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

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

21 **Keywords**

22 Consumer, labeling, food, trust, policy

Introduction

1
2 Consumer trust in the food system is essential to ensure a cooperative and functioning
3 market for system actors (Gambetta, 1988) and to manage complexity and uncertainty for
4 consumers (Luhmann, 1979). Much research has framed the problem of trust in food as
5 primarily an issue of appropriate food risk communication. However, following an analysis
6 of trust in food in Europe, Kjaernes (2006) argues that to focus on risk perception and
7 communication for the problem of trust represents an overly cognitively based and
8 inadequate picture of trust in food. As such, the idea of the 'knowledge fix' as a means to
9 enhance trust in food has been contested (Eden, Bear, & Walker, 2008; Kjaernes, 2006).

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

17 As stated by Luhmann (1979, p. 26), 'trust always extrapolates from the available evidence'.
18 That is to say, trust judgements are never fully complete and thus can be reflexively
19 considered in the light of new information, particularly indicators of trustworthiness
20 gleaned through social interaction (Mollering, 2006). Direct and personal evidence
21 pertaining to the trustworthiness of food system actors is limited by the physical and
22 rational separation of consumers and system actors because of the complexity of globalised
23 food chains (Belliveau, 2005; Brom, 2000). Well-publicised food scandals provide
24 opportunities for the public to scrutinise actions of those within the agri-food sector.
25 However these occasions are relatively rare. By contrast, food labelling provides an
26 everyday encounter with the food system through its positioning at the interface of
27 consumers and the market. As such, food labelling may provide an avenue for consumers to
28 assess the trustworthiness of food system actors.

29

1 Previous research exploring food labelling and trust has focused on trust in labelling (Tonkin,
2 Wilson, Coveney, Webb, & Meyer, 2015). From this perspective, trust in the labeller is
3 repeatedly shown to influence trust in the label message (Batrinou, Spiliotis, & Sakellaris,
4 2008; Eden et al., 2008; Janssen & Hamm, 2012; Sirieix, Delanchy, Remaud, Zepeda, &
5 Gurviez, 2013; Sonderskov & Daugbjerg, 2011; Soregaroli, Boccaletti, & Moro, 2003; Van
6 Rijswijk & Frewer, 2012). However, there are some suggestions in this literature that the
7 reverse may also be true—trust in labelling leads to trust in labellers. That is to say,
8 consumers may use the messages provided by labelling to foster trust in the manufacturer.
9 This statement examines trust *through* labelling, therefore switching the focus to
10 perceptions of food system trustworthiness that result from consumer interaction with
11 labelling. For example, Garretson and Burton (2000) showed that inconsistencies in labelling
12 information can result in a decline in perceived trustworthiness of the manufacturer.
13 Similarly, Van Rijswijk and Frewer (2012) found fraudulent labelling information would
14 result in a loss of consumer confidence in the producer of that product. While these findings
15 provide suggestions of consumers interpreting manufacturer trustworthiness from labelling,
16 they are far from a complete picture of how labelling may influence trust in the food
17 system. This paper contributes novel findings regarding the trust judgements formed
18 through consumer interaction with food labelling. In doing so, we also determine who
19 consumers make trust judgements about (which food actors within the system), and what
20 expectations these judgements are based on (what do consumers use as indicators of
21 trustworthiness).

22 **Theoretical framework**

23 Extant literature in the form of social theories of trust (Barber, 1983; Giddens, 1990, 1994;
24 Luhmann, 1979; Mollering, 2006) can be used to develop a set of guiding concepts for the
25 exploration of the foci for and foundations of trust judgements. First, sociological accounts
26 of trust distinguish between trust in individuals (for example between spouses), groups of
27 individuals (for example a company) and systems (for example the system of government)
28 (Mollering, 2006). Other theorists dispute trust in 'systems' as not trust itself but, rather,
29 confidence, with trust being associated with action and generalised trust in institutions and
30 systems as simply an attitude of acceptance (Barbalet, 2009). This provides useful

1 distinctions between active trust and passive confidence. Giddens (1990) and Luhmann
2 (1979) also posit that trust at these different social levels is not isolated, but interconnected.
3 Trust in the individual can influence trust in the group and vice versa. Through applying this
4 idea to consumer trust and food labelling it becomes possible to examine if food labelling
5 enables consumers to identify different social levels within the food chain, and specifically
6 locate the potentially different foci for consumer trust in food. It is also important for
7 understanding how these different focal points for trust may influence each other.

8 Second, social theory provides insights into what might form the foundational expectations
9 of trusting relations; that is, the types of information individuals base trust judgements on.
10 Mollering (2006) terms these foundational expectations 'indicators of trustworthiness'. One
11 prominent conceptualisation is that of Barber (1983), who theorises that the two primary
12 expectations trustors hold of trustees comprise technical competence and the fulfilment of
13 fiduciary obligation. For Barber (1983) fiduciary obligation recognises that trustworthiness
14 involves an element beyond competent performance, to address the ethical and moral
15 dimensions of social interactions. Metlay (1999) terms this dimension the 'affective'
16 element, representing perceived openness, reliability, integrity, credibility, fairness, and
17 caring of trustees. However, empirically there remains some contention regarding whether
18 there are dimensions beyond these two, and what these dimensions encompass. Previous
19 research has aimed to classify the underlying dimensions of trust in food (de Jonge et al.,
20 2007; de Jonge, van Trijp, van der Lans, Renes, & Frewer, 2008; Frewer, Howard, Hedderley,
21 & Shepherd, 1996; Sapp et al., 2009). Contrary to Metlay (1999) and Barber (1983),
22 Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) and Frewer et al. (1996) found the two main dimensions of
23 trust included one that conflates competence and fiduciary responsibility, and another
24 representing a scepticism or vested interest factor. Thus it remains open as to which
25 indicators of trustworthiness may be important here.

26 The above social theories of trust provide theoretical insights regarding the dynamics of
27 trust in different social levels, and the foundational expectations that form trust
28 judgements. These theoretical ideas can be used as a provisional set of guiding concepts for
29 exploring the research questions of what trust judgements consumers form through

1 interaction with labelling, and which indicators of trustworthiness are important in making
2 these judgements.

3 **Methods**

4 **Methodological approach**

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

18 **Data collection**

19 In-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of about one hour duration with 24 South
20 Australian consumers were conducted solely by the primary author (ET). The interview
21 schedule was structured around broad themes including participant expectations and
22 concerns about food in Australia, their definition and use of food labelling, their thoughts
23 about labelled and unlabelled food (for example from a farmers' market), and their
24 thoughts on specific packaging prompts. Major themes were used as a guide to direct the
25 interview, with specific questions used and the order of topics being unique to each
26 interview to allow a natural conversational manner. Examples of types of questions used are
27 'When I say "food labelling" not everyone thinks of the same thing. Can you describe what
28 you think of when I say "food labelling"?' and 'Who is responsible for the information on
29 food packages?' As such, no strict interview schedule beyond the major themes outlined

1 above was adhered to in the interview process, but consistency was achieved as all
2 participants were interviewed by the same researcher. Twelve real product packages and
3 three images were provided for participants to demonstrate their ideas if they wished,
4 however they were not referred to directly by the interviewer during the interview sections
5 drawn on in this analysis. Images of these are available as supplementary online material.
6 Here the term 'food labelling' is used to refer to all product packaging, while the term 'label
7 element' refers to individual label components (for example a health claim). As only broad
8 themes were used to structure interviews, discussions of labelling reflected consumer
9 perspectives and focussed on the label elements they interact with in their everyday
10 experience. Attention was paid to ensuring no research documents or discussions of the
11 research with participants stated or alluded to the topic of trust, or were leading to
12 participants in any other way. Trust was only discussed explicitly if a participant raised it,
13 preserving the language and context provided by the participant (Henwood, Pidgeon, Sarre,
14 Simmons, & Smith, 2008). Only when a participant never raised the issue of trust did the
15 interviewer do so as trust was a vital concept to the study. If necessary, this was done in the
16 final interview question.

17 **Recruitment and sampling**

18 Theoretical sampling of participants, as advanced by Layder (1998), was conducted. As the
19 present analysis explores how food labelling influences trust in the food system and its
20 actors, the following sampling criteria were chosen as they are factors identified in previous
21 literature to influence either trust in food or consumer interaction with food labelling.
22 Participants were recruited from a range of food markets as literature suggests an
23 association between food shopping practices and trust in the food system (Ekici, 2004):
24 supermarket, alternative food store (for example organic stores), and farmers' market or
25 strictly local produce shoppers. As previous research has shown trust in the food system
26 varies between consumers living in rural and metropolitan areas (Meyer, Coveney,
27 Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012), rural participants were actively sought to ensure both
28 rural and metropolitan residents were sampled. Additionally, recruitment aimed to capture
29 both genders, a range of ages, income groups and educational backgrounds, and consumers
30 with different dietary requirements (for example food allergy) as these sociodemographic

1 characteristics are known to impact both trust in food actors (Henderson, Coveney, Ward, &
2 Taylor, 2011) and attention to food labelling (FSANZ, 2008). Recruitment and interviewing
3 occurred during May – July 2014 and utilised a range of strategies including use of
4 advertising with specific organisations (for example Slow Food SA), and placing posters in
5 supermarkets, gyms and malls. The data regarding trust were found to be saturated at 24
6 participants, and theoretical sampling dimensions had also been adequately represented by
7 this stage (Mason, 2010). Participants were reimbursed \$30 for expenses associated with
8 taking part in the research. Ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Social and
9 Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (project number 6429).

10 **Analysis**

11 Each interview was transcribed in whole, read multiple times and summarised by the
12 primary researcher (ET). Summaries included links made with the set of guiding concepts
13 (see 'Theoretical framework' section). Major themes present in the summaries and relevant
14 to this analysis were trust, which food system actors participants saw as present in labelling,
15 participant interpretation of labeller motives, and mechanisms for controlling industry.
16 These major themes were condensed into a preliminary set of one word codes. Each
17 interview transcript was then coded with NVivo 10 (QSR International, Doncaster) using
18 both this preliminary set, and new codes created for new ideas and important features of
19 data (Layder, 1998). The code list was refined through interrogating each individual code for
20 uniqueness, and retaining, nesting, merging or deleting codes as appropriate (Saldana,
21 2013). Transcript sections pertaining to the large theme of trust were separated into the foci
22 of the trust judgements (what/who participants were (dis)trusting), and the common
23 expectations discussed in connection with trust judgements. This was done in tandem with
24 revisiting the set of guiding concepts. Therefore, consistent with adaptive theory, data
25 analysis was both inductive and deductive (Hewege & Perera, 2013; Layder, 1998), and the
26 outcome of this integration of theory with empirical data (Figure 1) is presented in the
27 results. In this way participants' main themes were used to structure the results. Analyst
28 triangulation was carried out through presentation of each analysis stage to the broader
29 research team, enabling examination, refinement, and at times alternative interpretations
30 of data (Fade, 2003). Further peer-debriefing was conducted through the presentation of

1 the findings to a group of researchers, regulators and policy makers to ensure research
2 credibility (Fade, 2003).

3 **Results**

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

11 **Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

	Gender	Age group	Shopping location	Locality	Highest educational attainment	Food considerations
Colin	M	25-34	Supermarket	Metro	Higher degree	None
Lucy	F	25-34	Supermarket	Metro	Diploma/vocational	Food allergy
Ruth	F	45-54	Alternative	Metro	Diploma/vocational	Chronic disease
Isla	F	25-34	Supermarket	Metro	Higher degree	Food allergy
Ruby	F	18-24	Supermarket	Metro	Secondary school	Food allergy
Paula	F	35-44	Supermarket	Rural	Bachelor's degree	Food allergy
Grace	F	25-34	Alternative	Metro	Bachelor's degree	Food allergy
Thomas	M	55-64	Alternative	Metro	Higher degree	None
Oliver	M	35-44	Supermarket	Metro	Bachelor's degree	None
Jack	M	>65	Alternative	Metro	Bachelor's degree	None
Hannah	F	>65	Alternative	Metro	-	None
May	F	>65	Supermarket	Rural	Year 10 or below	None
Margaret	F	>65	Supermarket	Rural	Diploma/vocational	None
Anne	F	>65	Supermarket	Rural	Year 10 or below	Chronic disease
Abbey	F	35-44	Supermarket	Metro	Diploma/vocational	None
Isaac	M	55-64	Local only	Metro	Higher degree	None
Leo	M	18-24	Supermarket	Metro	Bachelor's degree	None
Fran	F	25-34	Supermarket	Metro	Diploma/vocational	Chronic disease
Bruce	M	45-54	Local only	Rural	Higher degree	None

Henry	M	45-54	Alternative	Metro	Bachelor's degree	None
Chloe	F	18-24	Supermarket	Metro	Secondary school	None
Amelia	F	45-54	Supermarket	Metro	Higher degree	None
Liz	F	55-64	Supermarket	Metro	Bachelor's degree	Chronic disease
Lewis	M	18-24	Local only	Metro	Diploma/vocational	Food allergy

1

2 Labelling as a social interaction

3 Participants freely moved between discussing labelling as a collection of specific label
 4 elements, and food labelling at a higher level of abstraction; that is, labelling as a general
 5 concept. Participants led any discussions of specific label elements. Overall these were
 6 limited to advertising, certification, country of origin labels, ingredients lists, date marks and
 7 nutrition information panels. Only one participant identified other mandatory elements¹
 8 specifically, however they were clear that these aspects were not those he was attentive to,
 9 'What else are there [*sic*]... the manufacturer, or like the address of where they are but I
 10 don't care about that' (Leo).

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

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).

1 was discussed by participants as a form of social interaction, 'Labelling on...it's a
2 communication between us and the manufacturers' (Amelia).

3 **Labelling communicators**

4 All participants identified industry as the main actor communicating with them through
5 labelling. There was a lack of clarity around exactly who this was however, with the terms
6 'brand', 'labeller', 'company', 'producer', 'maker', 'manufacturer' and 'industry' used
7 interchangeably by participants. Some participants particularly specified the
8 marketers/advertisers as separate to producers/manufacturers, 'I think this main, the front
9 bit is advertisers and the side one is manufacturers' (Amelia). Over half the participants also
10 identified third-party organisations, such as the Australian Heart Foundation, as periphery
11 actors in the social interaction.

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

20 *'Interviewer: So who do you sort of hold responsible for that? Is it Uncle*
21 *Toby's or...'*

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

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

28 **Participant expectations of food system actors**

1 As labelling was seen as a form of social interaction with industry (and indirectly
2 government), it provided an avenue for participants to measure these actors against their
3 general expectations of social actors in a position of power. Two clear themes emerged
4 regarding the expectations participants held, and these were present as an undercurrent in
5 all interviews: expectations of technical competence and a component that encompassed
6 the moral quality, honesty, fiduciary responsibility and sincerity displayed by industry and
7 government. Herein this component will be encapsulated by the term 'goodwill' (Meijboom,
8 2007). Importantly, participants were clear that they did not anticipate actually finding
9 these qualities fulfilled, but thought they *should* be demonstrated by food system actors. An
10 example is Thomas implying his expectations around truth telling, although explicitly stating
11 that he doesn't anticipate to be told the truth, when discussing his use of labelling, 'In some
12 ways it's a little bit like politics, you don't expect to be told the truth. So what's that, *caveat*
13 *emptor* ["let the buyer beware"]?' (Thomas).

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

18 'I don't think it's generally purposeful, I think it's generally incompetence...
19 Incompetence in different levels... Like you know, some of it's quite
20 complicated to find out what should be on a label. So, it's incompetence but
21 it's not really incompetence because they're competent people it's just too
22 hard to work it out. Which is a government incompetence, not a producer
23 incompetence, if you like' (Henry).

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

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

1 dodgier², so there's like that lacking trust, but they're nicer and they're not as
2 pushy...' (Ruby).

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

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

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

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

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

² Australian slang for lower quality

1 Overall, while indicators of competence were only reflexively considered when something
2 was noticeably wrong, indicators of goodwill were routinely considered in interaction with
3 labelling, by all participants.

4 _____

5 Figure 1 about here

6 _____

7 **Trust in the food system and specific actors *through* labelling**

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

21 **Trustworthiness of industry**

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

26 'Yeah, it makes me not probably trust them [manufacturer] as much. I
27 understand what they're trying to do is, is try to flog you food that may not
28 be beneficial to you, nutrient wise or otherwise. And they probably are

1 thinking “look we can probably get away with this, you know, this follows the
2 rules, we’re writing this down, what they don’t realise is that actually they’re
3 drinking 10 of these” but ... Yeah’ (Colin).

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

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

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

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

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

24 *‘Well it’s the marketers that don’t have a social conscience is...what I feel is
25 that look, I know they’re in it to make money, but when something is
26 obviously not good for you that’s one thing, but when you start to now
27 market like what they did last night, you think you’re putting healthy snacks
28 in your children’s lunchboxes because you haven’t had time to make stuff
29 and then you think because it says “organic” or it’s “light” or it’s “whole
30 thing” or whatever, then if you actually just flicked to the ingredients and*

1 educate yourself it's actually not a good choice. And yes so that I feel really,
2 yeah quite deceived to be honest' (Abbey).

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

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

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

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

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

24 A lack of clarity in communication, whether practical or in expression and language used,
25 was perceived by participants as evasive. For example, the size of lettering and location of
26 key label elements were both practical aspects highlighted by participants, 'I think they put
27 them [nutrition information panels] in really hard to find places' (Lewis). Perceived language
28 issues like using technical names for ingredients or indirect language were also perceived to
29 be purposefully ambiguous, '..."and research shows that it *may* or *can*" - that's what they
30 say, it *may* or this one says *can* lower cholesterol' (Hannah). Conversely, positive intentions

1 were interpreted when labelling was ‘...nice and clear. There’s none of this I’ve got to take
2 my glasses off to have a look, I can actually read the whole lot’ (Liz). Enhancing the visibility
3 of certain ingredients and not others in the ingredients list or detailed nutrition information
4 panel however was seen as deliberately misleading. But this did not hold true for all
5 participants. One participant who was closer to the food chain (married into a farming
6 family) saw it differently, ‘Oh I think they’re being genuine. They’re highlighting what they
7 think is most important for what they’re promising...So I think, me, they’re actually just
8 highlighting what the product is supposedly about’ (Liz).

9 Some label elements were universally interpreted as demonstrating a lack of goodwill.
10 Nutrient content claims were very rarely seen as positively intended when on most
11 packaged food. ‘Them-versus-us’ language was often elicited,

12 ‘... it’s not about caring for the person and selling a product that’s actually
13 good for them and labelling the things that they care about. I guess that
14 comes back to that “may contain traces...” It’s more about them rather than
15 us’ (Ruby).

16 Incongruence between the label image and the product inside the packet, or the size of the
17 packet and the volume of product inside, were frequently perceived as purposefully
18 misleading. Advertising was not the only type of labelling raised as problematic however.
19 Negative intentions were interpreted if the ‘common sense’ meaning of a label element
20 varied from the technical meaning, ‘... for a long time we thought “made in Australia” was
21 [completely Australian] but it’s not. So that’s very tricky. And I think that’s underhand’
22 (Margaret). A good example of the confirmatory bias loop in action was participants’
23 response to allergy labelling. Due to ‘may contain’³ statements being voluntary, it was seen
24 not as a method of helping consumers to avoid allergenic products, but ‘they just kind of put
25 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.

1 reinforced their perception that companies do not care about consumer needs as many
2 reported feeling as though they either had to avoid many products they thought would not
3 actually be a problem, or ignore the labelling and feel insecure. Importantly, one label
4 element being interpreted negatively was at times enough to create scepticism about all the
5 labelling, 'Because when you see a phoney message or a message that you know that it's
6 not necessarily good...like "99% fat free" then you suddenly say "well I've got to look for
7 what is the hidden message about something else"' (Isaac). This was also true in a more
8 broad sense; participants described feeling more negative about labelling in general after
9 seeing a disingenuous product. In this way distrust *in* labelling fostered distrust in industry
10 *through* labelling.

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

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

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

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

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

29 **Trustworthiness of government**

1 While regulatory bodies were not seen to be direct labelling communicators, most
2 participants' perception that they are ultimately responsible for labelling meant
3 expectations of government competence and goodwill were judged through labelling, 'yes,
4 it's [labelling is] extremely deliberately misleading. And we've got governments that don't
5 want to change it because they get lobbied heavily' (Isaac). The perceived lack of
6 government presence on labelling, accompanied by what participants saw as disingenuous
7 labelling from industry, was seen as demonstration of government failure in fiduciary
8 obligation and competence, 'Oh pretty disappointed too. That they're allowed to get away,
9 that they allow businesses to get away with that... Yeah again it's, it's another way that the
10 government's letting people down I guess' (Lucy). Many participants felt government
11 involvement in more values-driven aspects of consumer protection could enhance belief in
12 government's fulfilment of their fiduciary responsibility, building trust, 'What I think
13 probably [regulatory agency] and labelling kind of regulation falls down on is the stuff they
14 allow not to be labelled and the stuff that is not officially labelled. So you know, stuff that's
15 "natural"...' (Oliver). More than half the participants expressed that they felt the labelling
16 environment did not support the best interests and health of the community, and the
17 hesitancy of government to intervene cast doubt on their fulfilment of fiduciary
18 responsibility,

19 'I think there is a responsibility that consumers should be protected because
20 the bottom line is money and if they're making millions and millions of dollars
21 by putting us all into an early grave it has to be a social responsibility and
22 consciousness. So yes I do believe that there has to be more than just me
23 deciding whether to go to that shop or to buy off the shelf.

24 *Interviewer: So you do see a role for the government in this stuff?*

25 *Abbey: Absolutely'*

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

30 **Trustworthiness of the broader food system**

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

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

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

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

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

21 Most participants felt the only source of security were social control mechanisms associated
22 with labelling, like reputation, motivating labellers to do the right thing, 'You know if you
23 prove somebody big to be wrong then everybody gets to hear about it which is bad for
24 business, so they care. Not because they care, they care because it's bad for business'
25 (Henry). Participants directly contrasted this with the motivation of it being 'a good thing for
26 the Australian [public], or for people generally' (Bruce). Additional social control
27 mechanisms participants expressed relying on were regulatory activities like laws,
28 monitoring and prosecution for misconduct, 'Yeah stuff like that [the detailed nutrition
29 information]. So yes I think that has helped and makes me feel like "okay at least that's

1 regulated''' (Abbey). Although this strategy was only possible for participants who knew
2 these label elements were regulated.

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

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

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

23 'You think "Oh maybe I'll just leave it"' (Liz),
24 'I'd probably just not read a lot of it' (Chloe),
25 'I tend to buy the same brands and same things' (Margaret),
26 'I'm buying less of the processed stuff because I just don't really know what I
27 can rely upon' (Thomas),
28 'I'm attempting to learn to cook everything that I enjoy myself' (Lewis),
29 'So basically I like to have that direct link [with producers]...I trust what I
30 trust' (Bruce).

1 Seeking government presence on labelling, shopping around the supermarket edges and
2 shopping in particular stores were further strategies expressed. However, it was clear that
3 mistrust and increased sensitivity to negative intentions were residual implications for
4 participants of repeatedly seeing their expectations of goodwill violated through labelling.

5 **Discussion**

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

14 The role of food labelling as described by these participants is consistent with Giddens'
15 (1990) conceptualisation of an 'access point' to a system. Experiences at access points are
16 likely to strongly influence attitudes of trust towards specific systems (Giddens, 1990).
17 Importantly, Giddens is clear that access points are places where trust in the system can be
18 enhanced *or* undermined. Here labelling afforded opportunities for both the building and
19 eroding of trust in specific actors and the system as a whole; labelling was an access point
20 for 'faceless' trust in the food system (Giddens, 1990, p. 88). This supports theoretical claims
21 that trust can be actively placed in systems, and provides empirical support for Giddens'
22 conceptualisation of 'access points'. Thus food labelling can be an opportunity to foster and
23 even potentially build trust in food systems, provided it is sending positive messages about
24 their trustworthiness.

25 The elements of trustworthiness these participants expressed assessing through labelling
26 are similar to the dimensions of trust in systems identified by others: a competence
27 component and an affective component here termed goodwill (Barber, 1983; Metlay, 1999;
28 Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2003; Sapp et al., 2009). Specific to the food system, in a large US
29 survey Sapp et al. (2009, p. 541) found that factors representing perceived competence and

1 fiduciary responsibility of institutional actors accounted for >96% of the variance in trust in
2 food. They found the effects of fiduciary responsibility on trust were more important than
3 that of competence, by a substantial way (average 3 to 1) (Sapp et al., 2009, p. 537). de
4 Jonge et al. (2008) also found that 'care' was the most important trust dimension in building
5 consumer confidence in food safety. Both suggest that rather than focussing risk
6 communication on competence aspects such as skills and expertise, consumer trust may be
7 better fostered through emphasising the fiduciary responsibility and care of system actors
8 (de Jonge et al., 2008; Sapp et al., 2009). Our results indicate that while food labelling
9 enhances consumer belief in industry and government competence (for example through
10 the presence of standardised nutrition information), it damages perceptions of their
11 goodwill; quite the reverse of the situation proposed as ideal for fostering trust in food by
12 Sapp et al. (2009) and de Jonge et al. (2008). The assertion from Sapp et al. (2009) that
13 'actions rather than words are needed to promote public confidence in fiduciary
14 responsibility' results in our findings being even more problematic for these actors. While
15 the everyday visible representative of the food system, food labelling, is perceived to
16 demonstrate a lack of goodwill from industry and government, verbal pontifications to the
17 contrary are likely to fall on deaf public ears.

18 At the core of judgements regarding goodwill was the assessment of labeller intent
19 displayed by these participants. This concept is similar to what is described in the
20 advertising literature as 'manipulative intent', Campbell (1995) defines it as 'consumer
21 inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair or
22 manipulative means' (p. 228). That consumers interpret manipulative intent from labelling is
23 supported by Abrams, Evans, and Duff (2015) who also found marketing tactics, such as
24 celebrity endorsement, are instead used as a defence heuristic by parents shopping for
25 children. However in the study presented here the assessment of manipulative intent was
26 not limited to the advertising information, but all labelling. Mandatory aspects of the label
27 were also at times perceived to be manipulative. This may be in part due to participants not
28 clearly distinguishing between mandatory and voluntary label elements, but simply seeing
29 all labelling as a direct communication from industry.

1 That so much manipulative intent is interpreted from such a wide variety of labelling
2 elements may be partially due to participants' pre-existing biases or ideas about the
3 goodwill of industry. We have suggested this is present as a confirmatory-bias loop in the
4 process of interpreting trustworthiness from labelling, as indicated in Figure 1. The
5 confirmatory bias hypothesis (White, Pahl, Buehner, & Haye, 2003) would suggest
6 participants who have a high degree of pessimism and perceive industry as lacking goodwill
7 interpret labelling in such a way as to support those same views. Exemplifying the suggested
8 confirmatory bias is the finding that language used to communicate uncertainty, and
9 therefore protect consumers, such as 'can' or 'may' in health claims was perceived by
10 participants as deliberately evasive and manipulative. Previous research examining trust in
11 food safety and regulation has provided similar support for the confirmatory bias hypothesis
12 (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2004). In quantitative studies this has been described as an issue of
13 attributing causality (de Jonge et al., 2008); that is, does perceiving manipulation in labelling
14 lead to distrust of actors, or does distrust of actors lead to interpretation of manipulation in
15 labelling? We argue that in complex social conditions such as these, attributing causality is
16 less important than recognising that the effects are likely reciprocally supporting, hence
17 presenting this as a loop in Figure 1. Consumers interpret labelling through the lens of a life
18 history of previous interactions with labelling and other experiences that form general
19 attitudes of trust towards food system actors. Policy makers and industry must be mindful
20 of not framing consumers as separate from this social context when reviewing and planning
21 labelling regulations and initiatives.

22 Participants explicitly stated that currently interaction with food labelling damages their
23 trust in industry, with flow on effects for trust in government. Consistent with social theory
24 (Barber, 1983; Gambetta, 1988), participants describe relying more heavily upon other
25 forms of social control like indirect management of the market through media and
26 prosecution for misconduct to manage food-related uncertainty. Consumers placing greater
27 emphasis on organisations responsible for monitoring and enforcement, and therefore
28 prosecution for misconduct, should be of concern to policy makers. In Australia and globally
29 these organisations are typically over-burdened and resource poor, working to risk-based
30 frameworks that can be unreflective of the issues important to many consumer groups.

1 Trust is a far more efficient solution, and thus critically examining current labelling practices
2 to encourage the fostering, rather than destruction, of trust may be the most economical
3 option with wide spread benefits for the overall food regulatory system. Petty (2015)
4 provides an interesting analysis of the policy implications of the numerous consumer class
5 action lawsuits in the US over the use of the term 'natural' in food advertising, which could
6 be seen as a response to many of the issues identified by the participants in this study. A
7 focus on risk and food safety emphasises competence, but the exclusion of other issues
8 relevant to consumers, the 'consumers values issues' (Blewett, Goddard, Pettigrew,
9 Reynolds, & Yeatman, 2011), does nothing to foster goodwill. The existence of multiple
10 dimensions to trustworthiness does not infer an either/or situation – *both* competence and
11 goodwill must be displayed for trust to be built and maintained (Frewer et al., 1996;
12 Meijboom, 2007).

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

22

Conclusions

23 This research presents a novel perspective in discussions of food and trust, it has focussed
24 on trust *through* labelling; previous research having exclusively examined consumer
25 trustingness, trust *in* labelling. It shows food labelling acts as an access point for trust in
26 disembedded, globalised food systems. The explicit voicing of distrust developed through
27 interaction with food labelling presented by these participants demands attention from
28 both food industry groups and regulatory bodies alike.

1 The research reported in this paper provides crucial insights into how labelling may damage
2 consumer belief in the trustworthiness of food system actors. The results have implications
3 for policy makers, and for primary and retail food industries. These actors must move away
4 from an exclusive focus on demonstrating competence to also consider how policy decisions
5 and labelling choices will impact upon consumer perceptions of actor goodwill.
6 Furthermore, this research can be used as a platform for future research exploring how
7 industry and policy makers can craft labelling that fosters consumer belief in food system
8 actors' goodwill. Rather than being merely a conduit for information about manufacture and
9 contents, this would potentially enable labelling to be used as a tool to rebuild and
10 maintain, rather than undermine, consumer trust in food systems.

11

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15

16

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