Consumer trust in the Australian food system – the everyday erosive impact of food labelling

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Consumer trust in food system actors is foundational for ensuring consumer confidence in food safety. As food labelling is a direct communication between consumers and food system actors, it may influence consumer perceptions of actor trustworthiness. This study explores the judgements formed about the trustworthiness of the food system and its actors through labelling, and the expectations these judgements are based on. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 Australian consumers were conducted. Theoretical sampling focused on shopping location, dietary requirements, rurality, gender, age and educational background. The methodological approach used (adaptive theory) enabled emerging data to be examined through the lens of a set of guiding theoretical concepts, and theory reconsidered in light of emerging data. Food labelling acted as a surrogate for personal interaction with industry and government for participants. Judgements about the trustworthiness of these actors and the broader food system were formed through interaction with food labelling and were based on expectations of both competence and goodwill. Interaction with labelling primarily reduced trust in actors within the food system, undermining trust in the system as a whole. Labelling has a role as an access point to the food system. Access points are points of vulnerability for systems, where trust can be developed, reinforced or broken down. For the participants in this study, in general labelling demonstrates food system actors lack goodwill and violate their fiduciary responsibility. This paper provides crucial insights for industry and policy actors to use this access point to build, rather than undermine, trust in food systems.

**Keywords**

Consumer, labeling, food, trust, policy
Consumer trust in the food system is essential to ensure a cooperative and functioning market for system actors (Gambetta, 1988) and to manage complexity and uncertainty for consumers (Luhmann, 1979). Much research has framed the problem of trust in food as primarily an issue of appropriate food risk communication. However, following an analysis of trust in food in Europe, Kjaernes (2006) argues that to focus on risk perception and communication for the problem of trust represents an overly cognitively based and inadequate picture of trust in food. As such, the idea of the ‘knowledge fix’ as a means to enhance trust in food has been contested (Eden, Bear, & Walker, 2008; Kjaernes, 2006).

Trust as a social phenomenon is far more complex than the rational assessment of risk; trust being founded on both cognitive and emotional bases (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Empirical studies have shown consumer trust in food and food safety to be strongly predicted by trust in food system actors (Berg et al., 2005; de Jonge, van Trijp, Renes, & Frewer, 2007; Sapp et al., 2009). Thus the problem of trust is refocussed to consider consumer perceptions of the trustworthiness of food system actors, rather than consumer willingness to trust based on rational risk information (Meijboom, Visak, & Brom, 2006; Sapp et al., 2009).

As stated by Luhmann (1979, p. 26), ‘trust always extrapolates from the available evidence’. That is to say, trust judgements are never fully complete and thus can be reflexively considered in the light of new information, particularly indicators of trustworthiness gleaned through social interaction (Mollerling, 2006). Direct and personal evidence pertaining to the trustworthiness of food system actors is limited by the physical and rational separation of consumers and system actors because of the complexity of globalised food chains (Belliveau, 2005; Brom, 2000). Well-publicised food scandals provide opportunities for the public to scrutinise actions of those within the agri-food sector. However these occasions are relatively rare. By contrast, food labelling provides an everyday encounter with the food system through its positioning at the interface of consumers and the market. As such, food labelling may provide an avenue for consumers to assess the trustworthiness of food system actors.
Previous research exploring food labelling and trust has focused on trust in labelling (Tonkin, Wilson, Coveney, Webb, & Meyer, 2015). From this perspective, trust in the labeller is repeatedly shown to influence trust in the label message (Batrinou, Spiliotis, & Sakellaris, 2008; Eden et al., 2008; Janssen & Hamm, 2012; Sirieix, Delanchy, Remaud, Zepeda, & Gurviez, 2013; Sonderskov & Daugbjerg, 2011; Soregaroli, Boccaletti, & Moro, 2003; Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2012). However, there are some suggestions in this literature that the reverse may also be true—trust in labelling leads to trust in labellers. That is to say, consumers may use the messages provided by labelling to foster trust in the manufacturer. This statement examines trust through labelling, therefore switching the focus to perceptions of food system trustworthiness that result from consumer interaction with labelling. For example, Garretson and Burton (2000) showed that inconsistencies in labelling information can result in a decline in perceived trustworthiness of the manufacturer. Similarly, Van Rijswijk and Frewer (2012) found fraudulent labelling information would result in a loss of consumer confidence in the producer of that product. While these findings provide suggestions of consumers interpreting manufacturer trustworthiness from labelling, they are far from a complete picture of how labelling may influence trust in the food system. This paper contributes novel findings regarding the trust judgements formed through consumer interaction with food labelling. In doing so, we also determine who consumers make trust judgements about (which food actors within the system), and what expectations these judgements are based on (what do consumers use as indicators of trustworthiness).

Theoretical framework

Extant literature in the form of social theories of trust (Barber, 1983; Giddens, 1990, 1994; Luhmann, 1979; Mollering, 2006) can be used to develop a set of guiding concepts for the exploration of the foci for and foundations of trust judgements. First, sociological accounts of trust distinguish between trust in individuals (for example between spouses), groups of individuals (for example a company) and systems (for example the system of government) (Mollering, 2006). Other theorists dispute trust in ‘systems’ as not trust itself but, rather, confidence, with trust being associated with action and generalised trust in institutions and systems as simply an attitude of acceptance (Barbalet, 2009). This provides useful
distinctions between active trust and passive confidence. Giddens (1990) and Luhmann (1979) also posit that trust at these different social levels is not isolated, but interconnected. Trust in the individual can influence trust in the group and vice versa. Through applying this idea to consumer trust and food labelling it becomes possible to examine if food labelling enables consumers to identify different social levels within the food chain, and specifically locate the potentially different foci for consumer trust in food. It is also important for understanding how these different focal points for trust may influence each other.

Second, social theory provides insights into what might form the foundational expectations of trusting relations; that is, the types of information individuals base trust judgements on. Mollering (2006) terms these foundational expectations ‘indicators of trustworthiness’. One prominent conceptualisation is that of Barber (1983), who theorises that the two primary expectations trustors hold of trustees comprise technical competence and the fulfilment of fiduciary obligation. For Barber (1983) fiduciary obligation recognises that trustworthiness involves an element beyond competent performance, to address the ethical and moral dimensions of social interactions. Metlay (1999) terms this dimension the ‘affective’ element, representing perceived openness, reliability, integrity, credibility, fairness, and caring of trustees. However, empirically there remains some contention regarding whether there are dimensions beyond these two, and what these dimensions encompass. Previous research has aimed to classify the underlying dimensions of trust in food (de Jonge et al., 2007; de Jonge, van Trijp, van der Lans, Renes, & Frewer, 2008; Frewer, Howard, Hedderley, & Shepherd, 1996; Sapp et al., 2009). Contrary to Metlay (1999) and Barber (1983), Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) and Frewer et al. (1996) found the two main dimensions of trust included one that conflates competence and fiduciary responsibility, and another representing a scepticism or vested interest factor. Thus it remains open as to which indicators of trustworthiness may be important here.

The above social theories of trust provide theoretical insights regarding the dynamics of trust in different social levels, and the foundational expectations that form trust judgements. These theoretical ideas can be used as a provisional set of guiding concepts for exploring the research questions of what trust judgements consumers form through
interaction with labelling, and which indicators of trustworthiness are important in making these judgements.

**Methods**

**Methodological approach**

Adaptive theory (Layder, 1998) was the methodological approach chosen for this research. In this approach empirical data is examined through the lens of provisional theoretical conceptual frameworks, and extant theory is reconsidered in the light of emerging data (Bessant & Francis, 2005). In this way new theory is grounded in both existing substantive theory and empirical findings (Bessant & Francis, 2005; Hewege & Perera, 2013). Following adaptive theory, theoretical literature was utilised to develop the provisional set of guiding concepts described in the ‘Theoretical framework’ section. This engagement with literature began before qualitative data collection, and continued throughout the research process to guide study design. During data analysis and development of the theoretical model these orienting ideas were used as sensitising concepts for identifying macro themes in the data (Bessant & Francis, 2005). The use of adaptive theory therefore centralised the emerging data while acknowledging and incorporating when useful existing theory in the development of the emergent theoretical model (Layder, 1998).

**Data collection**

In-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of about one hour duration with 24 South Australian consumers were conducted solely by the primary author (ET). The interview schedule was structured around broad themes including participant expectations and concerns about food in Australia, their definition and use of food labelling, their thoughts about labelled and unlabelled food (for example from a farmers’ market), and their thoughts on specific packaging prompts. Major themes were used as a guide to direct the interview, with specific questions used and the order of topics being unique to each interview to allow a natural conversational manner. Examples of types of questions used are ‘When I say “food labelling” not everyone thinks of the same thing. Can you describe what you think of when I say “food labelling”? ’ and ‘Who is responsible for the information on food packages?’ As such, no strict interview schedule beyond the major themes outlined
above was adhered to in the interview process, but consistency was achieved as all
participants were interviewed by the same researcher. Twelve real product packages and
three images were provided for participants to demonstrate their ideas if they wished,
however they were not referred to directly by the interviewer during the interview sections
drawn on in this analysis. Images of these are available as supplementary online material.
Here the term ‘food labelling’ is used to refer to all product packaging, while the term ‘label
element’ refers to individual label components (for example a health claim). As only broad
themes were used to structure interviews, discussions of labelling reflected consumer
perspectives and focussed on the label elements they interact with in their everyday
experience. Attention was paid to ensuring no research documents or discussions of the
research with participants stated or alluded to the topic of trust, or were leading to
participants in any other way. Trust was only discussed explicitly if a participant raised it,
preserving the language and context provided by the participant (Henwood, Pidgeon, Sarre,
Simmons, & Smith, 2008). Only when a participant never raised the issue of trust did the
interviewer do so as trust was a vital concept to the study. If necessary, this was done in the
final interview question.

17 Recruitment and sampling

Theoretical sampling of participants, as advanced by Layder (1998), was conducted. As the
present analysis explores how food labelling influences trust in the food system and its
actors, the following sampling criteria were chosen as they are factors identified in previous
literature to influence either trust in food or consumer interaction with food labelling.
Participants were recruited from a range of food markets as literature suggests an
association between food shopping practices and trust in the food system (Ekici, 2004):
supermarket, alternative food store (for example organic stores), and farmers’ market or
strictly local produce shoppers. As previous research has shown trust in the food system
varies between consumers living in rural and metropolitan areas (Meyer, Coveney,
Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012), rural participants were actively sought to ensure both
rural and metropolitan residents were sampled. Additionally, recruitment aimed to capture
both genders, a range of ages, income groups and educational backgrounds, and consumers
with different dietary requirements (for example food allergy) as these sociodemographic
characteristics are known to impact both trust in food actors (Henderson, Coveney, Ward, & Taylor, 2011) and attention to food labelling (FSANZ, 2008). Recruitment and interviewing occurred during May – July 2014 and utilised a range of strategies including use of advertising with specific organisations (for example Slow Food SA), and placing posters in supermarkets, gyms and malls. The data regarding trust were found to be saturated at 24 participants, and theoretical sampling dimensions had also been adequately represented by this stage (Mason, 2010). Participants were reimbursed $30 for expenses associated with taking part in the research. Ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (project number 6429).

**Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed in whole, read multiple times and summarised by the primary researcher (ET). Summaries included links made with the set of guiding concepts (see ‘Theoretical framework’ section). Major themes present in the summaries and relevant to this analysis were trust, which food system actors participants saw as present in labelling, participant interpretation of labeller motives, and mechanisms for controlling industry. These major themes were condensed into a preliminary set of one word codes. Each interview transcript was then coded with NVivo 10 (QSR International, Doncaster) using both this preliminary set, and new codes created for new ideas and important features of data (Layder, 1998). The code list was refined through interrogating each individual code for uniqueness, and retaining, nesting, merging or deleting codes as appropriate (Saldana, 2013). Transcript sections pertaining to the large theme of trust were separated into the foci of the trust judgements (what/who participants were (dis)trusting), and the common expectations discussed in connection with trust judgements. This was done in tandem with revisiting the set of guiding concepts. Therefore, consistent with adaptive theory, data analysis was both inductive and deductive (Hewege & Perera, 2013; Layder, 1998), and the outcome of this integration of theory with empirical data (Figure 1) is presented in the results. In this way participants’ main themes were used to structure the results. Analyst triangulation was carried out through presentation of each analysis stage to the broader research team, enabling examination, refinement, and at times alternative interpretations of data (Fade, 2003). Further peer-debriefing was conducted through the presentation of
the findings to a group of researchers, regulators and policy makers to ensure research credibility (Fade, 2003).

**Results**

The results are presented as follows: first we describe the role labelling played for participants as a mode of social interaction, and who participants saw as actors in this interaction with, and how these were assessed as fulfilled or violated in labelling. Finally, an explanation of how the fulfilment or disappointment of these expectations resulted in trust judgements made through labelling is provided. The characteristics of the 24 participants interviewed are presented in table 1.

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Shopping location</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Highest educational attainment</th>
<th>Food considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Diploma/vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Diploma/vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Year 10 or below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Diploma/vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Year 10 or below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Diploma/vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Local only</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Diploma/vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Local only</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Higher degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Labelling as a social interaction

Participants freely moved between discussing labelling as a collection of specific label elements, and food labelling at a higher level of abstraction; that is, labelling as a general concept. Participants led any discussions of specific label elements. Overall these were limited to advertising, certification, country of origin labels, ingredients lists, date marks and nutrition information panels. Only one participant identified other mandatory elements specifically, however they were clear that these aspects were not those he was attentive to, ‘What else are there [sic]... the manufacturer, or like the address of where they are but I don’t care about that’ (Leo).

Participants described their use of food labelling as functionally equivalent to an interaction with a person knowledgeable about that product; one participant explained that to find a fair trade product he would seek ‘Certification on it, or if I’m buying it from a market obviously you can see the people and talk to them’ (Lewis). In this way labelling acted as a surrogate for personal interaction with food system actors. Hence while labelling was used to find facts to inform product choice, participants also expressed that labelling was more than simply a passive information exchange, ‘and it’s reading the messages, but it’s reading not what they say, but interpret [sic] what that then means’ (Isaac). As such, food labelling

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1 In Australia food labelling must comply with the standards set out in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. The Code stipulates a number of label elements must be included on all packaged foods including: ingredient lists, nutrition information panels, name and address of supplier, country of origin labelling, and where relevant warning and advisory statements and date marking (use-by and best before).
was discussed by participants as a form of social interaction, ‘Labelling on...it’s a
communication between us and the manufacturers’ (Amelia).

Labelling communicators

All participants identified industry as the main actor communicating with them through
labelling. There was a lack of clarity around exactly who this was however, with the terms
interchangeably by participants. Some participants particularly specified the
marketers/advertisers as separate to producers/manufacturers, ‘I think this main, the front
bit is advertisers and the side one is manufacturers’ (Amelia). Over half the participants also
identified third-party organisations, such as the Australian Heart Foundation, as periphery
actors in the social interaction.

While the majority expressed an understanding of a governing body also present in
labelling, participants were similarly unclear about who this was specifically, simply using
‘government’ for most references. Rather than seeing them as direct communicators,
participants appeared to hold the ‘government’ ultimately responsible for what was, and
was not, found on labelling, ‘But it, it has been kind of approved [by government] otherwise
this label [element] wouldn’t be allowed to be on the packet’ (Leo). As such labelling
communicated information about regulatory bodies to participants, for example Liz
commented on a large multinational company using the Australian Made logo,

‘Interviewer: So who do you sort of hold responsible for that? Is it Uncle
Toby’s or...’

‘Oh no, the company is entitled to do what they like. I think
Australian....whoever makes the rules and regulations when it comes to
products...they’re the ones who should make the stipulation’ (Liz).

Therefore participants were clear that for them food labelling in general was a direct social
interaction with industry, and an indirect representation of the priorities and principles of
government.

Participant expectations of food system actors
As labelling was seen as a form of social interaction with industry (and indirectly government), it provided an avenue for participants to measure these actors against their general expectations of social actors in a position of power. Two clear themes emerged regarding the expectations participants held, and these were present as an undercurrent in all interviews: expectations of technical competence and a component that encompassed the moral quality, honesty, fiduciary responsibility and sincerity displayed by industry and government. Herein this component will be encapsulated by the term ‘goodwill’ (Meijboom, 2007). Importantly, participants were clear that they did not anticipate actually finding these qualities fulfilled, but thought they should be demonstrated by food system actors. An example is Thomas implying his expectations around truth telling, although explicitly stating that he doesn’t anticipate to be told the truth, when discussing his use of labelling, ‘In some ways it’s a little bit like politics, you don’t expect to be told the truth. So what’s that, caveat emptor [“let the buyer beware”]?’ (Thomas).

The competence of actors was discussed by participants typically only when they had had an experience showing a food system actor to be incompetent. An example was Henry having seen incorrectly labelled products and consequently questioning the competence of many system actors,

‘I don’t think it’s generally purposeful, I think it’s generally incompetence...

Incompetence in different levels... Like you know, some of it’s quite complicated to find out what should be on a label. So, it’s incompetence but it’s not really incompetence because they’re competent people it’s just too hard to work it out. Which is a government incompetence, not a producer incompetence, if you like’ (Henry).

For other participants competence was assessed only at the level of specific products, and typically in contrast to the goodwill component, as Ruby demonstrates,

‘It’s kind of like that balance of going...you know there’s those really like professionally packaged stuff that is gonna have all that information and like pushing, which is then you know you kind of associate with they’re professional so they’re reliable, despite them being super pushy, compared to like homebrand that probably aren’t as much but then look a little bit

dodgier, so there’s like that lacking trust, but they’re nicer and they’re not as pushy...’ (Ruby).

Competence was most reflexively considered by participants with relatively high vulnerability to food risk (such as those with allergies) and thus was discussed related to specific risks;

‘I’d probably agree with that [the food system is trustworthy] more than not, but then there’s always error, you know there’s always room for error; people make mistakes, forget to put something on... So yeah I think they’re probably trying more to help than hinder but yeah there’s always room for error’ (Grace).

Expectations of goodwill and their violation or fulfilment were a major theme of most interviews, far more dominant than considerations of competence. Goodwill was discussed in its most basic form as what motivated actors to label in a certain way, or the intent behind particular label elements. Participants commented on whether companies were ‘genuine’ or ‘care’ about consumers in response to specific label elements, ‘[it is] just a marketing tactic. Not so much “we care about you and we’re gonna let you know that this is good for you”, it’s more just like “we want you to buy this”’ (Ruby). There appeared to be a clear process surrounding the interpretation of intent (Figure 1).

Participants interpreted the meaning and intent of a label element, and in the context of wider labelling and personal factors (for more information about these factors see Tonkin, Meyer, Coveney, Webb & Wilson, forthcoming), also inferred actor goodwill. All participants displayed or expressed these considerations;

‘I don’t know whether they think “let’s put it [extensive nutrition information] on there so it’s too much so they give up and buy it anyway”...so whether they’re tricking people, or whether they think they’re doing the better thing by putting it on there and letting people know, it’s hard to know, you know? No, I’m a bit sceptical.’ (Grace)

2 Australian slang for lower quality
Overall, while indicators of competence were only reflexively considered when something was noticeably wrong, indicators of goodwill were routinely considered in interaction with labelling, by all participants.

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Figure 1 about here

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Trust in the food system and specific actors through labelling

Competence and goodwill were seen as indicators of trustworthiness and as such formed the foundation for trust judgements made through food labelling (Figure 1). Thus, the violation or fulfilment of expectations resulted in an overall judgement about the trustworthiness of specific actors through interaction with labelling. Additionally, participants also spoke about actively considering trust in the overall outcome of the interaction between these actors. This focal point for trust was at a higher level, involving all the actors, and as such is labelled here the ‘food system’. Participants most commonly did not use this term and often struggled to find the language to describe their idea. They variously referred to the ‘market system’, trust in ‘food in Australia’ or ‘labelling’ in general, ‘the system’ or most simply ‘it’. For example, while discussing what she saw as misleading uses of the term organic, Isla said ‘It suggests the system doesn’t work to support the things that consumers want/need to know’. As such, participants also discussed making judgements about the trustworthiness of the food system through labelling.

Trustworthiness of industry

When participants interpreted negative intentions in labelling it appeared to violate expectations of goodwill and participants explicitly expressed mistrust in industry. Here Colin is responding to the serving size information provided by the manufacturer on a carton of drink; the 600 mL carton said to contain 2.4 serves,

‘Yeah, it makes me not probably trust them [manufacturer] as much. I understand what they’re trying to do is, is try to flog you food that may not be beneficial to you, nutrient wise or otherwise. And they probably are
thinking “look we can probably get away with this, you know, this follows the rules, we’re writing this down, what they don’t realise is that actually they’re drinking 10 of these” but … Yeah’ (Colin).

This created a type of confirmatory bias loop (Figure 1) where previous negative judgements about the intentions and trustworthiness of industry resulted in labelling being interpreted more negatively on future occasions,

‘Interviewer: Does this stuff [indicates to the labelling prompts] sort of feed that perception of industry, or did you already have that idea and so you look at this with those eyes…?'

Lucy: No I think this feeds it. And I think it’s because with more and more products coming out it’s only getting worse’ (Lucy).

The level of risk relevant to the food issue addressed by a label element created important exceptions to this however. For example, allergy statements were identified as something industry would ‘take very seriously’ while nutrient content claims ‘they might play around with’ (Thomas). As such while participants did not think industry would intentionally cause direct physical harm, they perceived labelling in general demonstrated a lack of goodwill.

A primary example participants provided of violated expectations of goodwill were when labelling elements themselves were not technically misleading, but did not create a fair representation of a product, ‘...I find this sort of thing misleading [indicates to 99% fat free on a confectionary packet], but it’s not untrue. How do you legislate, or compel people, without I suppose being so prescriptive that it becomes onerous?’ (Thomas). This was also discussed in a more abstract sense than any single label element or product, as Abbey demonstrates with the comment,

‘Well it’s the marketers that don’t have a social conscience is...what I feel is that look, I know they’re in it to make money, but when something is obviously not good for you that’s one thing, but when you start to now market like what they did last night, you think you’re putting healthy snacks in your children’s lunchboxes because you haven’t had time to make stuff and then you think because it says “organic” or it’s “light” or it’s “whole thing” or whatever, then if you actually just flicked to the ingredients and
educate yourself it’s actually not a good choice. And yes so that I feel really,
yeah quite deceived to be honest’ (Abbey).

Perceived violations of goodwill were sometimes attributed to marketers/advertisers rather
than the producer/brand, ‘The marketing department. Yep. Not, not the actual brand itself,
that wants to do the best for the consumer’ (Lucy).

Labelling practices participants identified as contributing to perceived violations of goodwill
from industry were ‘marketing tactics’, ‘pushy’ labelling, ‘marketing ploy[s]’, ‘tricking’,
‘hiding’, ‘misleading’, and ‘underhand’ labelling. One participant with a background in
economics expressed it as labelling

‘...should address that information imbalance and not seek to amplify that. So
I think a lot of product labelling does muddy the waters. So yeah I guess
you’re aware that there is a lot of research that goes into how they are
packaging their products and I don’t think it’s all for providing genuine and
useful information to the consumer’ (Oliver).

A quarter of participants additionally articulated that the awareness of these perceived
negative intentions had grown with shopping experience,

‘I probably wouldn’t have had the opinions first I don’t think. Like it’s
probably something that’s been there [on labelling], noticed and talked about
that then has formed the opinion. I mean because like if you go to something
first and objectively, you’d probably just be like, “well this is someone who’s
giving me a product” - you would trust that. But then as soon as they’re like
chucking those extra things on, you’re kind of like “why are they doing that?”
and then you’re thinking about, then you’re forming an opinion’ (Ruby).

A lack of clarity in communication, whether practical or in expression and language used,
was perceived by participants as evasive. For example, the size of lettering and location of
key label elements were both practical aspects highlighted by participants, ‘I think they put
them [nutrition information panels] in really hard to find places’ (Lewis). Perceived language
issues like using technical names for ingredients or indirect language were also perceived to
be purposefully ambiguous, ‘...‘and research shows that it may or can” - that’s what they
say, it may or this one says can lower cholesterol’ (Hannah). Conversely, positive intentions
were interpreted when labelling was ‘...nice and clear. There’s none of this I’ve got to take my glasses off to have a look, I can actually read the whole lot’ (Liz). Enhancing the visibility of certain ingredients and not others in the ingredients list or detailed nutrition information panel however was seen as deliberately misleading. But this did not hold true for all participants. One participant who was closer to the food chain (married into a farming family) saw it differently, ‘Oh I think they’re being genuine. They’re highlighting what they think is most important for what they’re promising...So I think, me, they’re actually just highlighting what the product is supposedly about’ (Liz).

Some label elements were universally interpreted as demonstrating a lack of goodwill. Nutrient content claims were very rarely seen as positively intended when on most packaged food. ‘Them-versus-us’ language was often elicited, ‘... it’s not about caring for the person and selling a product that’s actually good for them and labelling the things that they care about. I guess that comes back to that “may contain traces...” It’s more about them rather than us’ (Ruby).

Incongruence between the label image and the product inside the packet, or the size of the packet and the volume of product inside, were frequently perceived as purposefully misleading. Advertising was not the only type of labelling raised as problematic however. Negative intentions were interpreted if the ‘common sense’ meaning of a label element varied from the technical meaning, ‘... for a long time we thought “made in Australia” was [completely Australian] but it’s not. So that’s very tricky. And I think that’s underhand’ (Margaret). A good example of the confirmatory bias loop in action was participants’ response to allergy labelling. Due to ‘may contain’ statements being voluntary, it was seen not as a method of helping consumers to avoid allergenic products, but ‘they just kind of put it on there to save their butt’ (Ruby) by all but one of the allergic participants. This

3 ‘May contain’ statements are voluntary label elements identifying the potential for cross-contamination of common allergens. These statements are distinct from mandatory allergen advisory statements which must be present on food labelling in Australia when a product contains peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, sesame seeds, fish, shellfish, soy or wheat.
reinforced their perception that companies do not care about consumer needs as many
reported feeling as though they either had to avoid many products they thought would not
actually be a problem, or ignore the labelling and feel insecure. Importantly, one label
element being interpreted negatively was at times enough to create scepticism about all the
labelling, ‘Because when you see a phoney message or a message that you know that it’s
not necessarily good...like “99% fat free” then you suddenly say “well I’ve got to look for
what is the hidden message about something else”’ (Isaac). This was also true in a more
broad sense; participants described feeling more negative about labelling in general after
seeing a disingenuous product. In this way distrust in labelling fostered distrust in industry
through labelling.

However, labelling not only reduced trust in industry, but provided opportunities for
enhanced trust. Plainly and simply packaged products without a lot of advertising
information enhanced perceived trustworthiness of the product manufacturer,

‘I’m giving somewhat kudos [sic] because that’s [tea in a clear bag with
mandatory labelling only], it doesn’t appear to be excessively packaged...the
vibe I get from this is they’re less keen on deceiving me than these people are
[boxed tea with some advertising]’ (Oliver).

Additionally, fulfilled expectations of competence occasionally enhanced trust despite
violated expectations of goodwill,

‘...yeah like there’s obviously elements that you go like the professionalism
makes me trust them more but, you know, the pushy advertising makes me
trust them less, or experience makes me trust them more because I know I
don’t react to it or, you know, just writing “may contain” for the sake of it
makes me trust them less, you know? There’s just that whole mixture like I
don’t think I can... So many elements...’ (Ruby).

So while participants generally described that their interaction with labelling resulted in
violation of expectations of goodwill and therefore mis/distrust in industry, labelling could
also foster trust through perceived demonstrations of competence and goodwill.

Trustworthiness of government
While regulatory bodies were not seen to be direct labelling communicators, most participants’ perception that they are ultimately responsible for labelling meant expectations of government competence and goodwill were judged through labelling, ‘yes, it’s [labelling is] extremely deliberately misleading. And we’ve got governments that don’t want to change it because they get lobbied heavily’ (Isaac). The perceived lack of government presence on labelling, accompanied by what participants saw as disingenuous labelling from industry, was seen as demonstration of government failure in fiduciary obligation and competence, ‘Oh pretty disappointed too. That they’re allowed to get away, that they allow businesses to get away with that... Yeah again it’s, it’s another way that the government’s letting people down I guess’ (Lucy). Many participants felt government involvement in more values-driven aspects of consumer protection could enhance belief in government’s fulfilment of their fiduciary responsibility, building trust, ‘What I think probably [regulatory agency] and labelling kind of regulation falls down on is the stuff they allow not to be labelled and the stuff that is not officially labelled. So you know, stuff that’s “natural”…’ (Oliver). More than half the participants expressed that they felt the labelling environment did not support the best interests and health of the community, and the hesitancy of government to intervene cast doubt on their fulfilment of fiduciary responsibility, ‘I think there is a responsibility that consumers should be protected because the bottom line is money and if they’re making millions and millions of dollars by putting us all into an early grave it has to be a social responsibility and consciousness. So yes I do believe that there has to be more than just me deciding whether to go to that shop or to buy off the shelf.

Abbey: Absolutely’

Therefore the perceived unwillingness of government to take action to prevent the lack of goodwill of industry resulted in participants feeling that government placed industry interests ahead of consumer interests, violating their fiduciary responsibility and/or competence, and fostering mis/distrust in government.

Trustworthiness of the broader food system
As labelling appeared to be a surrogate for personal interaction with food system actors, for
the majority of participants, perceiving these actors to be untrustworthy undermined trust
in the food system as a whole. One participant articulated the combination of violation of
expectations of goodwill from industry and competence from government around consumer
concerns as,

‘...it’s just ambiguous all the time. So you don’t have any, any say in your
choice. You, you really... I think they have a responsibility if they’re going to
provide food. In terms of the market system, the market system should
engage and have respect for the consumer; the consumer would like to make
specific choices and they don’t do that. And I think the people that are the
authorities and the governments and whatever, I think they’ve been
absolutely hopeless’ (Bruce)

This resulted in uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the system and mistrust for some
participants,

‘And I will now just go in and just say “it’s all marketing and they’re just trying
to deceive me” so now it’s a very negative thing. ...so you start thinking “well
who [in general, not a specific company] can I trust so that I can make an
informed decision and that I’m not being manipulated or deceived?”’ (Abbey)

In others it resulted in active distrust, ‘Interviewer: ...they seem to think that labelling
suggests positive things about the food system...? Isla: No. For me it’s almost total distrust’.

Most participants felt the only source of security were social control mechanisms associated
with labelling, like reputation, motivating labellers to do the right thing, ‘You know if you
prove somebody big to be wrong then everybody gets to hear about it which is bad for
business, so they care. Not because they care, they care because it’s bad for business’
(Henry). Participants directly contrasted this with the motivation of it being ‘a good thing for
the Australian [public], or for people generally’ (Bruce). Additional social control
mechanisms participants expressed relying on were regulatory activities like laws,
monitoring and prosecution for misconduct, ‘Yeah stuff like that [the detailed nutrition
information]. So yes I think that has helped and makes me feel like “okay at least that’s
regulated” (Abbey). Although this strategy was only possible for participants who knew these label elements were regulated.

However, almost all participants concurrently described labelling fostering trust in the system regarding other risks, through being a visible representative of a technically competent, and therefore hygienically safe, system. Here participants cited standardised nutrition information and ingredients lists as indications of a well regulated system. Still, judgements regarding trust in the system were complex, often involving all the aspects (expectations of competence and goodwill, and additional social controls) at once,

‘I guess, it [labelling] does and it doesn’t [foster trust] for me, you know I...

They’re putting it out there, they’re going “this has blah blah blah inside of it” and I guess I go, “I trust that”. I guess it’s some sort of government body that says you know, “how have you tested that? You know, how have you weighed up your ingredients?”... I guess, you know, I imagine this body... that they’re actually watching this, and that if they play, if they played up—so saying the quality control study guy went awry that they’d get fined; do a recall. So I guess that that’s, in that sense it [labelling] does make me feel better about the food, and it does build my trust with it. There’re certain elements that don’t build my trust. I don’t for instance, you know the 99% fat free that seems to be the catch phrase, “99%, 99%”...so...Yeah, in that sense it doesn’t’ (Colin).

On an everyday, practical level, the strategies participants utilised to manage these interpreted indicators of lack of trustworthiness and conflicting feelings were numerous:

‘You think “Oh maybe I’ll just leave it”’ (Liz),

‘I’d probably just not read a lot of it’ (Chloe),

‘I tend to buy the same brands and same things’ (Margaret),

‘I’m buying less of the processed stuff because I just don’t really know what I can rely upon’ (Thomas),

‘I’m attempting to learn to cook everything that I enjoy myself’ (Lewis),

‘So basically I like to have that direct link [with producers]...I trust what I trust’ (Bruce).
Seeking government presence on labelling, shopping around the supermarket edges and shopping in particular stores were further strategies expressed. However, it was clear that mistrust and increased sensitivity to negative intentions were residual implications for participants of repeatedly seeing their expectations of goodwill violated through labelling.

Discussion

The findings presented suggest that food labelling acts as a surrogate for personal interaction with food system actors. This enables trust judgements about industry and government, and the broader food system to be formed by consumers though labelling. For these participants, in a general sense, labelling undermined belief in the goodwill and fulfilment of fiduciary responsibility of system actors, eroding trust in the system as a whole. Continued engagement with the conventional food system was made possible through labelling being a visible indication of actor competence, along with social control mechanisms complementary to trust, such as reputation and prosecution for misconduct.

The role of food labelling as described by these participants is consistent with Giddens’ (1990) conceptualisation of an ‘access point’ to a system. Experiences at access points are likely to strongly influence attitudes of trust towards specific systems (Giddens, 1990). Importantly, Giddens is clear that access points are places where trust in the system can be enhanced or undermined. Here labelling afforded opportunities for both the building and eroding of trust in specific actors and the system as a whole; labelling was an access point for ‘faceless’ trust in the food system (Giddens, 1990, p. 88). This supports theoretical claims that trust can be actively placed in systems, and provides empirical support for Giddens’ conceptualisation of ‘access points’. Thus food labelling can be an opportunity to foster and even potentially build trust in food systems, provided it is sending positive messages about their trustworthiness.

The elements of trustworthiness these participants expressed assessing through labelling are similar to the dimensions of trust in systems identified by others: a competence component and an affective component here termed goodwill (Barber, 1983; Metlay, 1999; Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2003; Sapp et al., 2009). Specific to the food system, in a large US survey Sapp et al. (2009, p. 541) found that factors representing perceived competence and
fiduciary responsibility of institutional actors accounted for >96% of the variance in trust in food. They found the effects of fiduciary responsibility on trust were more important than that of competence, by a substantial way (average 3 to 1) (Sapp et al., 2009, p. 537). de Jonge et al. (2008) also found that ‘care’ was the most important trust dimension in building consumer confidence in food safety. Both suggest that rather than focussing risk communication on competence aspects such as skills and expertise, consumer trust may be better fostered through emphasising the fiduciary responsibility and care of system actors (de Jonge et al., 2008; Sapp et al., 2009). Our results indicate that while food labelling enhances consumer belief in industry and government competence (for example through the presence of standardised nutrition information), it damages perceptions of their goodwill; quite the reverse of the situation proposed as ideal for fostering trust in food by Sapp et al. (2009) and de Jonge et al. (2008). The assertion from Sapp et al. (2009) that ‘actions rather than words are needed to promote public confidence in fiduciary responsibility’ results in our findings being even more problematic for these actors. While the everyday visible representative of the food system, food labelling, is perceived to demonstrate a lack of goodwill from industry and government, verbal pontifications to the contrary are likely to fall on deaf public ears. At the core of judgements regarding goodwill was the assessment of labeller intent displayed by these participants. This concept is similar to what is described in the advertising literature as ‘manipulative intent’, Campbell (1995) defines it as ‘consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair or manipulative means’ (p. 228). That consumers interpret manipulative intent from labelling is supported by Abrams, Evans, and Duff (2015) who also found marketing tactics, such as celebrity endorsement, are instead used as a defence heuristic by parents shopping for children. However in the study presented here the assessment of manipulative intent was not limited to the advertising information, but all labelling. Mandatory aspects of the label were also at times perceived to be manipulative. This may be in part due to participants not clearly distinguishing between mandatory and voluntary label elements, but simply seeing all labelling as a direct communication from industry.
That so much manipulative intent is interpreted from such a wide variety of labelling elements may be partially due to participants’ pre-existing biases or ideas about the goodwill of industry. We have suggested this is present as a confirmatory-bias loop in the process of interpreting trustworthiness from labelling, as indicated in Figure 1. The confirmatory bias hypothesis (White, Pahl, Buehner, & Haye, 2003) would suggest participants who have a high degree of pessimism and perceive industry as lacking goodwill interpret labelling in such a way as to support those same views. Exemplifying the suggested confirmatory bias is the finding that language used to communicate uncertainty, and therefore protect consumers, such as ‘can’ or ‘may’ in health claims was perceived by participants as deliberately evasive and manipulative. Previous research examining trust in food safety and regulation has provided similar support for the confirmatory bias hypothesis (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2004). In quantitative studies this has been described as an issue of attributing causality (de Jonge et al., 2008); that is, does perceiving manipulation in labelling lead to distrust of actors, or does distrust of actors lead to interpretation of manipulation in labelling? We argue that in complex social conditions such as these, attributing causality is less important than recognising that the effects are likely reciprocally supporting, hence presenting this as a loop in Figure 1. Consumers interpret labelling through the lens of a life history of previous interactions with labelling and other experiences that form general attitudes of trust towards food system actors. Policy makers and industry must be mindful of not framing consumers as separate from this social context when reviewing and planning labelling regulations and initiatives.

Participants explicitly stated that currently interaction with food labelling damages their trust in industry, with flow on effects for trust in government. Consistent with social theory (Barber, 1983; Gambetta, 1988), participants describe relying more heavily upon other forms of social control like indirect management of the market through media and prosecution for misconduct to manage food-related uncertainty. Consumers placing greater emphasis on organisations responsible for monitoring and enforcement, and therefore prosecution for misconduct, should be of concern to policy makers. In Australia and globally these organisations are typically over-burdened and resource poor, working to risk-based frameworks that can be unreflective of the issues important to many consumer groups.
Trust is a far more efficient solution, and thus critically examining current labelling practices to encourage the fostering, rather than destruction, of trust may be the most economical option with wide spread benefits for the overall food regulatory system. Petty (2015) provides an interesting analysis of the policy implications of the numerous consumer class action lawsuits in the US over the use of the term ‘natural’ in food advertising, which could be seen as a response to many of the issues identified by the participants in this study. A focus on risk and food safety emphasises competence, but the exclusion of other issues relevant to consumers, the ‘consumers values issues’ (Blewett, Goddard, Pettigrew, Reynolds, & Yeatman, 2011), does nothing to foster goodwill. The existence of multiple dimensions to trustworthiness does not infer an either/or situation – both competence and goodwill must be displayed for trust to be built and maintained (Frewer et al., 1996; Meijboom, 2007).

This is a qualitative study and as such cannot make claims to population representativeness, limiting the generalisability of the findings beyond this participant group. However, that the findings were so consistently shown by a majority of participants theoretically sampled for variance in trust instils confidence in the conclusions drawn. Similarly, that these findings are so congruous with other larger, quantitative studies and extant theory provides further assurance of the validity of the central messages. While the depth of understanding achieved in this study would be unattainable in a large, population representative study, this work may be used as a platform for quantitative studies targeting specific parts of the findings presented here.

Conclusions

This research presents a novel perspective in discussions of food and trust, it has focussed on trust through labelling; previous research having exclusively examined consumer trustingness, trust in labelling. It shows food labelling acts as an access point for trust in disembedded, globalised food systems. The explicit voicing of distrust developed through interaction with food labelling presented by these participants demands attention from both food industry groups and regulatory bodies alike.
The research reported in this paper provides crucial insights into how labelling may damage consumer belief in the trustworthiness of food system actors. The results have implications for policy makers, and for primary and retail food industries. These actors must move away from an exclusive focus on demonstrating competence to also consider how policy decisions and labelling choices will impact upon consumer perceptions of actor goodwill. Furthermore, this research can be used as a platform for future research exploring how industry and policy makers can craft labelling that fosters consumer belief in food system actors’ goodwill. Rather than being merely a conduit for information about manufacture and contents, this would potentially enable labelling to be used as a tool to rebuild and maintain, rather than undermine, consumer trust in food systems.

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