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What are we eating? Consumer information requirement within a workplace canteen



Sarah Price^{a,*}, Giampaolo Viglia^a, Heather Hartwell^a, Ann Hemingway^b, Chris Chapleo^a, Katherine Appleton^c, Laure Saulais^d, Ioannis Mavridis^e, Federico J.A. Perez-Cueto^f

^a Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole BH12 5BB, UK

^b Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole BH12 5BB, UK

^c Faculty of Science and Technology, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole BH12 5BB, UK

^d Centre for Food and Hospitality Research, Institut Paul Bocuse, BP25, 69131 Ecully Cedex, France

^e Department of Applied Informatics, University of Macedonia, 156 Egnatia str., 54006 Thessaloniki, Greece

^f Department of Food Science, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 26, 1958 Frederisberg C, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The workplace is a captive environment where the overall contribution of the meal served could be an important element of the overall diet. Despite growing demand little information is available to aid healthy dish selection.

This study identifies information valued by consumers in the UK, Greece, Denmark and France using best-worst scaling. Value for Money, Nutrition and Naturalness are key elements of information that consumers require to be able to make a conscious decision about dish selection in all four countries. Latent class analysis shows that consumers align to one of five cluster groups, i.e., Value Driven, Conventionalists, Socially Responsible, Health Conscious and Locavores.

Understanding key information needs can allow food operators to align their service with consumer preferences across different market segments.

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1. Introduction

Compared to meals prepared at home, meals eaten out tend to contain more calories, total fat and saturated fat and it is here where the consumer has very little control or knowledge of the nutrient profile of the food they are eating (Bohm & Quartuccio, 2008). The positive association between the rise in consumption of food prepared outside the home and the increasing prevalence of obesity has been described as a major health and wellbeing societal challenge (Hartwell, Johns, & Edwards, 2016).

In settings such as workplaces there is a growing acceptance that the food provided has a significant impact on the diet of employees (Pridgeon & Whitehead, 2013). This is a captive environment where the overall contribution of the meal served could be an important element of the overall diet and represents an environment that is increasingly being used for daily main meal consumption. It is estimated, that most employees eat one or more meals per day whilst they are at work (Lassen et al., 2011). Food served in workplace canteens is often criticized for being

nutrient-poor and energy-dense (Sharma et al., 2016) with canteen operators promoting high calorie food that provides a high profit margin (Jaworowska, Blackham, Davies, & Stevenson, 2013). In 2011, UK food and drink sales in public sector organisations accounted for £2.1bn (6.5%) of total sales in the food service sector with most of this provision in the form of complete meals (Defra, 2012).

The workplace can be a supportive and influential domain in the promotion of a healthy diet which has benefits not only for the individual but also for employers and society (Ni Mhurchu, Aston, & Jebb, 2010). A healthy and vital workforce is an asset to any organisation and initiatives within this environment reflect health promotion strategies advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004). The European workforce is increasingly diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity and culture; it is also increasingly older which implies a greater potential and prevalence of chronic disease (Zwetsloot, Van Scheppingen, Dijkman, Heinrich, & Den Besten, 2010). Health and well-being are key topics in the debate on improving the lives of individuals in society and are directly linked to labour force participation, productivity and sustainability (Eurofound., 2013). Additionally, health and well-being at work are crucial elements of the overall Europe 2020

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: SarahPrice@bournemouth.ac.uk (S. Price).

strategy for growth, competitiveness and sustainable development. A healthy economy depends on a healthy population. Without this, employers lose out on worker productivity and citizens are deprived of potential longevity and quality of life (Zwetsloot et al., 2010). The European Treaties legislation (2007) and policy measures recognise the importance of preserving the health of the workforce and it is here where effective menu labelling could support the healthy lifestyle of employees at a societal and individual level (European Union, 2007). Health is seen as a factor that codetermines the functioning of people (human and social capital) and can contribute to an organisation's value. The workplace could be a central venue for influencing dietary behaviour and could be instrumental in reducing employee's risk of developing chronic disease by providing opportunities to take responsibility for their own health (Pridgeon & Whitehead, 2013).

The settings approach to promoting healthy eating has been growing in importance especially at work where a large proportion of the adult population can be reached including those unlikely to engage in a preventive health behaviour programme and where the canteen supplies meals for a regular clientele (Kahn-Marshall & Gallant, 2012). Already established organisational structures and communication strategies enable the implementation of interventions that promote individuals to make healthier choices when eating at work (Taylor, Pilkington, Montgomerie, & Feist, 2016). Food choices made in workplace canteens are influenced by individual preferences, characteristics of the food itself but it is also context dependent (Machín, Giménez, Vidal, & Ares, 2014). Participants expect inferior quality of food based on their previous experiences but accept this is due to time constraints and the convenience of eating onsite (Price, Hartwell, Hemingway, & Chapleo 2016; Raulio, Roos, & Prättälä, 2012). Nevertheless, the canteen is valued by employees because it provides a basis for interaction with other colleagues and the opportunity to take a break. The influence of convenience over other factors directing food choice has previously been recognised and plays an important role in the selection of food at work (Kamphuis, de Bekker-Grob, & van Lenthe, 2015). Notwithstanding, depending on the context, salient values such as taste and nutritional content are also compared and negotiated. These salient values are further influenced by employees' perceived stress at work which has been shown to favour the selection of dishes that are high in saturated fat, salt and sugar in workplace canteens (Stewart-Knox, 2014). Food choice in public sector foodservice relates to a meal rather than to individual ingredients, which differs from food choice made in a retail setting. Therefore, there is a stronger reliance on experience and visual appearance of the meal compared to choice made in a retail environment where full information is provided on the label (Price et al., 2016).

Given the amount of employees eating at their place of work, most research on this topic relates to the direct importance of making healthy dishes available (Nyberg & Olsen, 2010). The EU Eatwell Project. (2014) identified that few countries have introduced measures targeting workplace catered food, although some schemes have been introduced in Finland and Denmark where data are suggestive of success and indicate that the public is willing to accept workplace measures that expand and inform food choice (Lassen, Thorsen, Trolle, Elsig, & Ovesen 2004; Raulio, Roos, & Prättälä, 2010). Efforts taken to improve diet of employees include strategies such as developing healthier recipes, price reductions of healthy dishes, educational messages as well as the use of food labelling approaches (Bandoni, Sarno, & Jaime, 2011).

Previous research based on the retail market has demonstrated that non-directive labels with high information content have many attributes that make people believe that they are being given important evidence (Hodgkins et al., 2012). Even if the actual content is not used, consumers are reassured by the fact that the

information is there. In retail situations individuals tend to process information in a more heuristic style (i.e., quickly and superficially) while in a foodservice environment where the pace is more leisurely, consumers will engage in more elaborate systematic processing (Feldman, Hartwell, Brusca, Su, & Zhao, 2015). Significant debate exists amongst stakeholders as to the best labelling approach but very little information is available in out-of-home situations (Hoefkens, Prakashan Chellattan, Guido Van, John Van, & Wim, 2012). From a public health and food policy perspective, providing consumers with information at the point of purchase can empower and provide the framework for measured food choice decisions (Geaney et al., 2013). Providing tailored information can facilitate adoption of healthier nutrition practices and such a concept has been supported empirically in retail situations. Research has found that consumers appreciate messages tailored to their own needs, signposting specific values of interest that will enable consumers to utilize menus more effectively without being overwhelmed by the abundance of information given (Raspberry, Chaney, Misra, Miller, & Housman, 2007). Elicitation of categorisations from individuals has the potential to provide a very important perspective in this arena and one that can provide relevant insights for consumers.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify different criteria of importance that are valued by consumers to inform food provision in workplace canteens. This will be achieved by a consumer survey performed in 4 EU countries (Denmark, France, Greece and UK), demonstrating a pan European approach, focusing on different criteria of importance that influence food choice and indicate the type of information needed when eating at work.

2. Methods

Data from focus groups were used to inform the design of a best-worst questionnaire. Structured focus groups ($n = 8$) were conducted with employees who regularly, at least twice a week, use the canteen at their place of work and were recruited using purposive sampling. Email invitations were sent out to various employers in the UK, Greece, Denmark and France who offer workplace canteens to their members of staff. The study and questions were approved by the local Ethics Committees of each country, 40 participants took part, 29 female and 11 male, with an age range of 22–64 years. In order to ensure continuity across the eight focus groups, specific questions were used rather than relying on a topic guide. Questions used for the discussions were influenced by the literature and focussed on factors affecting meal choice when eating at work. These questions were also tested and revised in discussion with key industry stakeholders and included open-ended comment on the influences of food choice in workplace foodservice. Results from the focus groups were used to inform the criteria that were tested in a Best-worst experiment.

Best-worst scaling is constructed on the random utility theory developed by McFadden (1980) who concludes that a preference for one object over another is a function of the relative frequency of which this object has been chosen over the other. One of the benefits of using best-worst scaling is that it gives information about the top and bottom rated object in each choice set which provides more information about the rating of objects in each set. Consequently, as consumers are required to make a trade-off in choosing the most and least preferred option, this method does not suffer from the scale bias associated with rating based scales (Loose and Lockshin 2013). Therefore, it is specifically useful in cross-national research as undertaken in this study as previous research has found that participants from different countries make different use of verbal rating scales (Harzing et al., 2009). In the design of this questionnaire, respondents were presented with

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