Reviewer 3

Main comments It is a very interesting paper presenting original and new results, that fit well to the purpose of the journal. The conclusions are highly relevant to tackle social inequalities in nutrition and health, but would warrant extended discussion with reference with similar studies conducted in other location/other countries.

Conclusion 1) “While dollar-discount stores did have lower availability, they provided quality fresh and healthy foods which were usually less expensive. “ => “Dollar Discount Stores” seem to be very specific to the US, but it could be useful to readers from other countries to make some analogy with what exist in their countries. In particular I am thinking in hard discount stores in Europe (Aldi, Lidl, Dia.. ?), and in the selling of discount foods in regular supermarket chains in many countries. For instance, some studies found that prices differences between branded foods and generic or lowcost foods are not associated with parallel differences in nutritional quality. Another study found that diets aren’t healthier when they contain branded foods. Hence, compared with branded products, non-branded alternatives present better nutritional quality for their price and should therefore be preferred options to improve dietary quality when the budget for food is low.


Thank you for this recommendation. It has been added to the discussion section. It now reads “While dollar discount stores, pricing all items at a fixed $1 price, may be more common in the US, findings are still pertinent to other countries. For example, non-fixed price discount stores, as well as full service grocery stores that sell non-brand name food items are likely to offer equally healthy foods at a lower price. Hence, compared with branded products, non-branded alternatives are nutritionally equivalent options for a better price, and should therefore be preferred options to improve dietary quality when the budget for food is low.”

Conclusion 2) practitioners should consider non-traditional outlets when assessing the community food environment and designing and implementing outreach programs, as they may bridge some disparities in access. => This conclusion is important, but it may imply that nothing similar has been done previously. I think that the authors have to check. I know at least one successful intervention study conducted in discount stores which combined shelf labeling with a social marketing strategy to promote inexpensive foods with good nutritional quality (Gamburzew A, Darcel N, Gazan R, Dubois C, Maillot M, Tomé D, Raffin S, Darmon N. In-store marketing of inexpensive foods with good nutritional quality in disadvantaged neighborhoods: increased awareness, understanding and purchasing. Int J Behav Nutr Phys Activity, 2016, 13:104,), and I there are also very inspiring in-store interventions in poor populations conducted by John Gittelsohn, and colleagues.
This is very true, thank you for pointing it out. There have been studies examining non-traditional outlets, so we have reworded to simply state dollar discount stores. It now states “Practitioners should consider dollar discount stores when assessing the community food environment and designing and implementing outreach programs, as they may bridge some disparities in access.”

2 Specific comments Title I would remove quality from the title, because it is only “perceived quality” and it was only studied for produces (if I understand correctly). Alternatively, you could use the term ‘perceived quality’

The NEMS protocol does provide instruction on how to determine if the produce is acceptable or not (used for quality score). The definitions are below. The authors do not feel that this is necessarily perceived quality.

Acceptable = peak condition, top quality, good color, fresh, firm and clean ⚫ Unacceptable = bruised, old looking, mushy, dry, overripe, dark sunken spots in irregular patches or cracked or broken surfaces, signs of shriveling, mold or excessive softening

Abstract The abstract is difficult to read because some definitions are lacking: - Provide a simple and short explanation of what is a “dollar-discount store”. Line 4, you state that they are “stores that sold produce at fixed $1 price”: is this the definition?

Yes, this is the definition. We have moved it to the second sentence to improve clarity.

- Explain what is the NEMS-S, and that it is made of 3 “sub-scores” assessing respectively availability, quality and price, leading to a “total score” when the sub-scores are summed (isn’t it?). And then use this terminology throughout the paper.

The explanation of the subscales and summary score have been added. Similar language is used throughout, though we added price per item (not on NEMS), so that terminology is also used.

- Explain what is “M”

Done

Introduction - Line 67: ref 16 has to be introduced here.

done

Methods - Lines 93-94: introduce the terminology of sub-scores. It will be easier to read.

done

- Line 109: the statement that “all items were recalculated to price per piece” is not always true: it is for fruit but not for bread (lines112-113).
We have added that perishable and non-perishable items were recalculated to price per ounce.

Discussion - Line 181: replace have higher prices by are likely to have higher prices, or include a reference.

We added a reference

- Line 193: price modification is not the only tool, and it is not an easy tool to implement for the long term. Social marketing of foods that already are healthy and inexpensive is another option, probably easier to implement because it doesn’t imply additional costs, neither for the shopper, nor for the vendor, nor for the public authorities (Gamburzew A, Int J Behav Nutr Phys Activity, 2016, 13:104.).

Discussion of this tool and suggested reference have been added

- Line 201-202: it seems that references 31-34 apply to the first part of the sentence (“consumers perceive brand names to be of higher quality”) but additional references should be added to document the second part of the sentence (“even when they aren’t) => For instance, Cooper S et al J Hum Nutr Diet. 2003;16:339–347; - Darmon N, et al Public Health Nutr 2009;12: 808–815; Waterlander WE et al 2014 British Food Journal)

These references have been added

- One important thing is lacking in the discussion: the fact that the total score of NEMS-S is not relevant when one wants to evaluate the capacity of a store to provide good nutrition at good price for low-income people. The sub-scores seem to be more informative.

Thank you for pointing this out. A brief discussion of this has been added.