Abstract

The passing of the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act in the United States is remarkable for many reasons, not the least of which is that it is the source of our current model for Nutrition Facts Panels (NFPs). Unfortunately, while the FDA developed the label in the hopes of encouraging consumers to make healthier choices and manufacturers to develop healthier products, researchers have repeatedly found that NFPs are simply not meaningful to most American consumers. Moreover, the front-of-packaging labels (FOPs) developed to translate and simplify the information provided on the NFP only provide clear evaluations of products without empowering consumers to make their own informed choices. In this paper, nutrition labeling is taken up as rhetorical genres with conventions, embedded ideologies, and antecedent genres that both clarify and constrain American consumers’ ability to make food choices. I believe that by analyzing the NFP and FOPs with a rhetorical genre framework, we can better understand the dynamics at play between food labeling genres, nutrition literacy, and food choice as personal, social, and institutional rhetoric. Moreover, when we understand food choice as a rhetorical situation and food labels as emerging genres, we may be able to find generic alternatives that reimagine nutrition literacy as not just a matter of calorie and nutrient budgeting, but rather as the ability to successfully navigate and mediate a socioculturally-defined nutriscape.