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Relevance of Food Labels in Purchasing Habits of University-age Students

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PURPOSE: With rising rates of obesity on college campuses, combined with the high food insecurity simultaneously experienced by college students, the question of food availability and food purchasing behaviors has become even more prominent. This study aimed to examine prominent factors determining food purchasing behaviors in college-aged students (18-25 years). **METHODS:** Participants were drawn from the Food Labels study (PI: Liguori) and recruited online and in person. Data from n=6, 18-25-year-old participants from Phase 1 completed a vignette survey and participated in cognitive interviews to determine survey acceptability and validity. In the vignette survey, participants were randomly shown three food labels and asked how likely they were to purchase the product. The labels varied by: 1) food type (yogurt, cereal, or black beans); 2) cost (25% off coupon vs. no coupon); 3) FDA “Healthy” logo (logo vs. no logo); and 4) shopper rating (3-star rating vs. 5-star rating). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded using qualitative analysis techniques to reveal themes and patterns in the data. **RESULTS:** Qualitative analysis revealed several themes regarding the prominent factors determining food purchasing behaviors in college-aged students. Interviews revealed that “healthy” was primarily defined by the nutrient content of the food and food preference emerged as a primary influence on food choice. Participants in this age group felt confident in their abilities to purchase “healthy” food. Participants food purchasing behavior primarily focused on the convenience of food and whether it fell within the categories of food they typically purchased. **CONCLUSION:** Decisions regarding food choices on college campuses are multifaceted and may be limited by the education and availability of food on campuses. **SIGNIFICANCE/NOVELTY:** This study adds to our limited understanding of food purchasing behavior in college-aged students. Campus food options are limited mostly to dining halls and a few campus restaurants. These menus contain food high in sodium with few “healthy” options, making it difficult for students to focus on health. Campus food environments and policies should support healthier options for college-aged individuals.