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Consumer Confusion over Fats

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EUFIC Pan European consumer research on in-store behaviour, understanding and use of nutrition information on food labels, Feb 2008-09, with Prof Klaus Grunert, Aarhus Univ

- **Research questions: how good is consumers' nutrition knowledge? How do they use nutrition labels when shopping? Are they aware of different labelling systems, understand them and are able to use them?**
- **Observation at aisle: Looked at label and where, time spent choosing**
- **In-store interview (>11,700) about nutrition information on product bought:**
 - **Claims to have looked at nutrition information on the label?**
 - **Remembers any nutrition information from the label?**
 - **Which nutrition information looking for?**
- **Longer questionnaire to complete at home (>5,700 returned)**
 - **Nutrition knowledge questions**
 - **Awareness, knowledge & proficiency in using nutrition labelling system**
 - **Background variables: demographics, health**
- **Shoppers observed at 6 product categories, 3 retailers per country:**
 - **salty snacks, soft drinks, yoghurts, cereals, ready meals, confectionery**
- **Pan-European study; UK, France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Hungary**

Q: “Health experts recommend to eat more, about the same, less, try to avoid....”

- Consumers exaggerate their response towards foods high in fat, sugar or salt; try to avoid rather than eat less; strongest for UK (over 80%)
- **Fats:** > 60% of consumers (except 49% in Poland) are aware experts recommend to eat less fat (highest 73% UK)
 - Saturates, trans and omega-3 better understood than MUFA/PUFA
 - **Saturates** : > 67% eat less/try to avoid (90% UK to 68% Germany)
 - **Trans Fats:** > 60% eat less/try to avoid (96% Sweden to 59% France)
 - **Omega-3:** > 45% eat more (88% Sweden to 46% Poland)
 - **PUFA:** Less aware of the recommendation to consume more
 - 50% Sweden to 8% Poland

Q: For each food or drink type listed, please indicate whether you think it is high or low in each nutrient (fat, sugar, saturates, salt) (18 different foods)

FATs:

- Most (>80%) gave right answers for:
 - high fat in cheese, low saturates in frozen veg
- Most (>65%) got it wrong for:
 - *high* sat fat in margarine - UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Poland

Q: Which nutrient has the most calories, gram for gram? Choose from fat, sugar, alcohol, protein, starch, fibre

<45% chose fat as having the most calories (44% Poland - 24% Sweden)

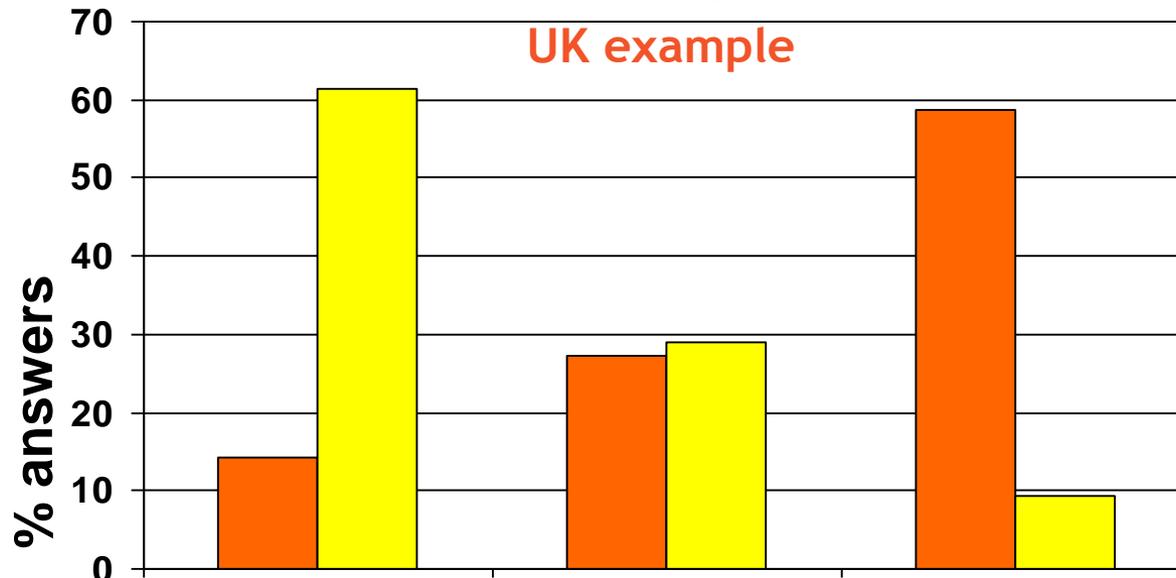
- When they got it wrong, alcohol and sugar were stated as the most calorific nutrients (starch also in Hungary)

What nutrition information did they look for?

- **Calories** most cited in 3 of 6 countries
 - except UK and Germany (fat, then calories) and Sweden (sugar, fat)
 - highest in Poland (66%), lowest in Sweden (17%)
- **Fat** among top 3 in all countries except Hungary
- Saturated fat, and salt, not among top 5 in any country except UK
- **Sugar** among top 5 in all countries
- Carbohydrates among top 5 in all countries except UK and Poland
- Other top 5 mentions: Food additives (Hungary, France, Poland), Fibre (Sweden), Protein (Hungary), Vitamins (Poland), Organic (Germany)

Health inference - choosing the healthier option: 3 product comparison - TL labels, UK

Q: Which is the healthiest/least healthy product?



All systems in all countries yield similar results



Choice of unhealthier product driven by high calories, fat



In all countries, very few identified high salt product as least healthy (<22%)

IFIC Food & Health Survey 2009: US perspective

- Majority heard of many types of fats and fatty acids: trans fats (90%), sat fats (88%), omega 3 (74%), PUFA (72%).
- Omega 3 awareness has increased over the past 4 years from 64-74%
 - 50% aware to consume more omega 3 and fish oils
 - But specific omega 3s (DHA, EPA, ALA) hardly known
- Unsat fats - only 6% trying to consume more PUFA
 - 33% trying to consume less, mostly respond neither
- If state heard of unsat fats or sat fat - only 10% can name a food source such as fish, veg oils, nuts, seeds
- 34% think calcs from fat are most likely to cause weight gain
- 34% report hearing that fats cannot be part of a healthful diet

The Future: further scope for confusion

- Increasing complexity of processed foods, reformulations, adding fats, fortification, functional foods
 - Fat spreads with different fat compositions
 - New functional foods that do not normally contain a specific nutrient, become a good source of it (eg bread or eggs enriched in omega 3)
- Nutrition labelling systems
 - Often do not differentiate quality of fats, more focus on bad fats than good fats, and quantity of fat
 - Fat levels judged on a per 100g basis, rather than per portion

Summary

- Consumers told to decrease intake of fats, healthier options being “fat-free” or “low-fat”
- On the other hand, they need to increase their consumption of “good fats” but don’t know how much
- They understand to eat less sat fat and trans fats
- Aware of omega 3s - know they should consume more, but some don’t know it is a fat
- PUFA - less aware of recommendation to consume more
- Many cannot name foods that contain a specific fat - either sat fat, or omega 3
- Education - needs to focus on specific foods, practical advice on switching to better quality fats
 - Under 25s and lower SE groups least aware about sat fats
 - Include education of celebrity chefs and recipe givers!