



## Consumers' confidence, reflections and response strategies following the horsemeat incident



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### ABSTRACT

Following the discovery of horsemeat in beef products in Europe in 2013, restoring consumers' confidence in processed meat products as well as in all the agencies involved – producers, food safety authorities, retailers – soon became a key priority. However, the European public's confidence in processed meat products and their views about government and industry actions to manage fraudulent practices in the wake of this incident are poorly understood. The objective of this study was to identify the core issues affecting consumers' confidence in the food industry, particularly in the meat processing sector, and to explore the impact of the horsemeat incident on consumers' purchasing and eating behaviour. It involved the use of an online deliberation tool VIZZATA™ to collect detailed views of 61 consumers in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Many participants reported buying fewer products containing processed meat as a result of the horsemeat incident. These respondents also claimed that their confidence in processed foods containing meat was lower than before the incident. Participants suggested restoring consumer confidence through improved traceability, sourcing local ingredients, providing clearer and correct labelling and stating the origin of meat on pack. Overall, findings indicate that rebuilding consumer confidence in processed meat products following a food adulteration episode is a multifaceted and difficult process. Food authorities and the food industry can benefit from the insights provided by this study to address issues affecting consumer confidence and to improve their communication strategies during future food adulteration incidents.

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### 1. Introduction

In January 2013, routine testing of products sold by major retail companies in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) revealed that certain processed food products labelled as beef were supplemented or fully substituted with horsemeat (Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), 2013). This transpired to be a pan-European problem of meat adulteration often referred to by the media as “the Horsemeat Scandal”.

Months after the initial news story broke, the horsemeat incident continued to dominate the media headlines in the UK and

Ireland. Reporting on the issue was stimulated by the publication of the results of the European Union (EU)-wide testing of beef products on 16th April which revealed that less than 5% of the tested products contained horse DNA (European Commission, 2013). The horsemeat adulteration of beef products not only had a direct impact on the European meat industry, but also indirectly insofar as consumer confidence in processed food sold by companies was affected. An inquiry into the integrity of the UK food network, which was commissioned by the UK government in the wake of the horsemeat incident, called for a national food crime unit to be set up, to protect consumers from food fraud incidents in the future (Elliott Review, July 2014).

The current study assessed the impact that the horsemeat incident had on consumers' confidence in the meat industry, their attitudes towards processed products containing meat, and the

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impact on their meat purchasing behaviour. It also follows up on a previous study, carried out just four days after the initial announcement by the FSAI, which examined consumers' immediate reactions to the findings, which we report elsewhere (Regan et al., 2015). We first consider two aspects of consumer confidence: in the food supply chain and around food safety incidents.

### 1.1. Consumer confidence in the food supply chain

On the whole, consumer confidence in the integrity and safety of the food supply chain is relatively high (de Jonge et al., 2004). For example, in the absence of a meat safety issue, less than 10% of consumers indicated they were 'not confident' about purchased beef and beef products, while the rest felt 'confident' that the consumption of beef and beef products would not result in adverse health effects (Van Wezemael, Verbeke, Kügler, & Scholderer, 2011). Trust in the food supply chain is also high in the absence of a food risk (Taylor et al., 2012). There is lack of agreement among researchers, however, on how to define trust, as the terms 'confidence' and 'trust' are sometimes used interchangeably. Siegrist (2010) described the importance, as well as the difficulty, of distinguishing between these two concepts noting that trust is based on value similarity, while confidence is based on performance (Siegrist et al. 2003). In an everyday context, confidence in food and considerations of risk are rarely visible; consumers' decision-making processes underlying their food purchases are usually based on subjective considerations of 'quality' and 'choice' (Green, Draper, & Dowler, 2003; Grunert, 2005), with the availability of a product in the marketplace being taken as an indication of its safety (Van Wezemael, Verbeke, Kügler, Barcellos, & Grunert, 2010).

Consumers apply a number of search strategies to exert an element of control over the quality and safety of their purchases using intrinsic and extrinsic cues (Green et al., 2003; van Rijswijk et al., 2008). When purchasing fresh meat products which are largely unbranded, consumers draw upon their prior experience (Fischer & Frewer, 2009) and use sensory and aesthetic intrinsic cues to approximate 'quality' (Green et al., 2003). In the case of beef purchases, consumers assess quality based on appearance (e.g. colour, freshness, visible fat/marbling, cut of meat) (Acebrón et al., 2000; Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunsø, 2004) and use extrinsic cues relating to confidence in local retailers, labelling, and country/region of origin (McCarthy et al., 2005; Van Wezemael et al., 2010). Alongside inferred credence characteristics linked to health and nutritional values (Grunert, 1997; Krystallis and Arvanitoyannis, 2006), there is an expectation that the use of these cues is associated with positive outcomes for diet quality. Quality is not the only criterion by which consumers select their food purchases. Alongside a general preference for less processing of foods (Verbeke, Pérez-Cueto, de Barcellos, Krystallis, & Grunert, 2010), there is a conflicting desire for convenience and 'value-for-money' in everyday life. Because consumers use these cues routinely and perceive themselves to have 'information sufficiency' (Fischer & Frewer, 2009), they are unlikely to question the characteristics by which they select products. Only when the product is unfamiliar or in circumstances of questionable food safety, will consumers seek a broader range of extrinsic cues (e.g. hygienic conditions at the place of purchase, brand, or country of origin) upon which to base their decisions (Fischer & Frewer, 2009).

Overall, consumers select their purchases based on heuristics framed in terms of benefit rather than risk (Fischer & Frewer, 2009). Implicit within these decisions, however, is the trust and confidence in the social systems which ensure the safe production, management and delivery of food products. Consumers trust that actors within food risk management are pro-active in their maintenance of public protection (Van Kleef et al., 2007; Yeung, Yee, &

Morris, 2010), and that mechanisms are embedded at every level of the system in order to respond promptly to control any potential food risk (Houghton, van Kleef, Rowe, & Frewer, 2006).

### 1.2. Consumer confidence following a food risk incident

Consumers' attitudes to risk and confidence in food safety and the impact of these factors on personal consumption practices have been highlighted in previous work (Lobb, 2005). Food fraud, including the subcategory of economically motivated adulteration, is a food risk that is gaining recognition and concern (Spink & Moyer, 2011). Food fraud is an intentional act for economic gain, whereas a food safety incident is an unintentional act with unintentional harm. Both food safety and food fraud incidents can create adulteration of food with public health threats. In the absence of concrete information and fuelled by media coverage, consumer perceptions of risk can be intensified, which in turn may lead to a lowered demand for the suspect foodstuff (Burton & Young, 1996; Lobb, 2005; Verbeke, 2005). In these circumstances, the majority of consumers wish to be notified of uncertainty and recognise its inevitability but are less tolerant of perceived governmental inaction in ensuring adequate information provision or in managing the situation (Frewer et al., 2002).

Although each food risk incident is unique, consumers use a variety of strategies in order to mitigate ambiguities in information provision and resultant risk perceptions. Responses may include wider information seeking (e.g. Kuttuschreuter et al., 2014) and attempts to exercise an element of control by maximising use of prior experience and routine intrinsic/extrinsic cues, which act as 'risk relievers' (McCarthy & Henson, 2005). Alternatively, consumers may simply change to different products or brands (Verbeke, 2005), or employ an 'optimistic bias' strategy in which the risk is not perceived to be meaningful to the individual themselves (Miles & Frewer, 2003; Zingg, Cousin, Connor, & Siegrist, 2013).

Given that such a wide range of consumer responses are observed, food risks pose a relatively intangible challenge for individual consumers and actors within the food-chain alike. Whilst attempts have been made to categorise consumer responses in the context of a range of potential food safety issues (for example, Christoph, Bruhn, & Roosen, 2008; Verbeke, Frewer, Scholderer, & DeBrabander, 2007), the complexity of interactions between individual, interpersonal, societal, and cultural responses make such a categorisation problematic. This in turn presents a particular challenge for risk communicators. Consumers' informational needs are often contradictory and no generalised response is possible (Verbeke et al., 2007). For example, whilst some consumers express a desire for information on uncertainty and traceability, and request more extensive labelling, others prefer that such information is limited, simple and more transparent, or do not attend to the information presented (Arens, Deimel, & Theuvsen, 2011; Verbeke and Ward, 2006). Therefore, in order to attend to the broadest range of consumer preferences there is a need for targeted and appropriate information which is tailored specifically to each food risk incident. Although efforts have been made to achieve these aims, each new incident that arises in the food chain that has the potential to be a public health threat, is likely to compound consumer concerns, consolidating more general anxieties around food safety as a whole.

The horsemeat incident was a clear case of an acute crisis where instrumental change resulted in the deliberate introduction of a hazard into the human food chain (Frewer et al., 2015). A multitude of practical, ethical, religious, safety and health considerations form the backdrop against which the horsemeat incident is situated. From the consumer perspective the incident had unique attributes by raising doubts about meat authenticity and integrity (O'Mahony,

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