Food Label Fear Mongering and its “Toxic” Effects

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by Megan Maisano

You know it’s hard out here for a processed food. These days, most consumers want to know what’s in their food and how it’s processed. While that may sound promising towards improving food choices and overall health, it also might be contributing to a culture of fear-mongering and food discrimination – none of which is helpful. This month, Megan Maisano investigates common marketing strategies employed by food manufacturers that result in unnecessary fear, doubt, and confusion in the minds of consumers.

Source: pexels.com

Good news: over half of the U.S. population is paying attention to food labels. Bad news: it might be increasing consumer confusion and contributing to unintended health hysteria.

Whether it’s the latest Netflix documentary demonizing an entire food group, an Instagram feed promoting “clean” eating, or your mother’s cousin Carol pushing her latest detox agenda on Facebook, food fear mongering is real.

The problem is that many claims of “toxic” or “unclean” foods don’t come from health professionals or experts. On top of that, their messages are more accessible by the common consumer than, let’ say, the most recent edition of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

I’ll be the first to admit I read Michael Pollen’s *Food Rules* a few years ago. I loved it. It was simple, easy to understand, and seemed logical. Nutrition science, however, is *not* simple, *not* easy to understand, and evolves with advancing evidence-based research… and nutrition research is hard.

While the desire for food transparency is warranted and can lead to healthier decision-making, the marketing response by the food industry has taken advantage of consumers’ unwarranted fears. Instead of highlighting what’s good in the food we eat, product labels emphasize what’s not in our food, and it’s contributing to the chaos.

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I decided to explore the research and science behind common food label claims. The results: practices that range from reasonable transparency to questionable marketing tactics that make us say C'mon Man.

Source: https://www.nongmoproject.org/

Non-GMO Project

The Non-GMO Project, which started in two grocery stores in 2007, now has its iconic butterfly on more than 3,000 brands and 43,000 products. GMOs, or Genetically Modified Organisms, are plants, animals, microorganisms or other organisms whose DNA has been changed via genetic engineering or transgenic technology. The debate concerning GMO safety remains highly controversial. Without going into too much detail, cynics claim that GMOs have not been proven safe and that people have a right to know whether their food contains them. On the other side, folks like the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine claim GMOs have not been proven harmful to humans or the environment.

Regardless of the verdict, the Non-GMO butterfly is landing on more and more products that are naturally GMO-free, such as tomatoes, oranges, and milk. This trend leads to the misconception that tomatoes, oranges, and milk without said-butterfly DO have GMOs and are therefore less safe. This deceptive labeling practice not only hurts the consumer, but also competing brands and their farmers.

The Impact – a 2015 nonpartisan analysis reported that only 37 percent of those surveyed feel that GMOs are safe to eat and 57 percent considered them unsafe. Individuals with a higher education, on the other hand, were more likely to consider GMOs safe. Numerous studies also show that consumer knowledge of GMOs is low and that their information is mainly sourced by the media – *insert cousin Carol's shared Facebook article on GMOs' toxic effects*. The fear continues.

Source: thrivemarket.com

Gluten Free and Grain Free

In his book Grain Brain, David Perlmutter writes, "Gluten sensitivity represents one of the greatest and most under-recognized health threats to humanity." The well-known blogger, Wellness Mama, once wrote an article titled "How Grains are Killing You Slowly" (but has since changed the title).

The 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, on the other hand, list grains (specifically whole grains) as a part of a healthy eating pattern. How did this extreme divide on gluten and grains come about?

The 1990's brought about increased awareness of celiac disease and the effectiveness of treatment following a gluten-free diet. This was a major win and relief for folks with gluten-related disorders. What followed was an increase in the amount of research on gluten and its potential effects on other chronic disorders – and that's when hysteria hit. Books like *Grain Brain* and *Wheat Belly*, both which have been accused of literature cherry-picking and generalization, earned best-selling status and changed the way we looked at a baguette. This frenzy, combined with the highly popular low-carb Atkins Diet, created the recipe for a new villain – gluten and grains.

The food industry responded and so did the media. According to the research firm Packaged Facts, sales in gluten-free products came in around $973 million in 2014 and are expected to exceed $2 billion by 2019 – far exceeding what would be expected in marketing to the less than one percent of individuals with celiac disease. Oh, and these products are about 240% more expensive. Celebrity influences like Gwyneth Paltrow's book and Miley Cyrus' tweet, have made the gluten-free diet appear more mainstream, swaying consumer perception and decreasing the seriousness of disorders like celiac disease.

While research on non-celiac gluten sensitivity (affecting about six percent of the U.S.) is still mixed, many studies suggest that gluten may not necessarily be the underlying problem and symptoms may even be psychological. In his book, *The Gluten Lie*, Alan Levinovitz explains that the significant increase in negative responses to gluten may be due to a phenomenon called Mass Sociogenic Illness – where a physiological response is provoked by mass anxiety and negative expectations.

The Impact – a 2015 Hartman Group survey found that 35% of respondents adopted a gluten-free lifestyle for "no reason," 26% followed it because they thought it was a "healthier option," 19% followed it for "digestive health," and only 8% followed it because of a "gluten sensitivity."

There is a growing body of research that suggests there is no evidence to support gluten-free diets for the general population and that going gluten-free may even hinder health. Nevertheless, the damage may be done.

Source: usda.gov

Going Organic

The USDA Organic label identifies a product that meets federal guidelines for farming and processing. Guidelines include soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and the use of additives. As far as organic packaged foods, 95% of the product must be organic and free of artificial preservatives, colors, or flavors.

The organic movement is a step in the right direction towards encouraging more responsible agricultural practices. However, the social impact of the organic label has created unwarranted confusion and fear in "chemically-ridden" conventional foods that aren't free of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. The fear is hurting small farmers and our wallets.

A common source of organic fear-mongering comes from the infamous Dirty Dozen published by the Environmental Working Group (EWG). This list identifies twelve non-organic produce items that are reported to have the highest levels of pesticide residue. What the EWG fails to mention,

however, is the type of pesticide and its relation to its chronic reference dose (i.e., safe maximum daily dose for life). A Journal of Toxicology study found that none of the dirty dozen products came even close to their reference dose and that EWG’s methodology lacked scientific credibility. While there is nothing wrong with being mindful of pesticide use, people should know organic farmers use pesticides too and their levels are not tested by the USDA.

From a nutrition perspective, research on organic food is mixed. Both organic and conventional practices offer nutritious produce with plenty of phytochemicals; however, organic produce may come out on top as far as levels of phosphorous, antioxidants and less pesticide residue.

From a health-outcome perspective however, there is no direct evidence that organic diets lead to improved health or lower the risk of disease and cancer. Pesticide residue risk, if a concern, can be reduced by simply washing fresh produce.

Lastly, organic farming, labeling, and products are expensive. If price is keeping consumers from purchasing organic produce and fear is keeping them from purchasing conventional produce, we have a problem.

In a country where less than twenty percent of adults eat their daily recommended fruits and vegetables, *all* produce should be promoted without adding unnecessary confusion or fear.

Source: topclassactions.com

“Natural” and “Free of …”

According to a 2014 global health survey, 43% of respondents rate “all-natural” foods very important in purchasing decisions. Therefore, having that green and neutral-colored label considerably influences consumer behavior. In regards to meat and poultry, the USDA defines “natural” as containing no artificial ingredients, added colors, and minimal processing. Unfortunately, there is no regulated definition of the use of “natural” for all other products – hence marketing exploitation and further confusion. Below are just a few assumptions that consumers make about natural products regarding what they’re free of, and whether or not that really matters:

Free of Preservatives: Preservatives in food help delay spoilage, improve quality, and decrease food waste. They decrease the risk of food-borne illness, lower oxidation in the body, and keep us from worrying about things like getting tuberculosis from our milk. Consumers often fear ingredients that have chemical-sounding names; however, lest we forget, we are made of chemical compounds! Many preservatives are harmless and even nutritious like ascorbic acid (vitamin C), alpha-tocopherol (vitamin E), calcium propionate, niacin (vitamin B3), lysozyme, and tertiary butylhydroquinone (TBHQ). Some other preservatives, however, may have questionable effects on health when consumed in high doses, so more research is needed on their safety.

No Antibiotics Ever: This term's tricky. For a long time, many farmers used antibiotics not just for the treatment of ill animals but also to facilitate growth. The FDA has since banned the use for growth and animal antibiotics sales have fallen considerably. However, sick animals do need treatment and not using antibiotics to treat them would be unethical and pose a risk to food safety. So, here's the deal to understanding the label: Farm A has a sick chicken which they treat with antibiotics. The chicken is therefore removed from the antibiotic-free group for sale (and who knows what that means). Farm B has a sick chicken which they treat with antibiotics. The chicken then goes through a withdrawal period and is tested before it can be used for processing, often with the oversight of a licensed veterinarian. Only Farm A can have the "No Antibiotics Ever" label. Is Farm A healthier than Farm B? Probably not.

No Hormones Added: Fun fact: adding hormones or steroids to poultry and pork is illegal in the U.S. Just like tomatoes with a Non-GMO label, chicken and pork products with a "No Hormones Added" label are simply playing into consumer fears.

Free of High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS): Great! But keep in mind that sugar, molasses, agave nectar, cane juice, and honey are "natural" sources of added sugars too. HFCS is essentially a mix of fructose, glucose, and water. It varies from having either 42% fructose (often found in processed food) to 55% fructose (often found in soft drinks) – not too different from sugar with a 50:50 mix or your $10 organic agave nectar.

Source: target.com

Conclusion: Fear Mongering Isn't Helping

When it comes to promoting healthy eating behaviors, fear tactics aren't helping and may even be harmful. Unlike tobacco or drug use, two issues where fear campaigns were successfully used to impact behavior, we *need* to eat to live. Instilling unnecessary anxiety about foods that are not Non-GMO, gluten-free, certified organic, or "free from" whatever may keep us from consuming a nutritious, well-balanced diet.

Unfortunately, the U.S. hasn't learned its lesson from the anti-fat and anti-cholesterol era because we continue to look for something simple to blame for health problems, and the media and food industry continues to take advantage of that desire. Moderation just isn't sexy.

Whether it's the latest one-dimensional diet, a food blogger's recent witch hunt, or a misleading food label in an earthy color tone, fear-induced messages are not helping. They are harming consumer knowledge, self-efficacy, health, and ultimate trust in food industry and nutrition science. It's time to stop the food fear mongering and encourage the good in foods that will lead to our "natural" wellbeing.

Megan Maisano *is a second year NICBC student and an RD-to-be. She has a Wheat Belly and a Grain Brain, but is doing okay. She's got no beef with Non-GMO, Gluten-free, or Organic products, only their use in scare-tactics that aren't based in science.*