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Evaluation, signalling and willingness to pay for traceability. A cross-national comparison



D. Calvo Dopico^{a,*}, R. Mendes^b, H.A. Silva^b, V. Verrez-Bagnis^c,
R. Pérez-Martín^d, C.G. Sotelo^d

^a University of A Coruña, Spain

^b Instituto Português do Mar e da Atmosfera (IPMA)

^c Ifremer, France

^d Instituto de Investigaciones Marinas CSIC, Spain

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Abstract This study aims to investigate the benefits associated with traceability and its relationship to quality. Market research has been conducted in Spain, Portugal, France, UK and Germany. The results show that the expected benefits for consumers related to traceability focus on food safety and quality. Relevant information about traceability should focus on the intrinsic quality attributes highly valued by consumers and food safety. Among them, it highlights the origin, the value of which has been highly appreciated by most consumers in different countries. As regards signalling, consumers rate labelling very favourably, which would have to offer all relevant information on the intrinsic quality attributes. The implementation of technology (e.g. QR) could favour the perception and recognition of the intrinsic attributes related to quality, food safety and sustainability. Regarding willingness to pay (WTP), the majority of consumers in Spain and Portugal are not willing to pay a premium for the implementation of a traceability programme, while a significant part of the population of France and Germany would be willing to pay a premium for implementing a traceability programme.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Etiquetado;
Señal;
Comportamiento del
consumidor;

Evaluación, señalización y disposición a pagar por la trazabilidad. Una comparativa internacional

Resumen El presente estudio trata de investigar los beneficios asociados a la trazabilidad y su relación con la calidad. Se ha realizado una investigación de mercado en España, Portugal, Francia, Reino Unido y Alemania. Los resultados reflejan que los beneficios asociados a la

* Corresponding author at: Facultad de Economía de Empresa, Campus de Elviña, s/n, 15091 A Coruña, Spain.
E-mail address: domingo.calvo.dopico@udc.es (D. Calvo Dopico).

Trazabilidad; Calidad

trazabilidad se centran en la seguridad y calidad de los alimentos. La información relevante sobre la trazabilidad debería centrarse en los atributos de la calidad intrínseca, altamente valorada por los consumidores, y en la seguridad de los alimentos. Entre esos atributos destaca el origen, cuyo valor ha sido altamente apreciado por muchos consumidores en todos los países analizados. En lo que atañe a la señalización, los consumidores han calificado de manera muy favorable el etiquetado, que debería ofrecer toda la información relevante sobre los atributos intrínsecos. La introducción de la tecnología (por ejemplo QR) podría favorecer la percepción y el reconocimiento de los atributos intrínsecos asociados a la calidad, seguridad alimentaria y sostenibilidad. En cuanto a la disposición a pagar, la mayoría de los consumidores de España y Portugal no están dispuestos a pagar una prima adicional sobre el precio por la introducción de un programa de trazabilidad, mientras que una población considerable de Francia y Alemania sí accederían a pagar dicha prima.

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Introduction and objectives

The market of food and agriculture products and fish products is immersed in a globalisation process and in a more and more competitive environment, with a growing demand for better guarantees of quality and safety. In fact, consumers have insufficient knowledge to perceive or recognise the features of a fish product such as source, date of capture species. Additionally to this, there are attributes for which consumers cannot know the real characteristics (e.g. food safety) of a product even if they try it. Thus, there is a problem of uncertainty regarding the quality of products (Ackerlof, 1970), also known as imperfect information on product quality. This problem becomes more complex when consumers are faced with many alternatives of a similar perceived quality, which makes them have to decide on one without being completely sure, such as fish products. This problem has become even more acute with the globalisation phenomenon, where there are many occasions of fraud.

It is therefore necessary not only to inform consumers about these characteristics, but also guarantee product quality and safety. Thus, the fishing sector industry must take on three major challenges. Firstly, firms need to inform consumers about the intrinsic characteristics of the products. Secondly, to guarantee these features, it is necessary to control the quality of fish products throughout the different stages of the food chain – production or extraction-processing-distribution-sales. Thirdly, due to consumers' incapacity to evaluate the product's intrinsic properties, there is a fraud phenomenon appearing in the commercialisation of fish products. These findings reveal the need for offering products with better guarantees of food safety and quality to end consumers (Grunert, 2005). Traceability is one of the tools available to the agents of the sector to trace the itinerary of a product. Facing any health problem or incident, the company can trace the food chain back and identify the route followed by a specific product, raw material or ingredient. This way, when implementing a traceability system, it is possible to follow the route of fish products throughout the different phases of the chain. This requirement has become more important since the standard that rules fish product labelling was approved on the 13 December 2014, introducing relevant changes not only as regards fish product labelling but also as regards the new demands in terms of traceability.

Nevertheless, most of consumers do not recognise what the term 'traceability' means (Giraud & Halawany, 2006). By the same token, there are few studies that have performed research, from the consumer behaviour standpoint, the importance of traceability for consumers (Chrysochoidis, Kehagia, & Chrysochou, 2006; Giraud & Halawany, 2006; Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2006). Some studies analysed the connection of traceability with quality and food safety (Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2006; Van Rijswijk, Frewer, Menorzi, & Fiaoli, 2008) or the benefits associated with traceability (Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2012). However, no study has ever been identified that permits not only to know the benefits associated with traceability, but also to know how these benefits can be signalled or communicated to the end consumer. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, this challenge becomes more important within a global environment. Such a global environment has higher quality and food safety requirements, in particular as regards fish products, because of the difficulty for consumers to identify and recognise the intrinsic properties and because the supply chains are longer and more complex due to the different levels of the product processing. The present study has three main objectives. Firstly, to know consumers' perception of the term 'traceability' of fish products. Secondly, to analyse indicators or signs to recognise the traceability of fish products and to assess the willingness to pay (WTP) a price premium for the introduction of a traceability system.

To respond to these objectives, we have divided this work into four sections. First, we will explain in detail the theoretical framework in which the principles of signalling theory will be explained. We will then explain the methodology and, finally, the analysis of results from which we will extract the main conclusions.

Traceability, quality and labelling: foundations and previous research

Perceived quality in food products: A signalling phenomenon

Traditionally, objective quality refers to the excellency of products (Brunso, Bredahl, Grunert, & Scholderer, 2005). The level at which the product adapts to quality standards established by the experts will determine the quality (Juran,

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