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The valuation and purchase of food products that combine local, regional and traditional features: The influence of consumer ethnocentrism

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature has addressed the concepts of local products, regional products and traditional products as if they were independent concepts. However, in practice, many food products combine all three concepts. The objectives of this paper are as follows: first, to explore the valuation of food products that have local, regional and traditional features through the analysis of specific product categories; second, to study the possible link between the level of consumer ethnocentrism and the valuation and effective purchase of local-regional-traditional food.

The results show that consumers value these products highly and buy them in high proportions. In addition, levels of consumer ethnocentrism are sometimes, but not always, related to the actual purchase of these local-regional-traditional food products. This finding highlights the need to include a product's category in analyses of the effects of consumer ethnocentrism.

The majority of previous studies examine the consumer's valuation and intention to buy local or traditional products at a general or abstract level, which does not allow respondents to evaluate a specific food product that they can find in the market and consume. An important contribution of this work is its level of analysis: we analyze specific food product categories in two different geographic environments in Spain.

1. Introduction

A variety of food crises and environmental concerns, combined with movements to support local producers and improve transparency in supply chains, have caused food trends to change since the beginning of the 21st century (Dragon & Albergaria, 2012). As Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Guerrero, and Hersleth (2009) note, there is growing consumer interest in products of local or regional origin and in products that have a traditional character or image. Consumer demand for these types of products may derive from opposition to globalization and industrialization in food production (Jordana, 2000). In this environment, movements such as “Slow Food” have emerged to promote the preservation of local food culture, regional culinary traditions and traditional methods of cultivating, producing and preparing food (Dansero & Puttilli, 2013). Bond, Thilmany, and Keeling Bond (2008) emphasize that the search for alternatives to intensive production systems is one of the main drivers of demand for local, organic and

pesticide-free products. Similarly, Costanigro, Kroll, Thilmany, and Bunning (2014) find that consumers are willing to pay a premium for unconventional products.

Local food production, tradition and connection to a product's region of origin may represent strong elements of local identity and culture (Galli & Brunori, 2013). Where strong local identity and commitment to the region exist, the demand for local products is likely to be greater. This phenomenon can be attributed to consumer ethnocentrism rather than to the product's intrinsic attributes (Groves, 2005).

The definitions of local, regional and traditional products are often conflated, causing overlaps and confusion about their differences (Uyttendaele, Herman, Daeseleire, Huyghebaert, & Pussemier, 2012). Meanings usually vary according to context and, as Eriksen (2013, p. 49) notes, imply “different things to different people in different contexts”. Although the concept of a traditional product is related to the notion of local and regional products, these terms are not equivalent (Pieniak et al., 2009).

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To the best of our knowledge, these three concepts have not been analyzed together in the literature, despite the fact that many products in the markets simultaneously meet the definitions of local, regional and traditional. Consumers must continually make decisions about whether to buy these products or alternatives. However, little is known about the way consumers actually value such products or how these products meet consumers' needs. Studies of consumer ethnocentrism, which are generally limited to the international marketing field, have ignored the possible relationship between this variable (i.e., ethnocentrism) and the demand for local-regional-traditional products. For this reason, this study aims to answer two questions:

RQ1: How are food products that are simultaneously local, regional and traditional valued by consumers?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between the valuation and purchase of these products and levels of consumer ethnocentrism?

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Local products

Local products are defined according to the geographical proximity of production to consumption. There is no agreement on the requirements of this proximity, but local products can be considered to be those that are grown, produced, marketed and consumed within a relatively small area (Martinez et al., 2010).

Two criteria are usually used for geographical delimitation. The first measures the distance between the location of production and the location of consumption. One of the most widely used criteria is the 100-mile radius (Durham, King, & Roheim, 2009), which is considered large enough to be adopted in large cities but also small enough to remain local (Smith & MacKinnon, 2007). Several consumer surveys have indicated that consumers generally associate a radius of 30 or 50 miles with local food, whereas a 100-mile radius is generally applied to food that is considered more regional than local (Groves, 2005; Onozaka, Nurse, & McFadden, 2010).

The second criterion is related to political-administrative boundaries, such as counties, states or provinces. Some consumer studies consider local food to be food produced within the same county (Groves, 2005), whereas others consider larger frontiers, such as the state (Darby, Batte, Erst, & Roe, 2008) and even the nation (Brown, 2003). These political-administrative boundaries may have a stronger impact than geographical boundaries on preferences for local products. Lim and Hu (2016) found that when buying meat, a sample of Canadian consumers showed a clear preference for home-province beef versus beef labeled "local" depending on the geographic distance.

Local products are associated with higher quality and are considered fresher, more nutritious and tastier than other products. This quality is derived from the geographic proximity between production and consumption, which shortens transport time, thus allowing optimum maturation and the use of fewer preservatives (Galli & Brunori, 2013; Groves, 2005). As an additional benefit of this proximity, local products are associated with values related to sustainability. Several studies claim that local consumption reduces the use of fuels and chemicals as well as greenhouse gas emissions (Karner, 2010; La Trobe, 2002). Furthermore, consumers feel that purchasing local products allows their money to remain within their own community to support local producers, who sometimes operate small or family-owned enterprises. This arrangement is seen as having a positive impact on the local economy and employment (Lang, Stanton, & Qu, 2014; Martinez et al., 2010).

The commercialization of these products is accomplished through short chains without intermediaries in which personal interaction between the producer and the consumer conveys authenticity and confidence. In other cases, the minimum possible number of intermediaries is involved. These intermediaries act as guarantors of authenticity and

transfer information about the values and quality of the product (Holcomb et al., 2016; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003).

2.2. Regional products

Regional products can be considered local products on a larger scale. They may travel longer distances to the final consumption location or derive from areas with wider borders. However, the geographical proximity between production and consumption, as well as the specific geographical origin of the product, is less important in definitions of regional products. A product's origin provides added value, which stems from the uniqueness of the culture, traditions, methods, and geographical and natural conditions associated with its production (Chinnakonda & Telford, 2007; Parrott, Wilson, & Murdoch, 2002). The combination of these human, natural, and production factors, which are linked to a specific location, differentiates regional products and gives them organoleptic properties and qualities that are difficult to imitate (García-Galán, Del Moral, & Galera, 2010).

Regional products are marketed with a special emphasis on quality (Ilbery & Maye, 2006). They travel along short chains and, regardless of the number of intermediaries or the travel distance, reach the consumer with explicit information about their origins (Renting et al., 2003). This transfer of information is usually accomplished through the packaging and labeling of the product or under Protected Designations of Origin and similar certification schemes (Kneafsey et al., 2013).

2.3. Traditional products

The identification of a particular origin is a necessary but not sufficient condition to classify a product as traditional; thus, only some local products can be considered traditional. A traditional product is linked to both territory and tradition (Jordana, 2000). Traditional food products are defined by European consumers as those "frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and / or seasons, transmitted from one generation to another, made in a specific way according to gastronomic heritage, naturally processed, and distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated with a certain local area, region or country" (Vanhonacker et al., 2010, p. 454). This definition presents a pan-European view from the consumer's perspective and is the result of qualitative and quantitative studies conducted using the framework of the TRUEFOOD European Project (Traditional United Europe Food) (Almli, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Næs, & Hersleth, 2011; Pieniak et al., 2009).

The results of Guerrero et al. (2009) show that from the perspective of European consumers, a product that is considered traditional must contain traditional ingredients and be processed in a traditional way that follows a traditional recipe. Many consumers perceive these products to be simple, basic, natural and pure, with as little manipulation as possible. Based on these perceptions, traditional products appear to have four dimensions: (1) production habits and natural character; (2) origin and locality; (3) processing and elaborating methods; and (4) sensory properties (Guerrero et al., 2009).

2.4. Relationships among the concepts of local products, regional products, and traditional products

There is evidence of overlap among the definitions of local, regional, and traditional products, as reflected in Fig. 1. The first circle of this figure represents the local product, which is produced and consumed locally and whose geographical proximity gives it superior quality with regard to taste, freshness, and sustainability. The second circle represents the regional product, which is produced locally, may or may not be consumed outside that environment, and offers superior quality derived from the specific conditions of its identifiable geographical origin. The third circle represents the traditional product, which is produced locally, may or may not be consumed outside that

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