

EUROPEAN FOOD AUTHENTICITY AND CHINESE CONSUMERS. REDUCING CONCERNS ABOUT FOOD SAFETY

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Authenticity assurances associated with food and drink may reduce consumer concerns about food safety and fraudulent production. This research reports the results of a mixed methods study, which aimed to understand the relationship between the concerns of Chinese consumers regarding food safety, and the role that authenticity assurance may play in relieving those concerns. Initially, qualitative research explored concerns held by Chinese consumers in relation to food safety and authenticity. The results, together with insights from the relevant literature, were used to inform the design of a quantitative survey instrument which was used to test hypotheses about the relationship between perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions regarding the purchase of “authentic” European products. The results of 6 focus groups in 3 Chinese cities indicated that study participants perceived that many locally produced foods were fraudulent and raised food safety issues. Serious concerns among Chinese consumers about the quality and safety standards of the Chinese domestic food supply chain when compared to other developed global food markets were revealed. Against this, evidence of authenticity and traceability were associated with improved food safety. Three main barriers were identified by participants as preventing consumers from assessing food as being authentic and safe; the regulatory environment; the complexity of the food supply chain and intentional fraudulent activity made possible by system complexity. Given the perceived lack of regulation and consumer protection offered by government and industry, a number of “risk relieving” strategies were used by consumers to manage the perceived prevalence of inauthentic food, including the use of heuristics and judgments based upon tangible product cues. Mistrust was perpetuated by numerous food scandals with participants resigned to the fact that fraudulent activity was widespread within the domestic supply chain, and hence unavoidable. The results of the focus groups were used to inform a survey (N=850 participants, 3 Chinese cities). The results of this quantitative survey indicate a high level of concern about adulterated foods, counterfeit foods and (mis)description of contents. The application of Structural Equation Modelling confirmed that the greater the level of concern about food safety, the greater the perceived *risks* associated with food safety, and the perceived *benefits* of authenticity, and authenticity cues, including association with European products. A more positive attitude towards, and intention to purchase, foods and drinks that have been traced for authenticity was observed. Differences in the strength of these relationships across different product types will be discussed. In conclusion, demonstrating authenticity improves the trust of Chinese consumers in the food system, and authenticity cues (e.g. product labels) direct consumer food choices to relieve food safety concerns.

Keywords: food safety, food authenticity, Chinese consumers, European products

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