



Motives towards traceable food choice: A comparison between French and Italian consumers



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ABSTRACT

Food traceability standards aim to reduce the risk of food-borne disease by facilitating the withdrawal of food and feed products and to provide consumers with targeted information. This paper analyses consumers' attitude and behaviour towards traceable food in two different European countries: Italy and France. A survey has been conducted on two samples of Italian ($n = 503$) and French ($n = 501$) consumers, aiming to explain the intention toward purchasing traceable food using the theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The predictive power of the TPB model significantly increases in both countries when new variables are added: habits, trust, past behaviour and socio-demographics. The results show that attitudes drive the intention to purchase traceable chicken and honey in France. Trust affects the intention to purchase traceable chicken and honey in Italy. These findings may serve to target public interventions and private strategies towards food traceability.

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1. Introduction

Food scares such as the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), avian flu and tainted milk powder have affected consumers' confidence and have increased the demand for verified and guaranteed food quality and safety information. The European Union's General Food Law¹ introduced an integrated approach aiming to guarantee food safety "from farm to table", specifying mandatory traceability requirements in the European food industry since January 2005 (Charlier & Valceschini, 2008). Similarly, to address concerns related to food terrorism, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the 2004 Food Bioterrorism Regulation for the establishment and maintenance of records to track commodity flows one step forward and one step backward (Nganje, Dahl, Wilson, Mounir, & Lewis, 2007). Although these mandatory requirements aim to facilitate the withdrawal of unsafe or risky food to prevent frauds and to improve consumer confidence, they do not deliver any information to consumers about the products they are buying. An improved traceability system that is able to organise the information transmission throughout the

entire supply chain would be more efficient in ensuring both sanitary security and consumers' information; however, it would be more costly, requiring some level of supply chain management and product labelling (Charlier & Valceschini, 2008). Additional compulsory traceability schemes have been introduced in the EU in specific food sectors that were linked to past scandals, such as beef (Menozzi, 2006) and fish (Asioli, Boecker, & Canavari, 2011). Other schemes for voluntary traceability and labelling have been introduced by national standard organisation and legislations (Banterle, Stranieri, & Baldi, 2006). Given this fragmented policy framework, consumers' attitudes towards and intention to purchase traceable food is a key element for both industries and policy makers.

Food traceability has received growing attention in the evaluation of consumers' perception and incentives towards traceable food. By increasing food chain transparency (Chen & Huang, 2013; Chrysochou, Chrysochoidis, & Kehagia, 2009; Van Rijswijk, Frewer, Menozzi, & Faioli, 2008), traceability is expected to improve consumer confidence in the food system, especially if associated with other quality assurance schemes (Hobbs, Bailey, Dickinson, & Haghiri, 2005; Verbeke & Ward, 2006). Both quality and safety were shown to be related to traceability in consumers' minds (Giraud & Halawany, 2006; Mora & Menozzi, 2008; Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2008; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008). Origin, increased prices, production methods, quality guarantee and best before date are the main attributes associated to traceability, whilst its main benefits

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¹ Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety.

are food safety, health, naturalness, quality, trust, control guarantee and environmental protection (Dickinson & Bailey, 2002; Giraud & Amblard, 2003; Giraud & Halawany, 2006; Lichtenberg, Heidecke, & Becker, 2008; Mai, Bogason, Arason, Árnason, & Matthíasson, 2010; Miles, Ueland, & Frewer, 2005; Mora, Menozzi, Faioli, Frewer, & van Rijswijk, 2009; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008; Verbeke & Ward, 2006). Traceability perception is a product-specific issue, mostly because of different perceived risks across different products, where traceability is expected to carry more weight for fresh produce (Dickinson & Bailey, 2002; Hobbs et al., 2005; Menozzi, Mora, Faioli, Chryssochoidis, & Kehagia, 2010; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008; Wu, Xu, & Gao, 2011). Cross-national differences in traceability perception were also observed (Cicia & Colantuoni, 2010; Giraud & Halawany, 2006; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008). Although consumers' perception of food traceability has been studied in the past, little is known about consumers' intention to purchase traceable food or the main psychosocial determinants of these intentions.

This research aims to examine the attitude towards and intention to buy traceable food, as well as to identify the determinants of traceable food purchasing in France and Italy using the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) as a conceptual framework. These two countries were selected because several studies related to food traceability have shown that Italian consumers are strongly concerned with safety issues related to food chain controls and recall possibilities, whilst French consumers are more interested in quality aspects linked to quality labels and indication of origin (Bernués, Olaizola, & Corcoran, 2003; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008). Thus, the determinants of intention to purchase traceable food in these two countries may reflect these differences in traceability perception. Two different products were considered—chicken and honey—that have both differences (e.g., production, consumption) and similarities (e.g., importance of traceability) to evaluate how the determinants of intention to purchase traceable food differ between them. As a fresh meat product, chicken raises sensitive issues with respect to traceability, such as concerns about safety, freshness, and origin, especially after the dioxin crisis in Belgium in 1999 and the major avian flu outbreak in 2005 (Mancini, 2005; Mazzocchi, Lobb, Traill, & Cavicchi, 2008; Vukasović, 2009). Although considered by consumers as safe and healthy, honey is also a sensitive case with respect to traceability: it is a processed and tradable food that might be blended after collection. Thus, concerns about safety and origin are also present in the case of honey. The frequency of consumption is high for chicken, where in Italy the yearly per capita consumption is 12 kg (U.N.A., 2011) whilst in France it is 15 kg (Agreste, 2012). On the contrary, Italy and France report the lowest per capita consumption of honey in Europe: approximately 600 g per year in each country, against 1.5 kg in Germany and 800 g in England (France-Agrimer, 2011; Unaapi, 2012). Finally, these two cases have also been chosen because voluntary traceability and labelling schemes have been developed in Italy for poultry meat² and honey³, whereas in France, voluntary traceability schemes for poultry meat were established under the quality logo “Label Rouge⁴”, and under the labelling system for honey.⁵ Given these features, we can expect

significant differences in purchasing determinants between products and countries.

2. The theoretical framework

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) suggests that the likelihood of a particular behaviour can be predicted by the individual's intention to perform that behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Intention captures the motivational factors that influence behaviour, e.g., to purchase traceable food. According to the TPB, behaviour is guided by favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour (attitudes towards the behaviour), perceived social pressure (subjective norms) and perceived ability to perform the behaviour (perceived behavioural control, PBC). In general, the more favourable the attitude and subjective norm, and the greater the perceived control, the stronger the intention to perform a given behaviour should be (Ajzen, 1991). TPB has proved to be a successful analysis tool for eating behaviours associated with risky or health-related actions (Lobb, Mazzocchi, & Traill, 2007; Mullan, Wong, & Kothe, 2013). Because traceability is related to both food quality and safety perceptions and to consumers' health (Van Rijswijk et al., 2008), the TPB was used in this paper to predict intention to purchase traceable food.

Although the TPB has been satisfactorily applied in predicting intentions and behaviour in many fields (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & Sparks, 2005), it may not necessarily capture all of the predictors of more complex behaviour such as food choices. Other concepts have extended the TPB, improving its descriptive and predictive power in the literature. For food purchases, behaviour may not only be the result of planned intentions, but it may also become habitual. Several studies have suggested that past behavioural frequency and habit strength may be important predictors of future behaviour. If past behaviour can be considered a frequency measure (Honkanen, Olsen, & Verplanken, 2005), habit is a psychological construct involving both repetition and automaticity (Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). It was found to have significant effects on food intentions and consumption in many health-related circumstances, such as fruit (De Bruijn, 2010; De Bruijn et al., 2007; Menozzi & Mora, 2012), fish and seafood consumption (Honkanen et al., 2005; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005) and binge drinking (Norman, 2011; Norman & Conner, 2006).

The information asymmetry and barriers preventing consumers from making their own risks assessments of food hazards, raise the importance of trust in evaluating the labelled information and safety certifications provided by producers, retailers, public authority or other sources (Lobb et al., 2007; Mazzocchi et al., 2008; Stefani, Cavicchi, Romano, & Lobb, 2008). The implementation of food traceability systems and the existence of control throughout the food chain may result in an improvement of consumers' trust and confidence (Bosona & Gebresenbet, 2013; Chen & Huang, 2013; Van Rijswijk et al., 2008).

The influence of socio-demographic variables on food traceability perception is not clear in the literature. Verbeke and Ward (2006) found that older and female consumers gave more importance to the quality guarantee scheme associated with traceability, whereas young consumers were the least interested in the country of origin of beef. Lobb et al. (2007) found that age, income and education have a significant impact on trust in information as provided by alternative sources, whilst Mazzocchi et al. (2008) found no relationship between socio-demographic variables and consumer trust in food safety information.

The present study attempts to first test the TPB model by measuring the beliefs that underlie attitude, subjective norms, and PBC and how they influence intentions to purchase traceable food. Second, it tests the efficacy of an extended TPB model in predicting

² Ministerial Decree of 29/07/2004. Rules for the application of a voluntary system of labelling of poultry meat, issued by the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Official Journal of the Italian Republic n° 241, October 13, 2004.

³ Legislative Decree 21 May 2004, n. 179. Implementation of Directive 2001/110/EC concerning the production and marketing of honey, Official Journal of the Italian Republic n° 168, July 20, 2004.

⁴ French Rural Code, art. R641-1, Decree No. 2007-30 of 05/01/2007, Official Journal of the French Republic of January 7, 2007.

⁵ Decree no. 2003-587 of 30 June 2003. Practical guidelines for beekeeping. application of the article L. 214-1 of the consumption code concerned with honey. Official Journal of the French Republic of July 2, 2003.

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