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Suggestions of supporting a healthy nutrition policy at grocery stores

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AiMS: Weight management is affected by food choice. It is important to show in practice how challenging an environment a grocery store is to consumers from a weight management perspective. Thus, based on verbalizations and observations of consumers made in a real-life supermarket setting, it is important to point out how environments of grocery stores could support consumers' daily and healthier food choices.

Background: The study was a part of a project "Consumers in the weight management market" (2009-2011) funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation.

Methods: The study subjects were recruited by delivering 1000 questionnaires in Nov-Dec at the K-Citymarket Kolmisoppi, Kuopio. The subjects (n=36, age 18-65) were recruited to represent consumers of varied experience in weight management during their lifespan. The subjects' shopping behaviour was studied using verbal analysis protocol combined with wireless audio-visual observation, questionnaires and interviews in the K-Citymarket in Apr-May 2010. For two consecutive shopping tasks, the study subjects were given a shopping list of 11 food categories. During the first task, they were asked to select a product they usually buy and during the second task, a product they would use for weight management. The level of nutritional knowledge of the study subjects was also assessed and related to the choices made.

Results: According to the observations, the consumers made their shopping decisions routinely as there were none stimuli available at a supermarket in relation to healthy choices apart from versatile, abundant and small-sized labels all over food packages. The consumers had several challenges while choosing food, such as the time taken (maximum 225 seconds) to find a suitable product among all the options of a wide product category, for example, 459 ready meals per product category with the energy variation from 30 to 330 kcal/100g, and understanding all package labels properly, such as the GDA-label in relation to the nutrition content table.

Improvements: The needs of consumers who are actively managing their weight should be better taken into consideration in grocery stores as also subjects pointed out by theMSelves during the field experiment. The subjects had several practical suggestions, such as coloured labels in shelves, how consumer-oriented marketing communication and services should be developed and provided by retailers cooperatively with health-care actors to promote consumers' awareness of healthy food choices in grocery stores.

Discussion: For a consumer, it is important to be able to easily find, identify and compare suitable products from a weight management point of view. Successful consumer marketing will achieve desirable results for manufacturers, retailers and consumers as well as benefit the welfare of society's welfare in the long run.

Biography

Anna-Maria Saarela (PhD, nutrition, MSc., nutrition; MSc., biochemistry; authorized dietician; food safety officer) is the senior research lecturer, the student counselor and the international coordinator of Savonia UAS. Anna-Maria has also competence on food product development, consumer behavior, consumer food choices at a grocery store and multidimensional research approaches. Anna-Maria has more than 14 years' experience educating, also in English, supervising final reports of the students (> 50), carrying scientific projects with industry and academia in relation to food science and management, food product development, nutrition and natural sciences. Anna-Maria is also an active writer, such as the editor and the writer of the nationwide textbook about food processing for universities. Over 14 years' experience teaching several courses in relation to food science and management studies, nutrition and natural sciences. Nearly ten years being responsible for the international mobility of both students and staff and other international affairs with the international partners. She does lecture visits (Erasmus exchange) in several EU countries. Anna-Maria Saarela negotiated successfully the double degree possibilities for the students of the Savonia UAS and BBI Brussels. She is also a member of Chemistry Association of Eastern Finland and the Finnish Society of Food Science and Technology.

At the moment, she is a consumer research advisor and facilitator of the future food project. Also starting from 1st of Nov, as a project partner manager under the EU's framework FP7 program called "Network for the Transfer of knowledge on traditional foods to SME" with other 18 project partner managers all around Europa. Participating on a multidisciplinary project "Consumers on the weight management market" (2009-2011) funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation and eight Finnish food companies.

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