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Smoke and mirrors: nutrition content claims used to market unhealthy food

Abstract

Nutrition content claims are statements that relate to the presence or absence of nutrients, energy or biologically active substances in food. Currently in Australia, food manufacturers are permitted to make nutrition content claims as long as they can substantiate that the food component is present at the claimed levels, that is, that the claim is honest and true. Nutrition content claims can be used by food manufacturers to market food products, whereby positive nutritional attributes are emphasised to exaggerate the nutritional quality or health benefit of the product. In this way, nutrition-related claims can be misleading, with manufacturers able to promote single nutritional attributes without disclosing the product's less healthy characteristics.

Keywords

mirrors, nutrition, content, claims, used, market, smoke, unhealthy, food

Disciplines

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SMOKE AND MIRRORS: NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS USED TO MARKET UNHEALTHY FOOD

To the Editor: Nutrition content claims are statements that relate to the presence or absence of nutrients, energy or biologically active substances in food.¹ Currently in Australia, food manufacturers are permitted to make nutrition content claims as long as they can substantiate that the food component is present at the claimed levels, that is, that the claim is honest and true.

Nutrition content claims can be used by food manufacturers to market food products, whereby positive nutritional attributes are emphasised to exaggerate the nutritional quality or health benefit of the product. In this way, nutrition-related claims can be misleading, with manufacturers able to promote single nutritional attributes without disclosing the product's less healthy characteristics.²

Previous research on the use of these nutrition content claims in food advertisements, on both the Internet and in magazines, has indicated that these claims are frequently used as a marketing tool. In a study of 30 popular Australian magazines, researchers identified almost two health claims per food advertisement.³ Also, research assessing nutrition-related claims on 128 Australian food product websites indicated that 60% of websites contained nutrition content claims and 14% contained health claims.⁴

For comparison, we aimed to determine the extent to which nutrition content claims were used in advertisements on Sydney commercial television and the nature of these claims. The food products carrying these claims were classified into the food categories core, non-core and miscellaneous. Based on the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating,⁵ core foods are those that are recommended to be consumed daily to meet nutrient requirements, and non-core foods are other foods, including those that are relatively high in less desirable nutrients. The miscellaneous category included supplements, tea and coffee; or local restaurants and supermarkets. These major food categories were also disaggregated into 21 food groups (Table 1).

Television programs and advertisements were recorded from all three Sydney commercial channels broadcasts between 6:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., over two weeks; from 13–19 May 2007 and 14–20 May 2006, for a total time of 714 hours (238 hours each channel).

Overall, there were a total of 20 201 advertisements, of which 26% were for food. The most frequently advertised food category was non-core foods, comprising 56% of all food advertisements.

Nutrition content claims were used in 22% of all food advertisements, and most frequently in advertisements for non-core foods (55% of all claims). Table 1 shows each specific food category's contribution to advertisements containing nutrient content claims, the foremost being *high-sugar/low-fibre* breakfast cereals; *low-sugar/high-fibre* breads and cereals; reduced fat dairy; chocolate and confectionery; and cakes and biscuits. The total frequency of food adver-

tisements with nutrition content claims is reported (which includes repeats of some advertisements) as this provides an indicator of viewers' exposure to nutrition claims, and places this in the context of total food advertisements.

The majority of nutrition content claims were related to wholegrains, fibre or the product's bioactive properties (35% of all claims), reduced fat content (25%) and vitamins, minerals or antioxidants (22%). Paradoxically, nutrition content claims for *high-sugar/low-fibre* breakfast cereals were mostly related to fibre content (64% of claims for this food group); for chocolate and confectionery, claims related to reduced fat content, reduced energy content and low sugar (39%, 31% and 28%); and for cakes and biscuits, claims were predominantly for reduced fat content (42%).

Food Standards Australia New Zealand is in the process of reviewing the proposed standards relating to health-related claims on food products. Nutrition content claims should be distinguished from health claims, which describe the relation of a nutrient or substance in a food to a health function, and high-level health claims that convey the relation of a nutrient or substance in a food to a disease or biomarker. Under a new proposed system, disqualifying criteria will preclude some food products from making nutrient content claims. However, unlike health claims, this criteria will not be based on nutrient profiling, which uses a scoring system to allocate cumulative points based on levels of energy, saturated fat, total sugars and sodium, while making allowances for protein, fibre and fruit and vegetables and calcium for cheeses.¹ Using this scoring system, food products that score above a specified level are ineligible to make health claims, but may still be permitted to make nutrition content claims. Instead, specific disqualifying criteria may be applied to some nutrition content claims where considered appropriate; however, no disqualifying criteria will be applied to nutrition content claims relating to biologically active substances, wholegrain, reduced sugar and reduced fat.¹ Although disqualifying criteria do exist for energy, these do not relate to the nutrition profile of the food product overall.

Our research indicates that the use of nutrition content claims in commercial television advertisements is widespread, and the majority of food products using these claims are considered to be non-core. These nutrition content claims appear to promote aspects of food products that might appear desirable, while ignoring other qualities that are less desirable. For example, some confectionary advertisements promoted that the product was low in fat, while ignoring the high sugar content. The majority of nutrition content claims were related to active substances, wholegrain, reduced sugar and reduced fat, precisely the claims that will not be governed by disqualifying criteria under the new regulatory framework for nutrition-related claims.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand's proposal might allow nutrition content claims to be used to market unhealthy food products without adequate qualification. This would contradict their mandate to ensure well-informed consumers. Australian guidelines for nutrition-related claims should follow the lead of other jurisdictions, including the European Union,⁶ and include nutrient

Table 1 The number and proportion of all nutrition content claims for food groups

<i>Food groups</i>	<i>Number of food ads containing nutrition content claims (%)</i>
Core foods	349 (31)
Low-sugar/high-fibre breakfast cereals (<20 g/100 g sugar and >5 g/100 g dietary fibre), breads, rice, pasta and noodles	139 (12)
Fruits and fruit products, and vegetables and vegetable products without added sugar	0 (0)
Reduced fat dairy (includes cheese < 15 g/100 g fat; 50% reduced fat cheddar, ricotta and cottage) and alternatives (includes probiotic drinks)	121 (11)
Meat and meat alternatives (not crumbed or battered) (includes fish, legumes, eggs, nuts and nut products, including peanut butter, excluding sugar coated or salted nuts)	1 (0)
Sandwiches, salads soups and sauces; includes sandwiches, mixed salads, frozen meals (<10 g/serve fat), soups (<2 g/100 g fat, excludes dehydrated) and low-fat savoury sauces (<5 g/100 g fat)	88 (8)
Baby foods (excluding milk formulae)	0 (0)
Bottled water	0 (0)
Non-core foods	620 (55)
High-sugar/low-fibre breakfast cereals (>20 g/100 g or <5 g/100 g dietary fibre)	151 (13)
Crumbed or battered meat and meat alternatives and high-fat frozen meals (>10 g/serve fat)	33 (1)
Cakes, muffins, sweet biscuits, muesli bars, snack bars, high-fat savoury biscuits, pies and pastries	99 (8)
Snack foods, including chips, savoury crisps, extruded snacks, popcorn, sugar sweetened fruit and vegetable products, and sugar-coated and salted nuts	37 (3)
Fruit juice and fruit drinks	40 (4)
Frozen/fried potato products (excluding packet crisps)	0 (0)
Full cream dairy and alternatives (includes dairy desserts)	79 (7)
Ice cream and iced confection	12 (1)
Chocolate and confectionery (including chewing gum)	99 (9)
Fast food restaurants/meals (including general pizza, burgers, salads from fast food restaurants, Subway)	2 (0)
High fat/sugar/salt spread spreads (excluding peanut butter), oils, high-fat savoury sauces (>5 g/100 fat), meal helpers (including stocks, tomato paste) and soups (>2 g/100 g fat tinned and all dehydrated)	39 (3)
Sugar-sweetened drinks, including soft drinks, cordials, electrolyte drinks and flavour additions	7 (1)
Alcohol	0 (0)
Baby and toddler milk formulae	61 (5)
Local restaurants, cafes, supermarkets	0 (0)
Miscellaneous beverages—tea/coffee	0 (0)
Supplements	162 (14)
Total	1131 (100)

profiling criteria for both nutrition content claims and health claims.

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