 3 in Scotland) to explore the use of food labelling when preparing food and at the meal table, and how this use of labels at home might impact upon subsequent behaviour at the next time of purchase.

The researcher observed and filmed each family, couple or individual recruited for breakfast, lunch or their evening meal, and noted how food labelling was used (or not) used during the preparation and consumption of that meal. The researcher also made note of the contents of participants’ cupboards and fridge – especially the contradictions between what people say is important to them when they buy food when compared what they have already bought. After the meal (or during the meal if it was evident that there was no food packing to be read during the meal) the researcher asked questions based on their observations. The footage of the accompanied meals was reviewed during the analysis stage of this project, but full transcripts of the accompanied meals were not produced.

This ethnographic approach – observing people in their own environment – proved to be both an innovative and appropriate way of conducting informative research within a realistic environment. Although, on recruitment some respondents required an initial degree of reassurance regarding being filmed, when it came to the actual fieldwork, it was found in this study that people relaxed into the interview very quickly and that the presence of the camera helped them to feel valued and reassured them about the legitimacy of the research. The researchers found that the slight formality the camera brings encourages people to be more open, and willing to let them explore their homes. Participants commented on the camera’s presence and how it resulted in their wanting to present an accurate depiction of how they lived.

The presence of children in households also helped the interviews have a more natural flow as the demands of hungry children overrode initial concerns about how participants 'looked' on camera. The routine nature of many families’ meal times also helped this approach to work well. Once initial awareness of the camera wore off (usually within a couple of minutes) - the routine of preparing a meal with different members of the households fulfilling certain assigned roles - it was evident that for many participants the presence of the camera clearly was not affecting their behaviour. For those who demonstrated a limited use of food labels during the preparation of their meal, the remainder of the cooking time was used to talk to the participants putting them at maximum ease before discussing food labelling related questions.
Cooking times varied, but during meals with longer cooking times it was possible to explore in detail with participants aspects of their shopping behaviour. One significant benefit of this approach is that it allowed researchers to compare reported behaviour against actual behaviour by looking in cupboards, fridge and freezer, and where differences existed, the researcher could probe on this. For example, participants may say during the cooking of a meal, but after the use of labelling had stopped, “I don’t buy ‘value’ labelled goods” however the researcher may discover value flour in the cupboard. This approach also allowed development of the ‘why was this one purchased’ discussion that started while participants were cooking. For example, researchers would ask why was it that that particular packet/type of mince had been purchased, and not other options. In order to sufficiently discuss the packaging of items purchased, participants were asked to describe the items used and then the researcher could compare their description with the packaging, on occasion retrieving the packaging from the bin to facilitate comparison.

By using the cupboard audits as a means of leading discussions around purchasing habits, it was possible to explore whether or not participants looked at food labels as they put purchased food away into the cupboards, fridge and freezer.

An unplanned strength of the accompanied meals was the insight that they provided into wider shopping behaviour. The accompanied meals were initially proposed as a means of assessing people’s use of food labels in the home. They did allow the assessment of food label use in the home, however they also provided a broader insight into consumers’ behaviour not only in the home, but also in store, as participants discussed and described their behaviour and the reasons behind that behaviour.

As mentioned the accompanied meals worked well because they were accompanied meals - participants were accompanied whilst undertaking a routine and familiar task. As a method they worked particularly well due to the familiar nature of the task.

If accompanied filming is being considered for other uses it is recommended that the task they are accompanying is a routine task that is familiar to respondents to best minimise the impact of the presence of the researcher and camera.

All the members of the project team were experienced in conducting accompanied and filmed tasks, and the success of this stage of the research requires an ability to put the participant at ease. Undertaking this research demonstrated that the filming is of secondary importance to the research process that occurs during the accompanied meal. It is more important to have a good researcher than a good camera operator.

The researchers could generally very quickly identify if the individual preparing the meal was a reader of food labels or not and after allowing time to check that that behaviour was consistent, or allowing time to see where variations existed, it was the subsequent questioning and discussion that provided the additional and particularly useful insight.

Overall those who took part in the accompanied meals do not use food labels very much when they are preparing a familiar meal, or using familiar ingredients or cooking methods, and there is limited use of labels at the putting food away stage. If ingredients are used that are unfamiliar, or if participants are attempting a new dish, a different approach to reading labels is required. Much of this insight gained was done so from the discussion with participants, and not simply from the observation.

Again the researchers tried to minimise their impact, and not influence participants' behaviour, for example leaving questioning until the meal was prepared and allowing cooking to continue as normal.

When looking through cupboards the researcher could, for example, ask “why was this particular can of beans was purchased”, or “what made you choose this different brand of
beans”. Given the relative frequency of most people’s shops, participants generally found it easy to recall the drivers that influenced their purchase.

The filmed accompanied meals:

- Provided insight into the use of food labels in the home
- Provided insight into how consumers put away shopping on return from the shop
- Provided insight into how consumers prepare and cook food
- Provided further insight into the spectrum of label users
- Enabled exploration of the variation between actual and reported purchase behaviour, by means of examining cupboard contents following discussion

**Tasked purchase in the Ipsos MORI retail lab, and follow-up' eye-tracked tasked purchases**

Tasked shopping purchases in the Retail Lab were as follows:

1. *Find a product that you consider gives you information about its country of origin*
2. *Find a milk product you can use every day next week*
3. *Find a ‘high quality’ and a ‘low quality cereal*

Whilst the eye tracked shopping trips provided a valuable insight into consumers point of sale behaviour, participants were also tasked with specific questions in the Retail Lab in a fourth phase of the research.

The Retail Lab is a mock store which can be laid out to represent aisles within a variety of different types of outlets. The layout of the store can be changed for different scenarios to allow different types of tests. Whilst it is not a ‘real’ retail environment this method was chosen as it is an ideal tool to use to assist in analysing more specific areas of food labelling (e.g. *country of origin, best before dates, and perceptions of quality*), and allows a degree of control, in terms of merchandising and access, which is difficult to achieve in ‘real’ retail environments.

Individually, participants were tasked with making three selections from the shelves within the retail lab. Participants wore field of vision glasses (*a less sophisticated version of eye-tracking which allow researchers to track the line of sight*), and after the purchases were made participants took part in an interview using the field of vision data to unpick, discuss, and explore their use of food labels in their selection process.

The retail lab tasked purchases (using field of vision glasses) were useful in that they allowed exploration into the issues that underpin label use behaviour, rather than focussing only on what people were looking at. This helped identify issues to be followed up in the desk research stage. The research team identified that whilst people were concerned with the logistics and practicalities of the labels themselves, there was a ‘precursor stage’ that steered their use of those labels, for example quality being considered in terms of brands (e.g., Kellogg’s), or in terms of nutritional goodness, or in terms of packaging materials. This precursor stage reflects
the wider cultural context within which food purchases are made and as such were a useful lead in to the semiotic stage.

The final six tasked purchases in the Retail Lab were eye-tracked, which allowed the research team to explore in more detail issues regarding country of origin, date labels, and wording/symbols perceived as denoting "quality", which were highlighted throughout the progression of the study as areas requiring additional exploration.

The eye tracked retail lab tasks provided two particularly useful outputs:

It allowed the researchers to test the ideas they had developed after the non eye tracked tasked purchases (using field of vision glasses) in terms of what elements of labelling consumers were actually looking at.

It also allowed the researchers to explore the extent to which the physical act of looking at different elements was influenced by the wider contextual associations relating to quality, country of origin, and date information.

The retail lab work had been intended to be a way of pulling together any loose research strands from the previous stages however it did far more than that; it allowed the research team to develop far more fully the role of those wider contextual issues and explore directly the actual impact this had on the use of labelling and thus the researchers were delighted with the insight gained from this stage of the research.

Semiotic Analysis

The semiotic analysis was used to help explain the context within which behaviour was observed, and it helped to aid understanding of the ways in which food labels were received and understood by consumers. It helped the researchers to understand and contextualise the emerging findings, and provided a platform from which to begin discussing the main findings which emerged from the research.

Analysis & reporting

Qualitative research relies upon the skills of the researcher conducting the research to a greater extent than large scale quantitative work, whereby it is the quality of the questions posed that has the greatest impact, not necessarily the quality of the way in which these questions are asked. The researchers involved in this research considered the analysis of the findings and how to make the outputs insightful, useful and useable from the outset of this project.

The researchers relied on both creative techniques such as ‘brainstorms’ as part of the analysis in addition to more structured approaches such as the development of analysis grids: listing the issues identified as relevant and the frequency with which they occur, the different variations evident, and the significance and impact of that issue.
### Appendix 2: Research documents

1. **Non eye-tracked Accompanied Shop (AST) screener (adapted for eye-tracking shopping quotas)**

**RESPONDENT NAME:** ____________________________

**TIME/DATE OF AST:** ____________________________

0900606101 May 09

FSA non eye tracked ASTs
Recruitment Screener

**CLASSIFICATION**

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<th>OCCUPATION OF RESPONDENT</th>
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<td>Occupation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Industry:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Max: 3/4 female

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Code</th>
<th>OCCUPATION OF RESPONDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>18 and under</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 – 45</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 - 60 yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66+</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GOOD MIX OF AGES**

**GOOD MIX OF LIFESTAGES:**

- Pre family
- Family
- Post family (Empty nesters)

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Ipsos MORI qualitative report: FSA Food labelling, December 2009
Good morning/afternoon/evening, my name is ................... from Ipsos MORI, an independent market research agency based in London. We are conducting a project with consumers, and I wonder if you would like to take part? Could I ask you a few questions to see if you would be eligible for the study? If you are, we'll be inviting you to participate in this research.

Female 1  Male 2

Q.1 Do you or anyone in your family / close friends work in any of the following fields?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADVERTISING AGENCY</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARKET RESEARCH</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOURNALISM / PRESS</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARKETING</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSYCHOLOGY / SOCIOLOGY / ANTHROPOLOGY</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOLESALE/RETAIL/MANUFACTURE OF FOOD OR ALCOHOLIC DRINKS</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any medical field, St John's, doctor, pharmacist, etc</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any nutritionist or dietician</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any graphic design or package design field</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

→ IF RESPONDENT OR ANY FAMILY OR CLOSE FRIENDS WORK OR ARE INVOLVED IN ANY OF ABOVE FIELDS OR PROFESSIONS → CLOSE

Q.2a What is your current occupation, and in which field?

WRITE IN: _____________________________________

Q.2b And the occupation of your partner / spouse? And in which field?

WRITE IN: _____________________________________

Q.3a Have you ever participated in a group discussion, interview or accompanied shop for market research?

- YES………………………………. □ GO TO Q.2B, C, D
- NO………………………………. □ GO TO Q.3

Q.3b How many times have you participated in a group discussion / interview / accompanied shop?

NOTE NUMBER ______________________________________________

IF 3 OR MORE ASK. How long ago were these?

Q.3c When did you last participate in a group discussion / interview / accompanied shop?

NOTE ______________________________________________________

NB = NON ELIGIBLE IF HAVE PARTICIPATED IN ANY GROUP DISCUSSION / INTERVIEW / ACCOMPANIED SHOP WITHIN THE PAST 6 MONTHS

Q.3d What was the subject of the last group discussion / interview / accompanied shop you took part in?

NOTE ______________________________________________________

NB= NON ELIGIBLE IF PARTICIPATED IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS/INTERVIEW ON RETAILERS/SUPERMARKETS OR FOODSTUFFS
Q.4 Can you tell me which of the following represents your current life stage?

- Single, living with parents (Pre family)
- Single living in flat/house share (Pre family)
- Single/married/cohabiting with no children (Pre family)
- Single/married/cohabiting with children (Family)
- Single/married/cohabiting – all children adults and living away from home (Post family)

Check quotas

Q.5a Who is responsible for the bulk of your household’s grocery shopping?

- Me, principally .................................  ☐ ALL MUST CODE
- My partner / other household member and I jointly ...... ☐ CLOSE

My partner, exclusively .............................. ☐ CLOSE

Q.6a (For info) Is this store, the store that you …

- currently use most regularly for the bulk of your grocery shopping (i.e. where you tend to spend the most on food and groceries i.e. weekly /fortnightly / monthly shop) ................................. ☐

- currently use most regularly for top-up grocery shopping? ................................. ☐

- Store you occasionally/ infrequently use for the bulk of your grocery shopping (i.e. where you tend to spend the most on food and groceries) ................................. ☐

What store(s) do you use most regularly/frequently for the bulk of your grocery shopping

NOTE ______________________________________________________

- Store you occasionally / infrequently use or top-up grocery shopping? ................................. ☐

What store(s) do you use most regularly/frequently for your top-up grocery shopping

NOTE ______________________________________________________

Q.6b Today are you doing a…

- A main grocery shop ................................. ☐
- A Top up shop ................................. ☐

CHECK QUOTAS

Q.7 I will now read a list of different types of purchases you can make on a grocery shop. Please tell me which types you regularly shop for, sometimes shop for and rarely shop for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT TYPE</th>
<th>REGULARLY</th>
<th>SOMETIMES</th>
<th>NEVER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
CLOSE ON ANYONE WHO DOES NOT REGULARLY PURCHASE A RANGE OF FOOD PRODUCE

RECRUITER’S EXPLANATION OF PROCEEDING:

We would like accompany you as you carry out your shopping today, and then spend a few minutes afterwards talking about your shop with you. You’ll still have to pay for your shopping as normal but we’ll pay you £xx as a thank you for taking part in our research.

Please sign the declarations overleaf:

RESPONDENT DECLARATION

B. (CHECK QUOTAS – respondent to complete the below if conducting a full standard shopping trip as part of the research)

I agree to be accompanied on my shopping trip today and to discuss my shopping trip briefly afterwards. I will pay for all goods purchased on the shopping trip.

NAME……………………………
ADDRESS…………………………
……………………………………
……………………………………
……………………………………
PHONE:……………………………
……………………………………
SIGNATURE…………………………
DATE………………………………

RECRUITED FOR ON (DATE) …………………………(TIME)………………
Inform all respondents that discussion will be audio recorded and that under the Rules of the MRS Code of Conduct, any information given will only be viewed by the immediate team working on this project and that no personal information will be passed on to any third party who is not involved in this project.

RECRUITER DECLARATION

I declare that the respondent was unknown to me until this interview took place, and that the interview was conducted according to instructions and the MRS Code of Conduct.

Signed……………………………………….Date .............................
2. Accompanied Meal screener

RESPONDENT NAME: ________________________________

TIME/DATE OF Accompanied meal: ____________________

0900606101 May 09

FSA Accompanied meal
Recruitment Screener

CLASSIFICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEX OF RESPONDENT</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Route</th>
<th>OCCUPATION OF CIE (write in)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female ...................</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Occupation: __________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male ....................</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>Industry: __________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE: (WRITE IN)</th>
<th>Route</th>
<th>SOCIAL GRADE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18 yrs</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>A 1..........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–30 yrs</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>B 2..........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40 yrs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C1 3.........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50 yrs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>C2 4.........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–60 yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>D 5..........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>E 5..........</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD</th>
<th>LIFESTAGE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO: (WRITE IN)</td>
<td>Pre family 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE(S)</td>
<td>Young family 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–10 yrs</td>
<td>Older family 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–15 yrs</td>
<td>Empty nesters 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–18 yrs</td>
<td>Working f/time 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Working p/time 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non working 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Good morning/afternoon, my name is __________ from Ipsos MORI, an independent market research agency. We are conducting a project with consumers, and I wonder if you would like to take part? Could I ask you a few questions to see if you would be eligible for the study? If you are, we'll be inviting you to participate in this research.

Q.1 Do you or anyone in your family / close friends work in any of the following fields?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADVERTISING AGENCY</th>
<th>MARKET RESEARCH</th>
<th>JOURNALISM / PRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>CLOSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOSE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q.1b  What is your current occupation? And in which field? And the occupation of your partner? And in which field?

Occupation: ____________________________  Field: __________________

Occupation of partner ____________________________  Field: __________________

Q.2  Have you previously been to a market research discussion group or depth interview?

Yes  1  GO TO Q.2b
No  2  GO TO Q.3

Q.2b  When was the last time you attended a market research discussion group or depth interview?

WRITE IN: ______________________________

MUST NOT HAVE BEEN IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS

Q.2c  What subject was this group/depth interview on?

WRITE IN: ______________________________

MUST NOT HAVE BEEN ON SUPERMARKETS/DIETRY/FOOD/PACKAGING DESIGN

Q.3a  What is your age? (WRITE IN) _____________________

Q.3b  Which of the following lifestages applies to you?

Single living alone/flatshare/at home with parents  1
Cohabiting/married/no kids  2
Cohabiting/married/single with children  3
under 18yrs in household
single/married/cohabiting all children grown and
living away from home  4

CHECK SPECIFIC QUOTAS

Q.3c  How many people are living in your household (including yourself)? And what is their relationship to you? Please also could you give me the age(s) of all children living in your household with you.

WRITE IN: ______________________________

Q.3d  Which of the following applies to you?

Working full-time  1
Working part time  2
Non working (housewife)  3
Student  4
Retired  5
Unemployed  6 CLOSE

PLEASE ENSURE A GOOD MIX ACROSS THE SAMPLE

Q.4a  Are you the person responsible for the main grocery shopping for your household?

Yes  1  GO TO Q.4b

No  2  GO TO Q.4b
Q.4b Are you the person in your household who prepares and cooks the majority of the meals for yourself and your partner/family at home?

Yes 1 CONTINUE
No 2 ASK TO SPEAK TO RELEVANT PERSON IN HOUSEHOLD

Q.4c And as a general rule, do you regularly eat your meals together as a family?

Yes 1
No 2

Q.5 Which of the following supermarkets do you regularly use most often for….

a) main shopping
b) top-up shopping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supermarket</th>
<th>a) main shopping</th>
<th>b) top-up shopping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sainsbury’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tesco</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M&amp;S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Write in)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PLEASE ENSURE A GOOD MIX OF SUPERMARKETS USED ACROSS THE SAMPLE

RESPONDENT DETAILS

NAME: __________________________________________

ADDRESS: ___________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

POST CODE: __________________ TELEPHONE No________________________

MOBILE NUMBER_____________ EMAIL ADDRESS: ______________________________

RECRUITER DECLARATION

I declare that the respondent was unknown to me until this interview took place, and that the interview was conducted according to instructions and the MRS Code of Conduct.

Signed .................................. Date ........................................

Ipsos MORI qualitative report: FSA Food labelling, December 2009
Recruitment letter and Consent

Dear Sir/Madam,

Research into Use of Food Labels When Shopping

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this piece of research on consumers’ shopping behaviour.

We are an independent research agency and are carrying out this project on behalf of the Food Standards Agency. We are a member of the Market Research Society and bound by their code of conduct (for further details please visit www.mrs.org.uk).

Your comments and visual recordings will form part of the feedback to the Agency but these will not be attributed personally to you and will be kept anonymous. Any personal details (for example, names, address) will be kept confidential, held securely and will not used for any purpose beyond this specific project unless you have given permission to do so. All these details will be removed from our records on completion of the project.

If you have any further questions please feel free to call me, Gemma Enright, on the following number 020 8861 8054.

Yours faithfully,

Gemma Enright
Senior Research Executive
Ipsos Mori Hot House
Informed Consent:

I confirm that I have read and understood this information sheet and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had them answered satisfactorily.

I understand that the study is being carried out solely for the purposes of market research. I understand that the study will take approximately 60 minutes and consist of answering some brief questions, wearing a pair of eye-tracking glasses to complete the shopping task, and having an interview about my experience.

I understand that the study will involve video recordings of what I will be looking at (however I will not be pictured on the video). I agree for the video recordings from this session to be used demonstrate the research findings (as part of the final report to the Food Standards Agency and as an edited CD).

I understand that all data collected will be kept strictly confidential and that any published findings will retain my anonymity. Any personal information (i.e., name, address) will be kept confidential, held securely and will not be used for any purpose beyond this specific project (unless I have given permission to do so) and will be removed from Ipsos Mori’s records upon completion of the project.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. I agree to take part in this research.

____________________  ___________  __________________
Name of participant    Date                  Signature

____________________  ___________  __________________
Name of person taking consent  Date                  Signature
3. Discussion guide (used for non-eye tracked ASTs, and adapted for Eye-tracked shops)

Introduction

Explain the research to the respondent and make sure they are comfortable with the process – explain confidentiality, no right or wrong.

After going through the screener and making sure the participant fits the criteria the moderator then explains the process:

“I’m working on behalf of the Food Standards Agency and we’re interested in how people shop. Would you mind if I accompanied you as you go round the store today? No need to behave any differently to normal – I am purely interested in observing you, and asking a few questions as we go round. This isn’t a test and there’s no right or wrong so please try and shop as you normally would – I’m not judging you on what you put into your trolley/basket!”

1) Observation of shopper behaviour (what people spontaneously look at)

Note down shopper behaviour including:

For each item the length and nature of deliberation (e.g. does respondent pick up item, with / without comparison; length of selection process, impact of packaging, texture, content and form, use of labelling (what do they read).

2) Discussion of shopper behaviour

Allow respondent to move to each area of the store in their own time, allowing them to browse, read labels and compare products without interruption – do not hurry them up! As they move away from each section, having made their choices probe:

This process will be repeated at different stages throughout the AST

I noticed you were looking at ‘X type of food’

- What things were you thinking about?
- How long do you think it took you to decide which product to buy?
- Talk me through how you decided to select your product - what was your thought process?
  - What type of product were you looking for?
  - How did you narrow down your choice? How did you decide which products were relevant and which weren’t?
  - What was the most important thing you were looking for?
  - Where did you look to find this information?
  - Did you find the information you were looking for?
    - Where was it? (note to moderator: this is exploring labelling function without explicitly mentioning label)
  - How did this effect your decision to purchase the product?
  - What products did you consider? Why?
  - What made you choose the product that you finally decided on?
  - What can you tell me about the product you’ve chosen?

Probe on mentions of colour and design / layout of packaging, type of packaging, information on the packaging if mentioned spontaneously by respondent
3) **Food label analysis in retrospect (determining what respondent can recall about the food labels after the shopping trip)**

At the checkout, loading the conveyor belt, and waiting in turn – probe on particular items from various food categories, based on interesting behaviour as identified during the shop discuss:

- Why did you choose this product?
- How did you know you wanted this product over other products?
- How much time did you spend looking at the food label?
- How important was the food label in helping you make your choice?
- Is there any information in particular that you were looking for? **Probe on the importance / relevance of:**
  - Nutrition information – e.g. calorie info, macro/micro nutrients, RDIs
  - Health indicators – e.g. traffic light symbol, healthy ranges (e.g. ‘Be good to yourself’)
  - Claims – e.g. ‘low fat’, ‘wholegrain’, ‘fresh’, ‘fortified’, ‘organic’
  - Cooking instructions – e.g. ‘microwavable’, ‘ready to eat’
  - **The country of origin of the food** – e.g. ‘British beef’ **Probe on understanding**
    - Is there anything confusing or unclear? Would you need any extra information?
    - Anything else?

- Do you look for different kinds of information on different types of product?
- Is there any information which you choose not to use? What is this? Why do you choose not to use this information?
- Is there anything unclear or confusing? (catch all question)

4) **Overview of label use**

After goods have been paid for (in store café, or while packing bags, carrying to car) explore the following:

- How would you describe your use of food labels? (allows comparison of reported and observed behaviour)
- How easy / difficult is it to understand the information on food labels?
  - **Probe on look, layout, contrast between words and background and influence of packaging material / size / shape, is small text a problem?**
- Does your use of food labels differ for items that you buy regularly or items that you buy occasionally?
- Does your use of food labels differ for different types of item?
- Does your use of food labels differ depending on who is consuming the food?
- Does the shop lighting affect your use of food labels?
- Do you look at the food labels once you’ve got home?

Depending on earlier response explore further understanding of country of origin labelling - **Probe on both perception and literal understanding**

- What is the one ‘big thing’ that you either like or would want to change about food labelling?

**Help load shopping into car if required**

**Thank and close**
4. Discussion guide for Accompanied Meals

Introduction
Explain the research to the respondent and make sure they are comfortable with the process – explain confidentiality and anonymity, filming, no right or wrong.

“I’m working on behalf of the Food Standards Agency and we’re interested in people and food! I’m going to watch as you prepare and eat your meal. No need to behave any differently to normal – I am purely interested in observing you, and asking a few questions as we go along. This isn’t a test and there’s no right or wrong so please try and act as you normally would – I’m not judging you on what you’re eating or how you eat it”

1) Observation

Allow respondent to move to prepare food and eat in their own time, allowing them to behave normally without interruption – do not hurry them!

Note down respondent behaviour including:

- For each item the interaction with the packaging
  - How respondent opens and handles the material
  - The length of time and attention given to the packaging
  - Does respondent read or comment on the label?

- Interaction with other people, pets, or activities and use (or not) of labelling
  - i.e. if providing snack to child is label consulted
  - i.e. does anything distract or interrupt respondent’s use of label?

4) Discussion of behaviour to be undertaken after meal is finished

Can you talk me through the process of preparing your meal (to explore if labelling is spontaneously suggested)

Pick up on noted observations – e.g. I noticed you were looking at ‘X’ or ‘did Y’

- What things were you thinking about when you were doing ‘Y activity’ / ‘reading X’?
- How long do you think you were doing ‘Y activity’ / ‘reading X’?
- Were you looking for anything in particular? Any particular information? – What?
- What can you tell me about this food item?
- Were you the person who bought ‘X food item’ in the store?

If respondent bought the food: Can you remember how you decided to select this product? - what was your thought process?
- Why did you choose this product?
- How did you know you wanted this product over other products?
- What helped you make your choice? – Explore mention of food labelling if mentioned
- Do you look for any particular information to help you choose which food products to buy?
- What information do you look for?
- Where do you look to find this information?
- How important is this information on your decision to purchase this type of product?
- What other products have you considered when shopping for this product? Why?

- How much time did you spend looking at the food label?
- How important was the food label in helping you make your choice?
- Is there anything information in particular that you look for? **Probe on the importance / relevance of:**
  - Nutrition information – e.g. calorie info, macro/micro nutrients, RDIs
  - Health indicators – e.g. traffic light symbol, healthy ranges (e.g. ‘Be good to yourself’)
  - Claims – e.g. ‘low fat’, ‘wholegrain’, ‘fresh’, ‘fortified’ ‘organic’
  - Cooking instructions – e.g. ‘microwavable’, ‘ready to eat’
  - **The country of origin of the food** – e.g. ‘British beef’ **Probe on understanding**
    - Is there anything confusing or unclear? Would you need any extra information?
    - Anything else?

- Do you look for different kinds of information on different types of product?
- Is there any information which you choose not to use? What is this? Why do you choose not to use this information?
- Is there anything unclear or confusing? (catch all question)

**If respondent did not buy the food:** is there anything you seek to know about this food product before eating it?
- What do you seek to know?
- How do you find out this information?
- Where do you find it?
- How important is this?

**Probe on the importance / relevance of:**
- Nutrition information – e.g. calorie info, macro/micro nutrients, RDIs
- Health indicators – e.g. traffic light symbol, healthy ranges (e.g. ‘Be good to yourself’)
- Claims – e.g. ‘low fat’, ‘wholegrain’, ‘fresh’, ‘fortified’ ‘organic’
- Cooking instructions – e.g. ‘microwavable’, ‘ready to eat’
- **The country of origin of the food** – e.g. ‘British beef’ **Probe on understanding**
  - Is there anything confusing or unclear? Would you need any extra information?
  - Anything else?

- Are different kinds of information relevant to different types of product? **Probe based on response**
- Is there any information which you’re not interested in? What is this and why is this?
- Is there anything unclear or confusing? (catch all question)

_During the above probe on mentions of colour and design / layout of packaging, type of packaging, information on the packaging if mentioned spontaneously by respondent_
4) **Overview of label use**

- How would you describe your use of food labels? (allows comparison of reported and observed behaviour)
- How easy / difficult is it to understand the information on food labels?
  - Probe on look, layout, contrast between words and background and influence of packaging material / size / shape, is small text a problem?
- Does your use of food labels differ for items that you buy / consume regularly or items that you buy / consume occasionally?
- Does your use of food labels differ for different types of item?
- Does your use of food labels differ depending on who is consuming the food?
- Does the shop or home lighting affect your use of food labels?

  *Depending on earlier response explore further understanding of country of origin labelling*
  - Probe on both perception and literal understanding

- What is the one ‘big thing’ that you either like or would want to change about food labelling?

**Thank and close**
Appendix 3: Sample frames

Eye-tracking sample frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Family makeup</th>
<th>Urban or rural</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Stores and location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>3 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>27th &amp; 29th May</td>
<td>Small Co-op Watford Middlesex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Tesco Banbury, Oxfordshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Post-family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Tesco Harrow, Middlesex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>3 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>1st - 2nd June</td>
<td>Large Sainsbury’s CARDIFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Tesco Pontypridd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small M&amp;S Cardiff Central train station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>3 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>4th - 5th June</td>
<td>Large ASDA Parkhead Forge,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small Tesco Express Glasgow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Sainsbury’s Glasgow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>3 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>8th - 9th June</td>
<td>Small Tesco Metro Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Sainsbury’s Lisburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x Post-family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large ASDA Newtownards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Non eye-tracked Accompanied Shop sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Family makeup</th>
<th>Urban or rural</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Stores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>England</strong></td>
<td>1 X Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>2 consecutive days between 18th - 26th May</td>
<td>Large Tesco Brixton, S.E London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 X Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small local Sainsbury’s Oxford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large ASDA Watford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wales</strong></td>
<td>2 X Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>2 consecutive days between 18th - 26th May</td>
<td>Large ASDA Tonypandy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small Tesco Express</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Co-op Newport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scotland</strong></td>
<td>1 X Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>2 consecutive days between 18th - 26th May</td>
<td>Large Sainsbury’s Edinburgh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 X Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Tesco Glasgow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small M&amp;S Glasgow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Ireland</strong></td>
<td>1 X Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
<td>2 consecutive days between 18th - 26th May</td>
<td>Large Co-op Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large Sainsbury’s Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 X Post family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tesco Express Newtownabbey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Accompanied meals sample frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Family makeup</th>
<th>Urban or rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>England, North West London, South East London, Oxford</strong></td>
<td>1 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 x Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wales, Cardiff and Caerphily, Llantrisant, Pontypridd</strong></td>
<td>2 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scotland, Glasgow, and Cumbernauld, Grangemouth, Livingston</strong></td>
<td>1 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ireland, Belfast and Newtownards, Bangor and Carrickfergus</strong></td>
<td>1 x Pre-family</td>
<td>Mix of half urban/ half rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 x Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x Post family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Semiotics of Food Labelling

Christopher Wilson

for Ipsos MORI

1. Summary

2. Semiotic principles
   - Semiotics
   - Conventions
   - Key terms
   - Relational meaning
   - Denotation and connotation
   - Change
   - Symbols, icons and indices

3. Conventions of food labelling
   - Butter and spreads
   - Chilled and frozen pizzas

4. The dynamics of food labelling
   - Labelling as integral with packaging
   - Mixed motive communication
   - Hybrid communication
   - Busy communication
   - Simple and complex
   - Conflicting impressions

5. What food labelling says
   - The supplier
   - The social context
   - Depicting the customer
   - The relationship
   - The language
1. SUMMARY

This section of the report looks at the semiotics of food labelling – at the signs and strategies employed in wrapping and describing food. It is based upon ‘desk research’ following the fieldwork phases of this project.

An examination of any particular type of food product reveals that the packaging and labelling is highly conventionalized. Here, we have looked at a) butters/spreads and b) pizzas, by way of example.

There are strong consistencies in packaging solution, colour choices for background and text, ‘markers’ showing variations within the type, types of promotional claim, imagery, types of brand name.

This exposes the apparent paradox of cooperation in competition. Competing brands of a product dress themselves up in similar clothing and talk about themselves in similar terms. This reflects the way designers and copy-writers absorb, and reproduce, existing conventions when packaging a particular type of food, and the way that focus groups of consumers confirm that the resulting delivery ‘feels right’.

The labelling and packaging of food are integral and inseparable. Packaging is the surface on which labelling is inscribed and the two inevitably, reciprocally shape each other.

Labelling began, and continues, primarily as advertising and promotional material for the product as it vies for attention and purchase, alongside competitor brands in shop displays. Regulation and voluntary practice have imposed further communicative jobs on food labelling. These include description of use, ingredients, nutritional properties, suitability for those with special dietary needs, recycling of packaging, country of origin.

Consequently, food labelling has become a collage of disparate, sometimes competing messages. It is a mixed-motive medium. Some of its product messages are cautionary in intent, enforced by regulation. But most are voluntary, exuberant, self-expressive and self-promotional.

There are instances when the interests of the manufacturer diverge from those of the consumer and regulator – for example when a food contains high levels of salt, fat or sugar, or an ingredient has received adverse publicity. Then, the manufacturer, who scripts the labelling, and controls the positioning and emphasis of items, generally has effective control of the overall impressions given.

Any particular consumer will have their own agenda, and is unlikely to be interested in the totality of labelling. In this light, labelling resembles other promotional material, such as direct
mail and radio advertising, where the consumer’s goal is to exercise their selective attention, securing key elements of information, while ignoring the broad mass of material.

Because it serves a range of descriptive tasks, some technical (detailing food ingredients and constituents), some mundane (for example, explaining how to cook the food) labelling is a hybrid text, presenting a range of different vocabularies and sets of assumptions. Some of the component messages may be patronizingly simple. Some descriptions of ingredients and constituents may presume knowledge that the general consumer lacks.

Besides describing product, or rendering its content visible, packaging serves a range of other functions. It ‘alter-casts’ the audience, assigns them identity, makes assumptions about their interests, and values. Labelling, through the properties of its language, and complexity of its propositions, makes assumptions about the educational level of the consumer. The rhetoric of the product-promotion assumes the likely motives of the consumer.

Labelling is also ‘phatic’ in offering a relationship between producer and consumer. And it is ‘referential’ in referring the wider context – economic, ideological, ecological – in which the consumers find themselves and the product finds use.

Labelling offers a range of symbols, and deploys a range of conventions. Here, it becomes ‘metalingual’, talking about how it talks, and saying how it says things. By way of explanation, labelling often tells how its conventions work and what its symbols mean.

Consumers know that words lie, pictures mislead, and marketers tell stories. Consequently, the overriding principle of product description and food packaging is to let the product speak for itself, and show itself, to offer direct sensory evidence of its appearance and qualities.

The most palpable, tangible, aromatic evidence comes in the open market where the customer is able to touch, taste, smell and test the product. This old-fashioned way of doing business survives in microcosm in the supermarket with displays of loose fruit and vegetables, at the deli-counter – where customers are invited to sample some product – or on the floor of the shop with special promotions. Generally, though, there’s a barrier. In the interests of hygiene, customer and raw product are kept apart, by the width of Clingfilm, at least.

This leaves ‘the sight of food’ as the primary indexical evidence available to the customer. Transparency /visibility become an overriding goal in food packaging, because it enables - direct, sensory product evidence; validation of quality claims; comparison to competitor product; imagined consumption.
2. SEMIOTIC PRINCIPLES

This report offers a semiotic examination of food-labelling in the UK. It looks at the general properties and principles of labelling and, for illustration and example, examines the labelling of specific food types – spreads and pizza.

**Semiotics**

Semiotics seeks to reveal the 'language' of everyday cultural expressions - of food, clothing, photography, music, for example - by analysing these as if they were 'texts', with their own grammar and vocabulary.

The Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, has proposed a hidden order to (French) food. He suggests that a 'grammatical' meal consists of 'the raw' (food untransformed), 'the cooked' (food transformed by people) and 'the rotten' (food transformed by nature). So that for the French, salad (raw), steak and chips (cooked) and cheese (rotten) as a complete and proper meal, containing all the main forms of food.

**Conventions**

If this seems a surprising analysis, it may illustrate a feature of conventions - that we often know them without knowing we know them. The rules of communication are often unspoken. Just as a child learns language without being able to state its formal grammar, so we internalise the rules of cultural forms without being able to explicitly voice them. Most easily we can see and say when rules are broken - 'that's an odd way to dress for an interview', 'that's a strange meal', 'that's a curious way to package sausages.'

Consumers of any type of communication have an internalised model of the conventions of that form. TV drama builds through conflict to crisis. Menus are expected to be brisk. Greeting cards are expected to be pretty, sentimental or jokily sadistic. Similarly, we have internalised the conventions of food packaging from past readings in the cumulative hours spent in those style libraries we call supermarkets.

**Key terms: binary oppositions**

Texts use general, shared language. They also stress particular dimensions, key concepts, to map their worlds, delineate their subject matter. They achieve such stress by presenting binary oppositions - good/bad, love/hate etc.

The Book of Genesis gives the opposites by which the world can be understood - light/dark, night/day, water/land, animal/plant.
Spy stories stress honesty/deception, concealment/revelation. Horror stories dwell on the mingling of the natural and unnatural, living and dead - evoking the unliving (werewolves) and the undead (zombies etc).

Texts work by showing extremes and opposites. The hero is counter-balanced by the villain, the friend by the enemy, the act of kindness by the act of cruelty.

So food packaging – like Spy stories, romantic fiction, or horror movies – has its own key, binary oppositions to structure the universe and demarcate the major players. Most notably, it stresses –

- Natural vs. synthetic
- Fresh vs. preserved
- Pure vs. processed
- Raw vs. cooked
- Quality vs. economy
- Traditional vs. new

**Relational meaning**

Semiotics argues that meanings are not absolute but relative, deriving from contrasts and comparisons within an overall system.

Take the 10.30 train from Euston to Edinburgh, just for example. The engine, carriages, staff and platform vary from day to day. The train may rarely leave at 10.30 precisely. Passengers understand the apparent illogicality when the announcer says “The 10.30 train has been delayed by forty five minutes...” The identity of the train is relational rather than positive. It only has sense in the overall scheme. It is what it is not. It isn’t the earlier or the later train in the timetable. It isn’t the same-time train to somewhere-else.

Similarly, any term in a system has a contrastive meaning; it conveys what it is not.

The consequence is that no choice in packaging or labelling is innocent or silent. Any stylistic choice - colour-scheme, font, word-selection - will be understood for what it is, and also be seen for what it is not. Every item in food labelling stands in dynamic opposition to the items that could replace it, that each means something else.

**Denotation and connotation**

The meanings of any item can be literal or cultural, specific or general, denotative or connotative.

A photograph shows not only its subject but also conveys a sense of ‘realism’. A graph shows the relationship of variables; it also conveys an image of ‘evidence’. The margarine packaging that shows a graph is not just offering an element of evidence. It is aligning the product with truth, claiming a special relationship with ‘science’.

Black has latent cultural meanings of the funereal or sombre. Purple carries connotations through its association with luxury, royalty and the papacy. Green is the colour of the
countryside and emblematic colour of ecological movement. The colours deployed in packaging utilize these references and resonances.

Particular foods – caviar, lobster, rice-pudding, turkey, fish fingers, pot-noodles - carry strong connotations through their association with affluence, childhood, special occasions, or the demographics of their characteristic consumers.

Forms of packaging carry connotations too. Cans are associated with economy family staples – baked beans, tomato soup, tinned fruit. Frozen food evokes associations of garden peas, fish fingers, Kerry Katona and Iceland shops. Chilled and fresh foods tend to connote greater quality for their assumed higher nutritional values and frequent cost premium.

**Change through time**

Denotation and connotation are subject to constant change. The vocabulary of food is constantly expanding – through innovation and by the appropriation of items from other cuisines and cultures.

The wider social meanings of food change too. Salmon used to be a luxury item. Now, through intensive farming, it has become a cheapish fish. Oysters used to be ‘poor-food’, served up in the work-house. Now, through change of taste, and relative scarcity, they carry connotations of affluence and luxury.

When that metal was extremely rare, some European royalty ate off aluminium plates. Their guests might have to make-do with gold. Things change.

**Symbols, icons and indices**

Anything that carries meaning can be regarded as a ‘sign’. Classically, signs have been characterised as ‘Symbols’, ‘Icons’ and ‘Indices’. The distinctions rest on the relationship between representation and meaning.

For symbols, this relationship is arbitrary. Any sound could be used to mean “dog”. The understanding rests on an arbitrary convention. Words are typically arbitrary. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”.

With Icons, there is a relationship of resemblance between representation and meaning. A photograph resembles its subject. A painted portrait resembles the sitter. A stylised icon of a phone resembles a real phone, albeit sketchily.

With an index, the representation is caused by the thing it depicts. Smoke is caused by fire and represents it. A high temperature indicates illness and is caused by it. The scent of roasting coffee is caused by the drink and represents it.
In food packaging, evidence of the food can be, and is, provided by symbols (words), icons (photos and graphics) and by indices (perceptual and sensory evidence of food). There’s cynicism and suspicion at work. Consumers know that words mislead, exaggerate and lie; that images are often contrived and enhanced. The best, most honest, most reliable evidence of the nature and quality of food is ‘indexical’, provided by sight, touch, smell and taste. These ‘show’ what’s what, whereas symbols merely ‘tell’.

One of the major factors shaping food packaging is the imperative to offer indexical evidence of food. Most frequently, this is achieved by ‘transparency’, by making the product visible to the consumer’s eye.
3. CONVENTIONS OF LABELLING

Food packaging and labelling tends to be highly conventionalised. Within any and every type of food product there’s evidence of –

- A narrow range of packaging solutions – e.g. cardboard or plastic cartons for milk.
- Consistent colours of packaging and labelling.
- Consistent markers, indicating standard variations within that type of product – e.g. blue cap/label for full-fat milk, green for semi-skimmed, red for skimmed.
- Consistent verbal descriptors of product – e.g. mature, medium and mild for cheddar cheese.
- Consistent criteria for judging and differentiating product within the range - e.g. ‘crumbly’, ‘tangy’, ‘with bite’ for mature cheddar.
- Naming conventions, that products of a certain type have similar reference points in their names – e.g. evoking place in the names for cheeses.

There are conventions evident both within and between brands. Sainsbury’s deploy green packaging to do a variety of descriptive, differentiating jobs within their stores –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Green’ means</th>
<th>Product range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb</td>
<td>Chilled meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vegetarian</td>
<td>Chilled ready-meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vegetable</td>
<td>Chilled pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Aloe Vera</td>
<td>Toilet paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry roasted</td>
<td>Peanuts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are strong agreements across brands. The effect shows a paradox of cooperation in competition. Different suppliers present similar products in similar ways, making them identifiable as belonging to a competitive set – e.g. of salt and vinegar crisps, dark roast coffee, non-biological washing powder.

The consistencies emerge out of product design and market research. Designers explicitly or implicitly observe the existing conventions. Their solutions are offered to consumer groups who say if the design looks appropriate or ‘right’.

Consumers can perform this validating task because they in turn have internalized conventions of packaging and labelling through the high cumulative mileage they’ve travelled, pushing a supermarket trolley.

On occasions designers will deliberately toy with the conventions. A few years ago, a manufacturer, reversed the green versus blue distinction between salt and vinegar and cheese and onion crisps. It works, and it arouses attention, because consumers are keenly,
explicitly aware of the prior convention, noticing the change - that the blue packet has gone green.

**Butter and spreads**

The conventions of packaging are clearly evident in spreads, for example. The range of butters and spread available in the major supermarkets in the UK constitute 8 main families/groups –

- Pure butter
- Butter blend (spreadable-butter)
- Buttery taste spread
- Olive-oil spread
- Sunflower spread
- Heart healthy spread
- Cholesterol lowering spread
- Cooking fat

There are standard types within these –

- Default/regular
- Light
- With omega-oil
- No-salt

And further, emerging, types -

- Gourmet
- Organic
The strong conventions of labelling and packaging make a spread clearly identifiable as belonging to a particular type -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pack</th>
<th>Pack colours</th>
<th>Pack imagery</th>
<th>Benefit claim on pack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butter</td>
<td>Block or cylinder</td>
<td>Metallic foil or yellow</td>
<td>Countryside Region/country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter-blend</td>
<td>Tub</td>
<td>Metallic Green text</td>
<td>As butter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buttery</td>
<td>tub</td>
<td>Yellow Blue text</td>
<td>Playful font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive-oil</td>
<td>tub</td>
<td>Olive green Olive brown</td>
<td>Cypress trees Italianesque-landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>tub</td>
<td>Pale yellow Or green</td>
<td>Sunflower Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-fat</td>
<td>tub</td>
<td>Green Blue-green-</td>
<td>Heart icon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol-lowering</td>
<td>tub</td>
<td>Green Blue-green</td>
<td>Heart icon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There can be striking uniformities.

Pure butter goes in paper or foil. It just doesn’t belong in a tub. Whatever the convenience and practical merits of that packaging, it might devalue the premium product in the range, presenting it as similar-looking to economy alternatives.

Olive oil spreads come in olive-coloured packs. They carry images of Cypress trees, or Tuscan landscapes, to evidence their *Italianicity*.

Those imitator spreads, that aren’t butter, actually, but seek to reproduce it’s taste, use blue lettering on a bright yellow pack and have punny names –

*I can’t believe it’s not butter*
*You’d butter believe it*
*Butterlicious*
*Utterly butterly*

Sunflower spread shows an icon of a sunflower or the sun on a pale yellow or green tub. Text is in darker green. Heart-healthy and Cholesterol-lowering spreads bear the icon of a heart and use green or green-blue packs. The brand names are ‘latinesque’ evoking scientific connotations, to reinforce the credibility of their health-claims.
Pizzas

Similar consistency and conventionality is seen in the packaging and labelling of pizza – both frozen and chilled. The product is likely to claim that it –

- Derives from an American or Italian tradition
- Is ‘authentic’ to that tradition
- Is ‘cuisine’ (food enhanced and transformed by craft)
- Has special nutritional value
  - (high fibre, GM-free, source of calcium, low fat, vegetarian etc)
- Delivers fast (can be prepared quickly)

Chilled Pizzas most often claim Italianicity. Frozen pizzas most often claim Americanicity. Frozen product may fit more readily in a US food tradition.

Between a quarter and three-quarters of the pack face is devoted to product display. Frozen pizza is displayed emphatically by photographic icon. Chilled pizza is displayed by –

- Photographic icon, and/or
- Transparent exposure through the wrapping

There is a very strong convention that the photograph should show a cut segment of pizza lifted from the rest –

- encouraging imaginary consumption
- revealing the properties of both base and topping through cross-sectional view

There tends to be four-fold description of product - topping and base are both described by (a) summary title, and (b) qualifying phrasing –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topping</th>
<th>Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>e.g. Pepperoni,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or Four Cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifier</td>
<td>e.g. topped with pepperoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>salami, Emmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cheese…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of the frequency of descriptions, the topping is deemed more important, and referred to more frequently than the base –

There’s strong colour coding. In three quarters of cases, chilled pizza packaging selects its dominant colour from the green-blue end of the spectrum - which connotes control and freshness.

Frozen pizza packaging frequently selects its dominant colour from the opposite, red-yellow, end of the spectrum - which connotes excitement and warmth.
4. THE DYNAMICS OF FOOD LABELLING

Packaging and labelling are integral

The labelling and packaging of food are inseparable.

- Packaging is a vehicle that displays or depicts the food, often stressing its visibility or appearance.
- Labelling requires - is realized upon - the surfaces of the packaging.
- Packaging solutions – e.g. tins, cartons – carry implications, offer possibilities or restrict options, for labelling or product description.

Tins prevent the transparent display of product. Conversely, transparent display restricts the surface available for other labelling. Curved, and flexible, surfaces prevent the use of a flat frame, normally employed for displaying text or imagery.

- Packaging solutions carry connotations which help define (label) the features of the food.

In nutritional and taste terms, frozen and tinned foods, are frequently seen as inferior to fresh and chilled equivalents. Some delivery methods – e.g. tube yoghurt – are seen as ‘childish’ rather than adult.

Labelling is mixed-motive communication

Food labelling combines compulsory figures and voluntary descriptions of product.

There are messages – about quality and product features, and appeals to the consumer - that the manufacturer/supplier wishes to express. And there are compulsory descriptions they have to provide. Regulations require food to be marked or labelled with certain descriptors, such as:

- the name of the food
- weight or volume
- a list of ingredients (including food allergens)
- GM ingredients
- the amount of an ingredient which is named or associated with the food
- an appropriate durability indication (e.g. ‘best before’ or ‘use by’)
- any special storage conditions or instructions for use
- the name and address of the manufacturer, packer or retailer
- the place of origin (where failure to do so might mislead)
- lot or batch number
- nutrition information is not required unless the product makes ‘nutrition claims’, but there must be a display of the energy value of the food in kilojoules (kJ) and kilocalories (kcal), and the amount of protein, carbohydrate and fat in grams (g) must be provided.

There are more detailed compositional and labelling rules for certain foods, including:

- bread and flour
- cocoa and chocolate
- soluble coffee
- evaporated and dried milk
• fruit juice
• honey
• infant formula
• jams
• meat products: sausages, burgers and pies
• natural mineral waters
• spreadable fats
• sugars

While the supplier/manufacturer will be eager to depict their product advantageously, there are legislative requirements of labelling they are less willing to discharge, for example describing –

• GM ingredients
• Relatively high salt, fat or sugar content
• Relatively low weight/volume in relation to package size
• Ingredients that are named in health-scares or have attracted adverse publicity

Similarly, for the consumer, labelling is mixed-motive communication. There are product descriptors they wish to read and examine – ingredients, fat content, country of origin – placed in unpredictable position amongst other information – product promotion, marketing – they prefer to avoid.

Further, there’s a perverse symmetry. The information the manufacturer wishes to ‘de-emphasise’ may be that information that the consumer most wishes to read. The consequences are intricate games, which the consumer plays with selective attention, awarding or withholding scrutiny, while the manufacturer plays with font size, positioning and emphasis.

In this light, food-labelling, alongside junk-mail, cold-calling and radio advertising, emerges as yet another arena in which an enthusiastic marketer pursues a weary, reluctant consumer.

Food labelling is hybrid text

Food labelling, unlike many texts, is hybrid, combining a range of different vocabularies and lexicons. It speaks a) self-promotion, b) cuisine, c) marketing, d) domestic advice, e) nutritional advice, f) quantitative analysis of food, all within a relatively terse volume of text. While a book or film can operate within a single genre, aesthetic or ‘register’, the labelling of a Heinz soup can is forced to shift between different types of language, vocabularies and sets of assumptions.

The product needs to be marketed as palatable and attractive.  
A delicious soup that’s bursting with flavour

The brand can present provenance and heritage  
Our famous, much loved… Classic… the original and the best

It has also to be described technically in terms of its nutritional values  
Energy – kJ 237kJ per 100g  
Salt equivalent 0.7g

The regulation to instruct for special use is sometimes interpreted over-literally  
Empty contents into a saucepan…
The overall effect, of this mix of descriptions, is a collage of disparate, unrelated messages, serving different functions, in a range of colours, fonts and type sizes spread over the mobius strip of the label.

Food labelling is busy

As a consequence of being hybrid and multi-functional, food labelling is ‘busy’, terse and hyperactive.

- It serves a broad range of descriptive jobs (descriptions of use, nutritional value, product, manufacturer) within confined space
- It’s text tends to be staccato, short and abbreviated
- It uses a large number, and high density, of graphic effects, symbols, changes of font, size and colour to demarcate sections and different descriptors

Food labelling can be both simple and complex

The educational level presumed by food-labelling differs drastically between sections. Marketing and promotional sections of labelling make normal assumptions about the intelligence of the consumer, but how-to-use instructions can seem simplistic and patronizing. For example, a soup can carries the advice –

*Check that the product is hot before serving.*

*Stir halfway through*

*IMPORTANT take care when removing hot liquids from microwave*

*Eat well*

*Microwave ovens vary*

It’s salutary to consider what corresponding instructions would say in the manual of a new car –

*Check that the vehicle has arrived before exiting.*

*Take care not to collide with oncoming vehicles*

*Drive properly*

*Cars vary*

Elsewhere on the can, consumers are offered quantitative information about the nutritional properties of food in technical language they generally do not understand –e.g. the difference between ‘kJ’ and ‘kcal’.

Focus groups on butter and spreads show that consumers tend to have an awareness of basic nutritional issues. They know they should reduce their intake of salt and fat and up their intake of fruit, vegetables and fibre.

But very few respondents understand the differences between saturated, unsaturated and monounsaturated fats, grasp the basics of cholesterol, or can say what omega oils are. Ingredient lists naming preservatives, sweeteners, colorants and other complex organic compounds are likely to exceed the comprehension of most consumers.

Regulatory food labelling is well-intentioned, designed to inform and help. But it can simultaneously speak beneath consumers and over their heads, addressing them as a domestic incompetents (who buy soup but don’t know how to heat it) while presuming they have a relatively sophisticated knowledge of nutrition or chemistry. Such paradoxical people do exist. But they are probably far less numerous than food-packaging supposes.
Labelling can give competing impressions

The contents of food labelling are shaped both by regulators and manufacturers. The latter seek both to promote their products and to seem helpful to consumers. The outcome is that there are three major forms of information –

a. Product promotion and description, defined by the producer to sell its product or present it advantageously with the competitive set.
b. Regulatory material, required by food legislators, and
c. Pro-bono information, shaped by the producer, judged to be useful to the consumer, offered as additional help, supplementary to the regulatory material

In the two tables below we see how these three sources provide information on the range of product features.

It immediately becomes apparent that in most aspects of food description, the producers are offering promotional text and image alongside the factual information required of them by regulators. This becomes more than a right of reply. It can lead to competing impressions and an uneven contest, since the producers of the food have control of the pack, the label, the positioning of information, and the emphasis conveyed by colour, graphics, font type and size.

A food can be described, with equal accuracy, as “90% fat-free”, in large red font on the front of the pack, or as “Fat: 10g per 100g” in small print on the reverse. The former sounds like a recommendation. The latter can be read as a covert warning.

There is an asymmetry of style at work. Publicity recommends. Regulation informs factually. Publicity strives for charismatic expression. Regulation offers numbers and lists of constituents. Publicity offers photos and imagery. Regulation has small font letters and numbers.

There is the further issue that, the identity and source of information may often be unclear. Promotional material - “Rich in B vitamins.” With an “Extra Folic Acid” logo – could be construed as regulatory approval or the endorsement of an independent validating body.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Product promotion</th>
<th>Regulatory</th>
<th>Pro-bono</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plus price-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>comparisons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingredients</td>
<td>Often, and when</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exotic/expensive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>In value offers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recyclable</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-friendly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source country</td>
<td>With authenticity</td>
<td>Country of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>preparation/manufa-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cture. not necessarily</td>
<td>origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allergy advice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetarian/vegan</td>
<td>As special ranges</td>
<td>From ingredient list</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special dietary need</td>
<td></td>
<td>From ingredient list?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight-conscious</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>From energy information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat/saturated fat</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt/sodium</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td></td>
<td>From ingredient list</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When it comes to the major criteria that we employ in our food selection – fresh, natural, pure, authentic etc – regulatory language has relatively little to say. By inference and a tight reading of the ingredient list, a consumer can determine if food is natural or pure.

Use-by and best-before information don’t talk about freshness. Instead they warn of ‘staleness’ or ‘potentially unsafe-to-eat’.

It is extremely difficult or impossible to estimate the quality, healthiness, or authenticity of food from the regulatory information on the pack.

‘Country of origin’ shows where food was finally prepared, not where ingredients were sourced or treated.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food qualities</th>
<th>Product promotion</th>
<th>Regulatory</th>
<th>Pro-bono</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td>(use by/best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>before)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td>Ingredient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>list</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td>Ingredient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>list</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td>(Country of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>origin)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economical</td>
<td>Package colours</td>
<td>(Price x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Images</td>
<td>quantity?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>(Ingredient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Images</td>
<td>list)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>Allergen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indulgent</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td>Ingredient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>list</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-friendly</td>
<td>Appearance Images</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The regulatory information offered on food labelling is factual, precise and accurate. It is of service to the consumer. But, in practice, for most food purchasers, its information is likely to be overwhelmed by the welter of promotional material surrounding it on the label.
THE MESSAGES OF LABELLING

In paraphrase of an influential theory proposed by Roman Jakobson, there are six key aspects of communication in any ‘text’, including food-packaging -

the wider context
the message

the communicator

the relationship

the audience

language and etiquette

The primary emphasis can shift continuously. Emphasis on any particular aspect will generate communication of a particular type. In effect, the wandering focus says -

‘The situation is...’
‘The product...’

‘We are...’
‘Let’s get together...’

‘You are...’
‘Let’s put it this way...’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicator = Producer/supplier</td>
<td>Emotive</td>
<td>Self-description Brand statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience = Customer/consumer</td>
<td>Conative</td>
<td>Describing the customer Appeals to customer motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact = Relationship between supplier and consumer</td>
<td>Phatic</td>
<td>Suggesting or describing relationship of care and provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context = Wider social situation</td>
<td>Referential</td>
<td>Describing the broader context in which food is produced and consumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message = Presenting the</td>
<td>Poetic</td>
<td>Product description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>product</td>
<td>metalingual</td>
<td>Language about the language. The text and symbols used in labelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The language = How things are said</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Emotive labelling**

With the product situated in the supermarket alongside its direct competitors, the manufacturer/supplier needs to promote its identity, features and strengths.

*Heinz Classic Cream of Tomato Soup… the original and the best*

*Tesco's finest*

Product labels have to function as effective promotion and advertising.

**Conative labelling**

Any act of communication 'alter-casts' the audience, assigns them identity, makes assumptions about their interests, values and motives. Labelling, through the properties of its language, and complexity of its propositions, makes assumptions about the educational level of the consumer –

*Do not overcook*

*Microwaves vary*

The pitch of the product-promotion assumes the likely motives of the consumer. There are several major considerations here that can be invoked individually, or entwined. These include the primary terms of consumers' food evaluation –

- Health –conscious/health enhancing
  *Proven to reduce cholesterol*

- Pure/natural
  *No artificial colours, no artificial flavours, no artificial preservatives*

- Slimming/low-calorie
  *Weight watchers..*

- Special dietary need
  *Suitable for a gluten-free diet*
• Foodie/haute cuisine

*Taste the difference*

• Indulgence/treat

*Treat yourself*

• Authentic/traditional

*A deliciously authentic pasta made in Italy*

• Child-appeal

*Calling all pirates...*

• Value/economy

*33% off... 40% extra*

**Phatic labelling**

Phatic expression stresses contact, assuming or suggesting a relationship between supplier and customer.

The message may be mass reproduced, written by a person unknown, in ignorance of the reader's existence, and left on the back of a food can or carton, but it remains nonetheless an expression of concern and an offer of aid.

*Every little helps*

*Call our careline on...*

*Take care when removing hot liquids from the microwave...*

*Because we care*

**Referential labelling**

This talks of the wider context in which the consumers find themselves and the product finds use.

*Recyclable*

*Assured chickens from farms in the UK...*

*From a sustainable source*

It includes reference to recycling and energy conservation, moral concerns about product, the economic climate and, currently, the credit crunch. Most of the ideological, animal-welfare, ecological concerns about food are ‘referential’ in this sense.
Metalingual labelling

This is language about language. Here, the label talks about how it talks. It defines its symbols and explains its conventions.

See the reverse side for cooking instructions
The multiple traffic light labelling is based on guideline daily amounts...
Whenever you see the eat well sunflower, you know...

There’s often a belt-and-braces approach in relations to icons and symbols, which are shown and also explained textually. This is useful, given the growth of endorsing bodies and the welter of new signages they add to the vocabulary of labelling.

This leaves the final form of labelling –

Product description

Consumers know that words lie, pictures mislead, and marketers tell stories. The overriding principle of product description and food packaging is, whenever possible, to let the product speak for itself, and show itself, to offer sensory and indexical evidence of the food and its qualities.

The most palpable, tangible, aromatic evidence comes in the open market where the customer is able to touch, taste, smell and test the product. This anachronistic way of doing business survives in microcosm in the supermarket with loose fruit and vegetables, at the deli-counter – where customers are invited to sample some product – or on the floor of the shop with special promotions.

Generally, though, there’s a barrier. In the interests of hygiene, customer and raw product are kept apart, by the width of Clingfilm, at least. This is the supermarket equivalent of safe-sex. This is clean shopping.

Transparency

This leaves ‘the sight of food’ as the primary indexical evidence available to the customer. Transparency /visibility becomes an overriding goal in food packaging, because it enables -

- Direct, sensory product evidence
- Evidence compatible with hygiene
- Validation of quality claims
- Comparison to competitor product
- Imagined consumption

The table below shows the sensory accessibility of food, through various packaging solutions and product types. It indicates the strong impulse for marketers to allow food to show itself visually.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory access</th>
<th>Packaging</th>
<th>Products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tastable</td>
<td>Unwrapped</td>
<td>Deli-counter fare etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Products on promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible/palpable/smellable</td>
<td>Unwrapped or openable</td>
<td>Loose fruit and vegetable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boxed eggs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent</td>
<td>Transparent film wrapper</td>
<td>Packaged fruit and veg,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transparent and uncoloured glass or Plastic</td>
<td>Fresh and cooked meats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blist pack and clamshell</td>
<td>Fresh and cooked fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cheese, bottled goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some chilled ready-meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windowed/visible</td>
<td>Boxed or wrapped with transparent window</td>
<td>Cakes, pies, fresh pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opaque/Translucent</td>
<td>Translucent glass or plastic</td>
<td>Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Translucent wrapped-goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape-disclosed</td>
<td>Opaque wrap</td>
<td>Biscuits, wrapped breads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depicted</td>
<td>Tinned, opaque-wrap, frozen, boxed</td>
<td>Canned fruit and veg.,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>meat and fish, depicted by photo or other image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described</td>
<td>Tinned, opaque-wrap, frozen, boxed</td>
<td>Contained and non-visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>goods described and qualified textually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are major limits to visibility with two forms of packaging:

- Frozen goods – where frosting prevents transparency, and most things look alike under snow, and
- Canned goods – where a metal barrier prevents an inside view.

The characteristic solution in both cases is to compensate for invisibility of the product itself by providing photographic imagery as the best (iconic, most realistic) alternative to direct sight.

**Binary terms**

This is the arena of manufacturers’ product descriptions. Like any form of communication, food design and packaging makes use of key, binary oppositions.
Market research indicates several important contrasts in consumers’ judgements of food, including –

*Fresh vs. Preserved, Natural vs. artificial, Pure vs. Processed, Organic vs. not-organic, Quality vs. Economy, Raw vs. Cooked.*

It’s in the nature of competitive, commercial activity to explore and exhaust the possibilities of a form. Once you pick one term, many other possibilities unfold.

Take any term. Like ‘Raw’. Immediately you have two terms, because any words presumes its opposite, its contradiction – ‘Cooked’.

This yields four terms, because any term presumes its contrary – what it’s not. Here, the contraries of are ‘not-cooked’ and ‘not-raw’.

From this we can derive a semiotic square (showing the full possibilities) by laying out these four terms, so –

![Semiotic Square Diagram]( attachment:semiotic_square.png)

The four terms this provides – A, B, not-A, not-B – allows the possibility of at least four further, composite terms – A+B, A+notB, B+notA, and notA+notB, and also the challenging contradictions A+notA, B+notB.

In essence, once initial term yields ten derivative, secondary meanings.
Terms generated by this - e.g. ‘fresh’ – can then be used as elements to explore further possibilities –

Food development, packaging and labelling explores the full semantic options available to it. This may reveal new ways of treating or devising food. More often, though, it will raise the issues of how existing things should be termed, named.

It’s in the essence of the promotional aspects of labelling to euphemise, find the best sounding descriptor for sometimes unattractive concepts. As above, where “caught/harvested some time ago then left in a freezer” can re-emerge smelling sweeter as “fresh-frozen”.

This leaves us in the centre of the labyrinth, with the endless recursiveness of language, where each term generates a range of further terms.

Food labelling is a medium of infinite possibility, with shifting conventions, and with a vocabulary in constant flux.