

Paper Ref 24 Rules at the table: an exploratory study about the relationship between risk_perception and policymaking to promote healthy eating

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Abstract

Overview

Unhealthy eating is a societal challenge around the world provoking diseases such as obesity, heart diseases, and some cancers, which are among the biggest cause of death (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). With mitigation and behavior change as a goal, risk communication has been pointed out as a tool to transfer knowledge about Public Health decisions between different stakeholders (Adekola et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). While communication has been proposed early on as a strategy to address public health topics (Hallahan et al., 2007; Werder, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2018), it has been suggested the desired level of knowledge is to be achieved, both in society and in the academy (Bernadas, 2021; Diepeveen et al., 2013; Wise, 2001).

Risk perception does not impact only the general public, but all stakeholders involved in the process, such as Experts and Govern (Adekola et al., 2019; Funk et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). The Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974; Rosenstock et al., 1988) suggests that a number of variables influence the likelihood of engaging in a different behavior, but how risk communication can influence said variables are not yet fully understood. This is of high importance, as policymakers' perception of risk and decisions influence the population as a whole.

Objectives

Our study aims to identify variables policymakers consider when evaluating the perceived benefits, efficacy, and threats, before acting on a topic. We also intended to identify strategies that have previously been used.

Methodology

To go in deep into the topic, we've conducted a case study exploratory analysis, as it is the preferred methodology to explore a contemporary event (Yin, 2009). Portugal was chosen as the object of analysis as the country has a very specific context regarding public policies to address healthy eating (Graça et al., 2018). Portugal's first approach to the topic was in the '70s and formally creating a sectoral strategy and a decision entity in 2012 the National Program of Healthy Eating (NPHE) (Graça, & Gregório, 2012). The strategy implemented was able to intervene successfully in reducing sugar intake (Goiana-da-Silva et al., 2018), and still achieve positive feedback from the public, even regarding taxes increment (Prada et al., 2020). The same result could not be replicated regarding policies to reduce salt intake. Hence, we've chosen to interview the current and the former first leaders of the NPHE, as they conducted the intervention strategy development of both cases. Their point of view on the chain of events is considered to be valuable, as they fall in the category of privileged witnesses who occupy a position with acting power and responsibilities (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1995). To collect data, we've proceeded with exploratory interviews, as these help the researcher probe topics and points of view not thought by himself (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1995). Topics such as how policymakers gather information for a decision process (Funk et al., 2022), the use of strategic communication as a tool to promote health knowledge (Adekola et al., 2019; Ihlen, 2020; Schiavo, 2013) and risk communications (Fischbacher;-Smith, 2012; Irwin, 2014) were the main topics explored.

Findings:

When implementing both strategies, the NPHE focused on five pilar topics: (1) Making clear reference regarding where the money collected with special taxes would be used – the National Healthcare System; (2) Stating that it was a policy developed to address a Public Health issue and not as a strategy to raise the state's revenue; (3) When referring to the reason why this was needed, it would be addressed that the main goal was to protect children, as obesity levels within that specific population had been increasing drastically; (4) Stating that all these efforts were aligned with the World Health Organization strategy and insights; (5) Clearly stating that only non-essential products would be affected by this and that it would not affect small and medium national companies – being clear that it was aimed to affect big corporations. The same strategy and methods did not work when they intended to address the salt intake topic. The Portuguese Parliament rejected the intervention, not making it to the policy development

and implementation stage. Regarding this topic, the interviewed explained that two of the political parties with parliamentary seats at the time evoked (1) that taxation on salt products would impact the national industry and this would reflect on the job positions, causing unemployment; The cultural values, habits, and traditions were also referred to (2) as a reason not to intervene. Regarding this topic, it's been addressed that, overall, the idea that sugar is bad for you is well received, but salt is often identified as an essential ingredient.

Discussion

Regarding the reasons for not approving the interventions to address salt intake, it's important to highlight that political parties evoke cultural values and traditions, aligned with what has been proposed regarding the impact of social norms and our decision process (Bicchieri, 2010; Cialdini, 2007; Fekadu & Kraft, 2002; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). While further research is needed to validate the topic, it seems imperative to analyze the trade-off between social norms, tradition, and culture in despite of public health risk, much like has been proposed in the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974; Rosenstock et al., 1988). When divided between public health and tradition, a trade-off takes place. Risk communication might lead to the needed risk perception. Social norms and the impact of interventions on the workforce seem to be topics that concern those with executive power.

While it might have not been fully intentional, as the strategic program does not have a communication advisor, the strategy seems to be aligned with the Seven Models of Framing proposed by Hallahan (1999), to establish a common perspective on a topic. This exploratory study allowed us to identify variables that influence a policy intervention. These should be considered when planning a risk communication strategy to achieve the desired result – an accurate transfer of knowledge and impact. Further research is needed to understand if risk perception can influence the decision process, overruling the previously mentioned constructs – if needed.

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