

Quality perceptions under evolving information conditions: Implications for diet, health and consumer satisfaction

Nigel D. Poole ^{a,*}, Laura Martínez-Carrasco Martínez ^b,
Fernando Vidal Giménez ^b

^a *Imperial College London, Centre for Environmental Policy – Wye Campus, Wye, Ashford, Kent TN25 5AH, UK*
^b *D. Economía, Sociología y Política Agraria, Universidad Miguel Hernández, Ctra. Beniel km. 3, 2, 03312 Orihuela (Alicante), Spain*

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Abstract

Consumers' perception of, and satisfaction with, fruit quality is an important issue for both public policy and commercial reasons. However, because of information problems, consumers cannot easily choose fruits of a quality most likely to satisfy their preferences and health needs. The research reported here employed an experimental auction method to test perceptions of fruit quality by evaluating the willingness to pay (WTP) of consumers for five different varieties of soft citrus under three different information conditions: visual inspection of the fruit before peeling; visual inspection after peeling; and after consumption. Significant differences were found in valuations of the different varieties as consumers gained information. Conclusions are drawn about the value of the methodology and the results themselves, and implications are inferred for policy and for growers and traders. It is argued that product information should be oriented not just towards nutritional education but also towards increasing the pleasure of healthy eating.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 207 594 2863; fax: +44 207 594 2838.

E-mail addresses: n.poole@imperial.ac.uk (N.D. Poole), lmartinez@umh.es (L.M.-C. Martínez), fvidal@umh.es (F.V. Giménez).

Introduction

Consumers face information problems in choosing certain types of foods that best match their preferences and assure satisfaction. For fresh fruits, expectations about the eating experience cannot be assured through external inspection of the product at the time of purchase, nor necessarily through experience. Limited information provided by the supply industry, unexploited product differentiation by marketers, and lack of awareness among consumers of quality attributes, and of the intrinsic heterogeneity of fresh produce, can lead to reduced consumer satisfaction, which in turn affects consumption patterns and attenuates the impact of policy initiatives to improve diet and health (Poole, 1996; Poole and Baron, 1996; Poole and Gray, 2002, 2003). This article reports research which probes these information problems experienced by consumers and explores information policies that might enhance dietary choices and the satisfaction – even pleasure – of healthy eating.

Fruit and vegetables, diet and health

Low fruit and vegetable (F&V) intake is a characteristic of a poor diet that is one of the major risk factors in chronic diseases (Department of Health, 2003). The WHO ‘Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health’ (WHO, undated) stresses the strength of the scientific evidence that a change in dietary habits can powerfully influence health in well- or over-fed societies: F&V are an excellent source of antioxidant nutrients which are thought to lower the risk of heart disease and several types of cancer, and are a good source of fibre which helps control cholesterol levels; F&V are beneficial to salt balance which is particularly important in cases of hypertension, and provide vitamins in addition to antioxidants, including folic acid which has been linked to the prevention of birth defects. Research also suggests that low levels of F&V consumption may be linked to anti-social behaviour (Gesch et al., 2002). And last but not least, the link between ill-health and ‘obesogenic’ diets – such as those low in F&V – has important economic dimensions (McCarthy, 2004).

National governments (e.g., Department of Health, 2003) are concerned about diet and health, and there has been renewed recognition within the European Union of the role of public policy in promoting healthy diets: paragraph 4.2.4 of the European Commission proposal for ‘Healthier, safer, more confident citizens: a health and consumer protection strategy’ (CEC, 2005) addresses the need for better informed and educated consumers with the aim of ‘Ensuring that consumers, through better information, are able to make informed, environmentally and socially responsible choices on food, the most advantageous products and services, and those that correspond most to their lifestyle objectives thus building up trust and confidence’.

In fact, nutrition transition towards unhealthy diets, which is occurring at a faster rate in developing countries than was the case for developed countries, is a global problem (Fraser, 2005; WHO, undated).

Food policy, information and health

There are many ways in which public policy aims to influence food consumption patterns, and interventions on health claims and labelling mandated by government policy

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