

Consumer responses to communication about food risks and associated risk management practices

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Abstract

With recent emphasis within policy circles on transparent communication with consumers about food safety procedures, it is important to ascertain *best* ways to communicate with the public about how food risks are *managed*. Previous research has focused on assessing consumer perceptions of food risks, but not consumer evaluations of how these risks are managed. In this study, the provision of information about regulatory enforcement, proactive risk management, scientific uncertainty and risk variability were manipulated in an experiment designed to examine their impact on consumer evaluations of food risk management quality. In order to investigate consumer reactions to specific cases, three food hazards were selected (mycotoxins on organically grown food, pesticide residues, and a genetically modified potato). Participants read a brief description about each hazard, followed by four statements where the provision of information about risk management practices was varied. Subsequently they responded to a series of questions on food risk management quality. Data were collected from representative samples of consumers in Germany (N=1796), Greece (N=1604), Norway (N=2273) and the UK (N=2279) in summer 2006. To assess the impact of country, hazard type, regulatory enforcement, proactive risk management, scientific uncertainty and risk variability on evaluations of food risk management, scores on the “food risk management” scale were subjected to a repeated-measures mixed linear model. The results highlight the importance of cultural variation regarding the impact of risk communication strategies. For example, while communication of uncertainty had a positive impact in Germany, it had a negative impact in the UK and Norway. In addition, results indicate that food risk managers should inform the public about enforcement of safety laws when communicating scientific uncertainty associated with risks. Implications for food risk management communication will be discussed.