

Enhancing Consumer Confidence

Partnership between Europe – China

China is now the third destination for EU agri-food exports and the fifth country of origin for EU agri-food imports (1). Cooperation between both parties on a regulatory, scientific, and technical level has the potential to further encourage trade and improve food safety. In EU-China-Safe, the consumer behaviour group at QUB worked closely with colleagues in Europe (UCD) and China (CFSA) to investigate the effectiveness of strategies to increase consumer confidence in food.

Definition of problem

Persistent incidents of food fraud have been documented in both the EU and China. Examples of high-profile cases include the 2013 horsemeat scandal in Europe and the 2008 melamine scandal in China. Incidents such as these have had implications for industry credibility, consumer confidence and public health.

Pathway to solution

Current food fraud detection methods typically expose adulterants after suspicion has been raised. However, innovative strategies (blockchain traceability, non-targeted analysis of food for authentication, QR codes for counterfeit protection) present new long-term proactive solutions for ensuring food integrity. They may also help to rebuild consumer confidence and trust in the foods they purchase and consume.

A mixed-method approach (surveys and interviews) was adopted to explore whether innovative food fraud strategies can enhance consumer trust in the food chain, as well as add value and increase sales. EU infant formula milk and Chinese garlic powder were used as exemplar products in the surveys to understand each export market (Chinese and EU consumers, respectively).

Chinese consumers thought that a system of convincingly guaranteeing the geographic origin of infant formula milk from the EU would be beneficial/important/essential. Specifically, they thought that an origin guarantee would be beneficial to infants and improve product safety, quality, and trust. Trust in authenticated or traceable IMF from the EU (and its manufacturers) was higher than that of the domestic IMF (and its manufacturers) and consumers expressed a preference for purchasing authenticated or traceable IMF from the EU over non-authentic or untraceable IMF from the EU.

EU consumers viewed that buying traceable and authentic processed Chinese garlic would be wise/beneficial and make them feel good/pleased. They also reported more positive perceptions of the product over non-authentic and untraceable garlic (healthier, safer, tastier etc.). The provision of traceability and authenticity information increased trust in the product and chain actors (farmers and manufacturers). Consumers expressed a preference for purchasing the authentic and traceable Chinese garlic over non-authentic and untraceable Chinese garlic. Consumers were willing to pay a premium for authentic and traceable garlic; typically, up to 10% extra but sometimes higher.

Long-term impact

Insights produced by this task and disseminated widely to stakeholders have highlighted different ways to increase consumer trust in food. This is important from an industry perspective as higher levels of trust will lead to more customers and an increased sale of products. This encourages the creation of new food fraud innovations with the capacity to shape the food system and contribute to the advancement of Sustainable Development Goals.

Reference

(1) European Commission (2017), Agri-Food Trade Statistical Factsheet, European Union - China, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, Brussels. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/agrifood-china_en.pdf