

Traditional methods, consumers' stereotyping of farmers and the compensatory effects of ethical food cues

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Abstract-

Purpose

Attesting to the growing interest in ethical food, scholarship has examined how consumers respond to different cues associated with food ethicality. However, the psychological mechanisms through which ethical food cues shape consumer preferences have been overlooked. Focusing on an underexamined cue (traditional production methods) and drawing from the Stereotype Content Model, this study aims to examine whether a warmth stereotyping of farmers may explain the influence of this cue on consumer preferences. Moreover, the paper also explores how the interaction of cues of localness and traditionality affect consumers' perceptions of farmers. The paper documents compensatory effects between traditional methods and localness in specific circumstances.

Design/methodology/approach

Two online experiments (Study 1, $n=291$; Study 2, $n=183$) were conducted to test the hypotheses. This paper manipulates farming methods and localness and measure perceptions of warmth and consumer responses to the profile of a fictitious farm. A model of moderated mediation is examined which identifies compensatory effects between traditional farming methods and perceptions of localness.

Findings

A warm stereotype of farmers explains the positive effect of traditional farming methods and localness on consumers' food attitudes and preferences. Furthermore, different ethical cues can have a compensatory effect on consumers' perceptions of warmth. Specifically, for consumers with strong opposition to long supply chains, the adoption of traditional farming methods compensates for the perceived warmth of geographically distant farmers. Thus, consumers who would usually dislike distant farmers retain a positive impression of them if these farmers can boast traditional farming cues. Furthermore, we find no evidence of an additive effect between traditional farming methods and localness on warmth: the addition of the two cues does not significantly increase perceptions of warmth.

Research limitations/implications

The study demonstrates that the social perception of farmers plays a key role in

food preferences and the perception of ethical cues in food consumption. Moreover, it shows how different cues may influence perceptions of warmth depending on consumers's involvement.

Practical implications

For the promotion of ethical food systems, farmers could increase favourable consumer attitudes by foregrounding the ethical cues of localness and traditional farming methods.

Originality/value

The results extend our understanding of the mechanisms underpinning preferences for ethical food and explicate how multiple ethical cues influence ethical food consumption.

Index Terms- Ethical food, Locavorism, Traditional production, Experiments, Stereotype content model, Persuasion

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