

Benefits and Challenges in Complying Regulations on Labelling of Packaged Foods in Southeast Asia: A Short Review

IIFT International Business and Management Review Journal
2025, 3(1) 39–46
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DOI: 10.1177/251400078
ift.spectrumjps.com



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Abstract

Packaging and labelling of processed foods are one of the most important aspects. It contains important information for consumers to make purchase decisions. In addition, food brand owners make claims on their food packages like nutrient content and function, marketing and other claims like '100% natural' or organic, 'No MSG' and so on. Regulatory compliances not only help in mitigating risks, improving operations, and boosting reputation and brand image, but also helps the brand owners avoid penalties, builds trust and ensures sustainable growth by complying with the standards and regulations. While refining the efficiency of operations and data security, compliance with regulations can definitely help minimise the risk of penalties, lawsuits and tarnishing of reputation. On the other side, if the regulations are not harmonised, the monitoring mechanism and implementation system are inadequate, which stops consumers from receiving clear and easy-to-get information, which is required for making purchase decisions and to safeguard them from health issues arising from consuming unhealthy and poor-quality food.

This short review provides information about the current food package labelling policies, their benefits, and the various challenges faced by the international brand owners in the Southeast Asia region in complying with the regulatory standards on packaging and labelling of food products. The review also highlights some of the important issues faced by the consumer due to non-compliance of the regulatory standards on food packaging and labelling by the industry in the Southeast Asia.

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Keywords

Challenges, food packaging, labelling, consumer, regulatory compliance, Southeast Asia

Introduction

The package labelling is a vital component of any food package. Any food package has multiple functions to perform. It protects and preserves the product, informs the consumer about various ingredients present in the packaged food, its shelf life and traceability. It also alerts and warns about the quality of food, its freshness, safety and so on, while making purchase decisions. In addition, the brand owners make various nutritional and marketing claims like '100% natural' or 'organic', 'No MSG' and so on. Regardless of the age, gender and profession, the nutritional label on any packaged food appeals to the eyes of the consumer and helps them to make quick decisions and manage their healthy diet by viewing the information like ingredients, quality, quantity, serving size, expiry date, calories, safety and so on. Consumers are becoming more intent on knowing what they are consuming and the nutritional value they are getting. The label of packaged food helps the retail consumer to enhance the acceptance level and the desire to try new foods. Thus, the information provided on the food packaging label should be simple, concise and clear to attract the consumer and improve their purchase intention. Due to increased cultural exchange between the countries and increased economic interdependency, in recent past, a variety of foods has been moving through international trade. The researchers have found that the effective food label providing a recipe, a list of the ingredients, history and others, minimises the information gaps and increases food acceptance by global consumers. Thus, the matters regarding various issues arising due to improper or non-standard labelling are becoming noticeable globally (Azizan et al., 2024; Juikar & Warkar, 2023; Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Lwin, 2015; Othman, 2007; Schulz, 2013; Tee, 2002).

Likewise, the solid waste generated from post-consumer food packaging material in Southeast Asia is a great concern due to the growing environmental burden posed by post-consumer waste. As the demand for sustainable packaging materials is growing day by day, the local governments in Southeast Asia have started implementing various food packaging regulations to help reduce the environmental impact posed by food packaging materials. They are encouraging brand owners to implement eco-friendly practices. In the future, food labelling seems to shift dramatically as consumer choices and regulatory compliance are evolving rapidly (Juikar & Warkar, 2023; Schulz, 2013).

Similarly, due to various diet-related diseases like diabetes, coronary heart disease and cancer, which are increasingly becoming a threat to public health. The pre-packaged food labelling being a key to successful foreign food trade, and the debates, such as differences in formats, size, verifiability, information provided and regulatory authorities, are increasing the challenges and concerns on the usefulness of the various prevalent regulations on packaged food labelling (Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Tee, 2002).

With the increase in global trade, rising economic interdependency, and regulatory compliance for food packaging and labelling are becoming more and more crucial. Thus, regulatory compliance should ensure food safety and provide clear information to consumers, and also reduce the environmental burden. This is especially relevant in the Southeast, where international business and consumer demand are growing. The Southeast Asia region is approximately 4.5 million sq. km, earmarked geographically south of China, east of India and north of Australia, and includes Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, Brunei, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and Timor-Leste. The population of this region is over 699 million, which is almost 8.5% of the world's total population. The regulators in the region of Southeast Asia have made various food packaging and labelling regulations in their respective countries. Most of the South Asian countries are complying with the eminent Codex guidelines when formulating their food packaging regulations. However, these regulations widely differ across the countries in this region, specifically with respect to the regulatory framework and also on the objectives, scopes and definitions of health claims (Azizan et al., 2024; Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Othman, 2007; Schulz, 2013; Tan et al., 2015; Tee, 2002).

Due to the differences in country-wise regulations, the food packages need to be tested multiple times when they travel worldwide. On many occasions, the cost and time spent on testing the food packages either delays its supply or the product never reaches the destination market. Harmonisation of the food packaging regulations is likely to overcome this difficulty by streamlining the import-export procedures and will certainly improve the international food trade (Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011).

Various scientific and research organisations, namely the International Organization for Standardization, World Trade Organization (WTO), Codex Alimentarius Commission, International Union of Food Science and Technology and Global Harmonisation Initiative, on the international level, are working together, ceaselessly and encouraging countries in the region to reduce the differences in packaged-food labelling and to improve the synchronisation of packaged-food standards globally. They have formulated guidelines based on Codex Alimentarius standards, codes and related texts, which are recognised and endorsed in the WTO's agreements on the applications of sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical barriers to trade. These guidelines elaborate on the regional requirements for labelling to be used for pre-packaged food products. The World Health Organization recommends that governments introduce front-of-pack nutrition labelling as a non-communicable diseases (NCDs) prevention programme. Providing such information on the front of food packaging panels in an easy format will assist consumers in purchasing healthy foods in an increasingly obesogenic environment. The efforts made by these organisations are definitely going to help in the harmonisation of food packaging and labelling regulations and to help improve public health, including world food trade (Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Lwin, 2015; Pettigrew et al., 2022; Tee, 2002).

Benefits of Harmonising Food Packaging Standards

Most food products with distinct characteristics like local origin, traditional methods of making, better nutritional content, sustainability benefits and ethical considerations are liked by consumers. Thus, the food label is now a prominent way of communication between brand owners and consumers, which plays a vital role in purchase decisions. Some of the benefits of harmonising the food packaging standards are discussed below (Azizan et al., 2024; Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Schulz, 2013):

1. Benefits to the consumers
 - a. Consumers will benefit globally from the harmonisation of food packaging standards, as multiple regional recipes will be made available internationally by fulfilling their desire to get a global taste.
 - b. They can also easily compare the nutrition values of competitors' foods and have nutritious food options, and the advantage of increased health benefits.
 - c. Consumers will have the availability of uniform and easy-to-use nutritional information.
 - d. Consumers will have the availability of better options for healthy, nutritious and safe food, improved diet and better purchasing power.
 - e. Consumers will also benefit from a reduced rate of chronic disease, and thus reduced medical costs.
2. Benefits to brand owners
 - a. Harmonisation of food packaging standards will enable brand owners to comply with a single set of internationally harmonised regulations instead of managing the various national standards.
 - b. The brand owners will gain entry to new markets and opportunities for trading in international trade.
 - c. It will have consistency in nutritional profile and presentation.
 - d. Improved product quality as a result of increased global competition.
 - e. Simplified import-export procedure and thus reduced trading costs. Ultimately, they will have improved profit figures.
3. Benefits to the government
 - a. The governments will also benefit from better economic growth due to the effective increase in trade and improved public health.
 - b. Improved food export figures and increased gross domestic product (GDP).
 - c. Better public health as a result of the reduced rate of chronic disease.

Common Challenges in Harmonising the Standards on Packaged Food Labelling

Harmonisation of the standards on packaged food labelling will certainly help brand owners, consumers and the government. However, harmonisation of these regulations may also give rise to some challenges.

Various technical and regulatory challenges in food labelling are being regularly addressed by the Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) and other similar committees. Guidelines are also set and amended from time to time by the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL) to help the consumers make their purchase decisions. However, despite their efforts, there are multiple challenges in food labelling. These challenges are discussed below (Kasapila & Shaarani, 2011; Khalid, 2015; Lwin, 2015; Pettigrew et al., 2022; Tee, 2002).

1. Compliance with regulatory authorities

- a. The food labelling regulations, being country-specific, complying with these diversified standards is challenging for many multinational food brand owners and manufacturers, as these regulations are frequently updated.
- b. In addition, difficulty in regularly updating the food packaging standards, the need for a sufficient number of accredited laboratories, redesigning and validating food packaging materials, reinforcing administrative set-ups, and experienced manpower, create effective collaboration and knowledge sharing among stakeholders, and efficiently monitoring the surveillance and enforcement of the adopted standards, as these are also some of the additional challenges.

2. Packaging constraints

- a. The space on the food package is limited. So, it is very difficult to accommodate all the mandatory information in specific formats and in a specific language, their font size, pictures and so on. Similarly, it is too difficult to ensure that these labels are not misleading, easily visible, clear and aesthetically presentable.

3. Accuracy of nutritional information

- a. Providing complete nutritional information accurately and concisely is necessary for customers to make quick and right purchase decisions. However, due to differences in the quality and quantity of ingredients used, processing techniques and serving sizes, authenticating particular nutritional information is difficult. In addition, it is not easy to validate the quality and consistency of the nutritional values across the different lot sizes of the same product.

4. Marketing and advertising claims

- a. Many brand owners, especially multinationals, include various claims like health, sustainability, organic status and so on. The consumers are inclined to underestimate the information, like the calorie content of fast food that has the 'healthy' claim, and thus overeat. It becomes challenging to validate and authenticate on the food labels, as time and cost are involved to get it tested by authorised organisations.

5. Linguistic and cultural barriers

- a. Globally, the linguistic and cultural variations make food labelling challenging, as translating any information into various languages accurately is a difficult task.

6. Allergy labelling

- a. Consumers having food intolerance or allergies, for them, appropriate allergy labelling is very important. It is challenging to identify and provide all the potential allergic information in the case of many processed foods, which are made up of many ingredients. In addition, maintaining the strict protocols and traceability across the distribution channel to avoid accidental allergen exposure is also challenging.

7. Educating consumers

- a. Various symbols, nutritional information and emblems are provided on food labels. While purchasing packaged food products, many times, consumers may find it difficult to understand food labels that are too technical or scientific in nature. The customers in the region have different understanding levels and are language dependent. Thus, educating consumers so that they can properly interpret these symbols and technical information, and providing clear, concise and standardised information to improve their understanding and decision-making is a difficult task.

8. Increased cost towards harmonisation, compliance and monitoring

- a. Increased cost to brand owners: The increased costs of compliance, implementation and monitoring of the internationally harmonised regulations and increased expenditure due to the cost towards training for familiarisation with the regulations will have to be borne by the brand owners, which will be compensated by increasing the cost.
- b. Increased cost to consumers: Consumers will also have to pay higher food prices due to the added cost of harmonisation by the brand owners.
- c. Increased cost to government: Government has to bear the burden of expenditure due to additional costs for harmonisation, costs for enforcement and monitoring, costs of surveillance and compliance, and costs for educating the consumers to improve their understanding.

9. Risk of cross-contamination and spread of food-borne illness

- a. The harmonisation of food labelling standardisation and its compliance globally may result in global food safety issues, as contaminated or infected food may become a vehicle for food-borne pathogens. And food trade may become a mechanism for the spread of food-borne illnesses to consumers in global markets. 80%–90% of cases of salmonellosis, an acute diarrhoea, have been shown to be imported cases as a result of food contamination.

In addition, various instances have shown that the standard harmonisation process is very complex due to issues like differing levels of development capacities in some of the countries. This will hamper the progress of harmonising the standard. Moreover, the harmonisation of food labelling standards, such as the labelling of pre-packaged food, applies to a plethora of products and is meant for a diverse population of consumers. Therefore, the food packaging regulations need to be

harmonised, keeping in mind the future scenario driven by innovations in the food industry and the changing purchasing habits of the modern consumer. For instance, most of the consumers are now buying their food products online. These consumers have the same need for clear, essential information as those who shop in their local supermarket. As such, the aim of internationalising food standards should primarily be to create legislation that is flexible enough to be easily adapted as consumer trends evolve, and wide-reaching in its approach to ensure that there is consistency in the approach (Khalid, 2015).

Conclusion

Diverse packaged food labelling standards and regulations have been published and implemented in various countries in Southeast Asia. The current food packaging and labelling regulations in the Southeast Asia region are preventing consumers from the benefits of fulfilling their fundamental right to get clear and accessible information for improved purchase decisions. These regulations have also created many concerns and challenges for multinational brand owners in trading among the countries. Now it is high time to frame the globally harmonised guidelines for food packaging and labelling regulations to improve global food safety. The globally harmonised standards will help the brand owners with increased global trading potential, which will ultimately help consumers and the government. However, while harmonising these standards, some of the challenges that may arise, as discussed in this article, need to be addressed to increase the benefits of harmonisation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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