

Consumer evaluation of fish quality as basis for fish market segmentation

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Abstract

This paper focuses on consumer evaluation of fish quality and its association with fish consumption, risk and benefit beliefs and information processing variables. Cross-sectional data were collected from a sample of 429 consumers in March 2003 in Belgium. Two dimensions shape fish quality evaluation: personal relevance attached to fish quality and self-confidence in fish quality evaluation, which allow segmenting the market in four fish consumer segments. The segments are typified as Uninvolved, Uncertain, Self-confident and Connoisseurs, and have distinctive behavioural, attitudinal and socio-demographic profiles. The Uninvolved are mainly young males, have the lowest fish consumption level, weakest belief in health benefits from eating fish, and lowest interest in both search and credence information cues. Uncertain fish consumers are mainly females, with a tendency of lower education and urban residence, who feel not confident to evaluate fish quality, although they find quality very important. They display a strong interest in a fish quality label. The most relevant findings about Self-confident consumers, whose socio-demographic profile matches best with the overall sample, are their high fish consumption level, and their relatively low interest in a fish quality label. Connoisseurs are mainly females in the age category 55+, who are strongly involved with food in general and most convinced of the association between food and health. They have the highest fish consumption and show a strong interest in both search and credence cues, as well as in a fish quality label. The segments do not differ with respect to risk perception about fish.

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1. Introduction

During the last decades healthy eating habits have received increased attention, and it is widely recognised that regular fish consumption is one possible health improving practice (Hoge Gezondheidsraad, 2004; Sidhu, 2003). However, actual fish consumption generally not even comes close to the recommendations to eat fish twice a week in many European countries (Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, 2004; Welch et al., 2002).

A considerable amount of research has shed light on consumers' motives and barriers to fish consumption. Research has especially focused on the relationship between consumption of fish/seafood and attitudes (Brunso, 2003; Leek, Maddock, & Foxall, 2000; Letarte, Dubé, & Troche, 1997; Olsen, 2001; Olsen, 2003), and the impact of consumer involvement (Juhl & Poulsen, 2000; Olsen, 2001; Olsen, 2003), role of lifestyles (Myrland, Trondsen, Johnston, & Lund, 2000), experience and habit (Myrland et al., 2000; Trondsen, Braaten, Lund, & Eggen, 2004; Trondsen, Scholderer, Lund, & Eggen, 2003; Honkanen, Olsen, & Verplanken, 2005), socio-demographic characteristics (Myrland et al., 2000; Olsen, 2003; Trondsen et al., 2003; Trondsen et al., 2004; Verbeke & Vackier,

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2005), health and diet beliefs (Trondsen et al., 2003; Trondsen et al., 2004; Verbeke et al., 2005), and convenience (Olsen, 2003). In contrast, relatively few studies have focused on consumers' fish quality perception and quality evaluation, with a few exceptions. In one study by Nielsen, Sørensen, and Grunert (1997), a qualitative approach was applied to derive quality dimensions of importance to consumers, revealing that desired quality dimensions are especially linked to health and family well-being, thus relating to the personal relevance of fish quality. In another study on consumers' quality evaluation, it was found that many consumers feel unable to use attributes of fresh fish to evaluate the overall expected quality (Juhl & Poulsen, 2000). Also consumer interest for additional information and use of information sources has only scarcely been researched with respect to fish (Pieniak, Verbeke, Fruensgard, Brunsø, & Olsen, 2004).

The present paper aims at bridging part of this gap in understanding consumers' quality evaluations of fish, through focusing on two specific areas of consumer evaluation of fish quality and their associations with consumer behaviour towards fish. Since many studies already concentrated on the precursors of quality and quality perceptions, we do not intend to focus on what fish quality means to specific people in this study. Instead, we will argue that personal importance attached to fish quality, and consumers' self-confidence to assess fish quality, are two relevant concepts in the quality evaluation process. It is argued that these two dimensions influence several steps in the decision-making process of fish consumption, and are associated with individual and socio-demographic factors. The following section introduces the constructs and the relations that will be investigated in this study. Next, materials and methods are detailed, followed by the presentation and discussion of the empirical results.

2. Theoretical approach to study consumer evaluation of fish quality

2.1. Dimensions in quality evaluation

First, consumers may differ with respect to quality consciousness, or personal relevance attached to quality. Quality consciousness or relevance is defined as "a mental predisposition to respond in a consistent way to quality-related aspects which is organised through learning and which influences behaviour" (Steenkamp, 1989). Consumers who are more concerned with product quality are likely to have a higher utility, i.e. a higher valuation, for quality products than consumers who are unconcerned about quality. The concept of subjective sense of concern towards an object, or importance or personal relevance is closely related to involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985), which is also defined as a motivational state of mind with regard to an object or activity (Mittal & Lee, 1989). In this sense, higher involvement or personal relevance attached to quality, may impact on quality evaluation and its outcomes in terms of

decision-making. As a result, involvement with quality, which refers to importance attached to quality or quality consciousness is the first hypothesised dimension of fish quality evaluation.

Second, consumers often experience quality uncertainty because quality performance, including the taste sensation and quality experience after cooking and consumption, is difficult to predict based on product characteristics available in the purchasing situation (Grunert, 1997). Consumers face difficulties in evaluating quality, in particular for unbranded and highly perishable food products like fresh fish (Juhl & Poulsen, 2000). Furthermore, consumers differ in their perceptual abilities, cognitive capacities, personal preferences, and experience level, and therefore, their evaluation and perception of quality may vary accordingly (Ophuis & Van Trijp, 1995). In response to uncertainty and limited abilities, they form quality expectations through making inferences by using cues or pieces of information. One of the basic drivers of inference-making pertains to confidence in cue utilisation (Cox, 1962), or also confidence in the personal ability to make inferences based on particular cues (Grunert, 2005a). Hence, self-confidence in making an evaluation of fish quality is hypothesised to constitute a second dimension in fish quality evaluation.

Individual differences in quality evaluations have numerous consequences, e.g. in terms of behaviour, beliefs or attitudes, and search for and use of information sources during decision-making, since expected quality influences a whole range of attitudes and behaviours from meal preparation methods to future purchase decisions (Brunso, Fjord, & Grunert, 2002; Grunert, Hartvig Larsen, Madsen, & Baadsgaard, 1996).

2.2. Association with behaviour and beliefs

Consumers who lack the confidence in assessing fish quality – because of for example, limited experience or low perceptual ability – are expected to act differently during the decision-making process compared to knowledgeable, self-confident consumers. Both product expertise (i.e. the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully) and product familiarity (i.e. the number of product-related experiences) are hypothesised to associate with consumers' confidence in assessing product quality, as well as with involvement with quality. We expect that consumers who have limited confidence in assessing fish quality (i.e. consumers facing higher levels of uncertainty) and/or lower involvement with fish quality, will be less familiar with fish and less inclined to buy fish.

Lower experience and lower confidence are likely to associate also with the perceived risk of buying low quality or making a wrong choice when buying fish, as well as with fish benefit perception. Hence, also higher risk perception and a more critical attitude towards health benefits can be expected among consumers who are less involved and feel less confident about evaluating fish quality. Thus, a consumer who feels more confident in judging fish quality,

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