Generation Z Perceptions of Quality Certification: A Cross-National Study

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Generation Z consumers’ perceptions of quality certification. Specifically, it studies what 270 Generation Z university students perceive when they observe that fruit has a quality certification label, assessing nine statements on a Likert scale. The study was conducted through an online questionnaire with participants from Greece (n=87), Romania (n=86), and the Czech Republic (n=97). Analysis revealed that as concerns Generation Z consumers’ perceptions of quality certification of fruits, the three higher overall (for all countries) mean scores were obtained for fruits having better taste (MS=4.22), being of superior quality (MS=4.20) and free of pesticides (MS=3.84). The Greek university students are the ones that have the least trust in the quality labeling and certifications. The results of the ANOVA analysis and post-hoc tests also indicated that there are significant differences among the three countries’ Generation Z-ers. Implications for fruit marketing based on results are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Fruit, Generation Z, Marketing, Perceptions, Quality Certification, University students,
INTRODUCTION

Globally, food safety is an ongoing issue, due to foodborne illnesses and diseases reported worldwide (WHO, 2015). Global food scares are not few; in Europe, if not all, almost all countries have experienced food scares at some level. In 1986, European consumers were shocked from the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) disease found in cattle, later known as the “mad cow disease”. The consumption of beef with BSE was linked to the probability of the appearance of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) in humans (Dealer & Lacey, 1990; Will et al., 2006). Cleeland (2009) states that BSE spread to at least 28 other countries in Europe, Asia (Japan), the Middle East (Israel) and North America, thus resulting in 175 cases of vCJD-variation of the Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (Will et al., 1996) in the UK and Northern Ireland, and 49 cases in other countries, from October 1996 to March 2011 (WHO, 2012: fact sheet No. 180). Other food-related incidents involve dioxin contamination of foods: cow’s milk and butter in Germany in the late 1990s (Carvalhaes et al., 2002); Belgian food products in 1999 (Bernard et al., 2002), and Ireland’s incidents in 2008 (Casey, Lawless & Wall, 2010). Regarding microbiological-related food scares (salmonella, *E. coli*, etc.), salmonella incidents go back to 1988 in the UK (Lacey, 1989). Hence, as previous research confirms, almost all countries in Europe have experienced salmonella incidents (Knowles et al., 2007), with Greece’s contamination incidents happening in 1998 (Hadjichristodolou et al., 1999).

The above-mentioned food scares are only a few of them that consumers in Europe have experienced. These resulted in people’s changes in attitudes, preferences and purchasing behavior towards food products (Fontes, Giraud-Héraud & Pinto, 2013). Thus, government and non-government organizations have developed Quality Assurance and Certification Schemes (e.g., for organic produce, geographical indication, etc.) to recover consumers’ trust. Quality Assurance and Certification Schemes specifically for agricultural products and foodstuffs marketed in the EU-27 exceed 440 in number (European Commission, 2016).

Previous research on food safety, food quality, and certification labels, regards mostly consumers’ willingness to (WT) pay, willing to (WT) purchase or/ and pay more for certified food and agricultural products. Overall, past research has revealed that consumers are willing to purchase environmentally friendly agricultural produce and food (Baourakis, Lassithiotaki & Pardalos, 2000). As regards consumer perceptions of certified fruit, research has focused mainly on the role of certification on consumer choice (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2003) and perceptions of organic fruit (Kontogeorgos & Semos, 2008).

This exploratory research aims to explore what university students from three different countries (Greece, Romania, and Czech Republic), belonging to Generation Z perceive when a fruit has a quality assurance or certification label. Additionally, it observes if there are differences between Gen Z-ers behavior depending on their Country of Origin. Lastly, it explores whether Gen Z when purchasing a fruit considers its quality certification a factor in their choice. This exploratory research can be
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