



Consumer perceptions of traceability: A cross-national comparison of the associated benefits

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Abstract

Consumer perceptions regarding traceability were investigated by means-end-chain laddering. Consumers in four European countries were questioned about the benefits they associate with traceability related attributes. The benefits consumers associate with traceability are in terms of health, quality, safety and control, of which the latter was associated with trust and confidence. These benefits were similarly important in the countries investigated. Cross-national differences were also observed. Importantly, both quality and safety were shown to be related to traceability in the consumers' minds with quality implying safety. The results show that traceability may contribute to improving consumer confidence. The most important aspects of traceability which should be incorporated into communication with consumers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Consumers' confidence in the quality and safety of their food may have declined over recent decades as a reaction to various food scares (De Jonge et al., 2004) and inappropriate risk management practices (Houghton et al., 2008). Producers and regulatory institutions (e.g. European Commission and EFSA) have attempted to restore consumer confidence by introducing food and ingredient traceability systems (i.e. General Food Law, Regulation (EC) 178/2002). Improved traceability is predicted to increase transparency throughout the food chain and to result in the development and maintenance of consumer trust in food and food producers. Whether traceability will indeed have a positive effect on consumer confidence, or not, remains to be seen. It is arguable that information about food and the food chain that becomes available through traceability sys-

tems needs to appeal to consumer needs. Thus information is required to be in the format and of the type that the consumer prefers and can understand. However, to date, there is insufficient knowledge about consumers' general perceptions of, and demands regarding, food traceability. The aim of the current study is to specifically focus on the perceived benefits European consumers associate with improved food traceability.

When it is desirable to induce a change in consumer attitudes by implementing new measures and policy initiatives, it is important to understand the preferences and needs of the consumers regarding a specific food issue (Opara & Mazaud, 2001). For this reason, it is important to study consumer perceptions (Przyrembel, 2004). Hence, in order to establish the effects of traceability on consumer confidence, we need to investigate what benefits consumers associate with traceability. Understanding which benefits consumers associate with traceability will assist in providing consumers with traceability information in line with their requirements, which in turn may help them regain their confidence in food safety and quality.

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The limited number of studies on consumers' perceptions of traceability that have been conducted thus far have primarily focused issues specifically related to food risk and safety (Giraud & Amblard, 2003) and therefore centred around one particular product type, namely meat, which is considered a potentially risky food product by consumers (Dickinson & Bailey, 2002; Gellynck & Verbeke, 2001; Hobbs, Bailey, Dickinson, & Haghiri, 2005). In addition, research has shown that people have little notion about what traceability is (Giraud & Amblard, 2003) and are not very interested in traceability (Giraud & Halawany, 2006b; Verbeke & Ward, 2006), and especially not in the technical aspects associated with it (Gellynck & Verbeke, 2001). It is therefore unlikely that providing information about the technical aspects of traceability is going to boost consumer confidence. Nevertheless, a recent study examining consumers' perceptions of traceability has shown that, although consumers do not have a clear understanding of traceability systems, they are able to express what benefits they might expect to derive from such systems (Giraud & Halawany, 2006b). Giraud and Halawany (2006b) showed that product origin was the first thing that came to consumers' minds when questioned about their (lay) definitions of traceability. In addition, consumers were shown to associate traceability with increased product prices. One needs to keep in mind that consumer perceptions are not necessarily in line with those of experts, and that consumers base their purchase decisions on their own views rather than those of experts (Hansen, Holm, Frewer, Robinson, & Sandøe, 2003).

Other consumer research has linked consumer perceptions of traceability with safety issues such as the BSE crises (Latouche, Rainelli, & Vermersch, 1998) and dioxin contamination of the food chain (Verbeke, 2001), as well as the acceptance of GMO foods and ingredients (Miles, Ueland, & Frewer, 2005). This research indicated that, although traceability is perceived by consumers to be primarily related to recall of products should a food safety crisis occur, it can potentially be used both to ascertain food safety as well as food quality. For example, traceability could also be an important tool to help to establish the authenticity of food, and to check that claims made by producers about food are true. Products that make special claims may benefit from traceability as a means to support the claims by making it verifiable, for example related to a premium quality, designated origin, organic production and fair trade, issues about which consumers are concerned or interested in (Gregory, 2000). Indeed traceability may be utilized to back up product claims such as origin and quality labelling (Verbeke & Ward, 2006). In fact, consumers who are shown to have a preference for products from their own region or country (Van der Lans, van Ittersum, DeCicco, & Loseby, 2001; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999) may be especially interested in traceability when it is linked to these types of quality assurances (Hobbs et al., 2005). Moreover, food safety and food quality seem to be two very important elements of people's conceptions of food and associated

decision making (i.e. food choices, Grunert, 2005; Röhr, Lüddecke, Drusch, Müller, & Alvensleben, 2005). Taken together, research has indicated that consumers are interested in issues such as geographical origin and labelling (e.g. Bernués, Olaizola, & Corcoran, 2003; Giraud & Halawany, 2006b), and therefore, as far as consumers are concerned, the particular benefits of traceability might be in terms of these types of food choice elements.

It is important to take consumers' backgrounds into account when studying and interpreting risk perceptions (Nayga, 1999), because consumers' preferences may vary depending on individual differences, or according to demographic or cultural differences. It is well known that people from different cultural backgrounds have different priorities and needs regarding food and that their perceptions and experiences related to food vary (e.g. Lennernäs et al., 1997; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). Cultural values influence consumer food decision making (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000; Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005; Overby, Gardial, & Woodruff, 2004). For example, people may look differently at food safety issues and risk management depending on their cultural background (cf. Houghton et al., 2008; van Kleef et al., 2006). Similarly, we may expect that different groups of consumers have different concerns regarding traceability.

In addition, it is believed that some cultures are more oriented towards food quality, whereas for others food safety is their main concern (Askegaard, 1995). The distinction that is often made in Europe is between the northern or central countries (e.g. UK, Scandinavia and Germany) and the southern or Mediterranean countries (e.g. France, Spain, Italy and Greece) (e.g. Askegaard, 1995; Grunert, Brunsø, Bredahl, & Bech, 2001b). Southern cultures are thought to be more involved with food quality and the pleasures that can be derived from eating (Pettinger, Holdsworth, & Gerber, 2004). In comparison, the northern cultures put more emphasis on food safety, and ethical concerns (e.g. about animal welfare) play a more important role (Pettinger et al., 2004). Therefore, in the current study, different European cultural backgrounds with respect to food quality and safety were taken into account.

Associations and benefits (a term used in means-end chain theory to identify consequences consumers link to product attributes) in relation to traceability were investigated by means of a laddering study (see Reynolds and Gutman (1988) for a detailed description of this technique). The laddering technique, a qualitative method, is primarily used in marketing research to study people's associations with, and benefits derived, from concrete product attributes, whether applied to existing products, or products that are being newly developed (see Van Kleef, van Trijp, & Luning, 2005). Whereas some researchers argue that results from laddering data is only useful when "mapping" consumers' pre-existing cognitive structures, others argue that information is not necessarily stored in an hierarchical way (e.g. Bagozzi & Dabholkar, 2000; Cohen & Warlop,

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