

17458

SO05, SO05.2

A taxonomy of disagreements related to health and nutrition information

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Nutrition and physical activity studies, Terrace 2B, June 6, 2019, 3:50 PM - 4:25 PM

Other

Purpose:

In today's society and media environment, people are increasingly exposed to conflicting or contradictory health and nutrition information. Consumers need to navigate this information to make commonplace decisions, such as which foods to consume, a process many find difficult. This complexity leads to confusion, and a mistrust in health advice. Although some consumers - particularly highly educated ones - do attribute these scientific disagreements to the complexity of research, many use a narrower set of explanations. There is a gap in existing frameworks to understand the range of reasons for these contradictions. The aim was to create a taxonomy that assists in supporting consumers in navigating these conflicts.

Methods:

In this paper, we argue for, and develop a taxonomy of disagreements. We derive this classification taxonomy and develop a framework from (1) a review of studies into consumer perspectives on scientific disagreements; (2) a review of a set of studies presenting such conflicting information to consumers, and the nature of those conflicts; and (3) a conceptual analysis of disagreements in a set of nutrition topics. We validate the framework through expert interviews to demonstrate its application to common examples of conflicting health and nutrition topics.

Results:

Preliminary analysis indicates disagreements can be sub-classified into categories including outcome ambiguity, probabilistic uncertainty, knowledge gaps, bias, and epistemic, informational, or decisional conflict. Analysis of existing work on dealing with conflicting sources suggests that these tend to focus on source credibility disagreements (e.g. an expert versus lay author). A taxonomy and its use as a framework to navigate health and nutrition related disagreements are presented.

Conclusion:

A taxonomy is proposed to facilitate an awareness of the differences in disagreement. We discuss the role of the taxonomy as a framework to support and plan future research, to facilitate communication, and to guide practice, e.g. in health and nutrition education.