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QUALITY OF LIFE AND MANAGEMENT OF LIVING RESOURCES

“Food Risk Communication and Consumers’ Trust in the Food Supply Chain”

TRUST

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WP3 report on the focus groups conducted in France

WP no. 15

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Summary

The project is devoted to exploring the antecedents of trust in information sources and risk management along the food chain and the mechanisms that determine the social diffusion of trust. The specific task of WP3 is to investigate the social and cultural dimensions of trust in the food field, by means of a series of focus groups. As for Italy, Germany, UK and the Netherlands, four focus groups were conducted in France, during the month of September 2003. They were organised according to the general instructions and selection criteria given by ISIG.

This report presents the major findings of the French focus groups. In particular, it highlights the following results:

- *quality, price and taste are the three main criteria for the choice of food products.*
- *consumers tend to rely more and more on their own "expertise", based on their experience and tastes.*
- *the food chain evoke very negative images and judgements, the food industry being perceived as a "black box".*
- *safety does not appear as a very sensitive issue for consumers - or at least not as sensitive as it has been in recent years.*
- *the responsibility of ensuring food safety belongs to the public authorities and should be controlled by an independent body.*
- *food safety issues generate a global distrust in the "system" even though consumers acknowledge that there has been significant improvements in food safety and that it is impossible to avoid all risks.*
- *regarding the issue genetically modified foods, there was a wide consensus amongst participants who, in majority, rejected such techniques and products.*
- *any kind of information on food safety / risks is almost automatically suspected of being either false, incorrect or manipulated but their is some clear demand for information on food safety issues and consumers consider they should be provided with such information.*

1. Methodology

In order to conduct the four FG of the first phase of WP3, we followed the general instructions as well as the selection criteria given by ISIG. The focus groups were conducted in Paris on the 10th, 17th, 18th and 23rd of September. They took place in a specialised conference room, specially equipped for audio and video taping, located near the Opera, in a very central area of Paris. The overall duration of the groups was about 2 hours. They were organised between 7 and 9 pm, in order to allow participants to come after work. Each of them received a cheque of 45 euros, in order to cover both the costs of time and travel.
The recruitment was done according to the instructions given by ISIG: after having obtained the agreement of the candidate participant, a preliminary short "interview" was conducted in order to determine in which group / cluster the candidate should be allocated. The candidates were asked to answer a set of ad hoc questions on several issues, including shopping and cooking habits, food choices, attitude towards labelled and organic products, attitude towards health and budget constraint. The recruitment was done under close supervision by CREDOC. All groups included 9 persons, both men and women, except for the "indifference" group, which was composed of 7 persons, even though 9 persons were initially recruited.
In some groups, it was difficult to ensure an equal distribution by age and education: according to the market structure in France, the "concern" group was composed of a majority of persons aged 40 and over; their level of "education" or social status (occupation) tended to be higher than the average.
The group typology was established both on general (age, gender, education) and particular, more subjective, criteria (opinions, values…), in order to fit the four groups: Care, Concern, Pleasure and Indifference.
The detailed composition of groups is indicated in table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Composition of focus groups

CARE	CONCERN	PLEASURE	INDIFFERENCE
Woman, 41, Paris, single, no child, webmaster.	Man, 41, suburbs, married, no child, manager.	Woman, 40, suburbs, married, 2 children, social worker.	Woman, 33, suburbs, couple, 1 child, bus driver.
Woman, 36, suburbs, married, 1 child, employee.	Woman, 39, Paris, married, 3 children, intellectual profession.	Man, 30, Paris, engineer.	Woman, 28, suburbs, single, no child, non working.
Woman, 29, Paris, married, 2 children, employee.	Woman, 28, suburbs, single, no child, intermediate profession.	Man, 40, suburbs, married, technician.	Man, 41, suburbs, married, 1 child, technician.
Woman, 55, suburbs, 1 child, seller.	Man, 44, Paris, couple, no child, consultant.	Woman, 48, suburbs, employee.	Man, 24, Paris, single, student.
Man, 33, suburbs, married, 2 children, intermediate occupation.	Woman, 45, Paris, single, no child, flight attendant.	Woman, 43, Paris, single, no child, non working.	Man, 27, Paris, married, no child, intermediate profession.
Man, 28, Paris, married, 2 children, technician.	Woman, 46, suburbs, married, 3 children, employee.	Man, 26, suburbs, couple, no child, postman.	Woman, 56, Paris, divorced, 2 children, employee.
Woman, 47, Paris, married, 2 children, non working.	Woman, 50, Paris, single, no child, social worker.	Man, 59, Paris, 2 children, intermediate profession.	Woman, 37, suburbs, married, no child, intermediate profession.
Man, 60, Paris, divorced, 2 children, technician.	Man, 36, suburbs, married, 3 children, engineer.	Woman, 25, suburbs, employee.	
Woman, 50, suburbs, married, 2 children, manager.	Man, 52, divorced, no child, company manager.	Man, 38, suburbs, intermediate profession.	

Source: CREDOC.

2. Food Choices

2.1. Food provisioning and cooking

In the four groups, participants buy food at least twice a week: most of them go to the supermarket (or hypermarket, depending on where they live[1]) once a week, often on Saturday. Except for the "indifference" group, most consumers go to the market almost every week, in order to buy fresh food, mainly fruits, vegetables, meat and fish. The participants of the "indifference" group go quite often to discount shops (Ed, Leader Price, Lidl …) and seldom in specialised food shops, where prices are usually higher. Several "concern" consumers are regular buyers of organic food, which they purchase either in specialised organic shops or in regular supermarkets.
Married people quite often share the food provisioning task (for example, the husband helps for the big weekly shopping or goes to the market), it appears that women usually decide of what should be bought. The cooking is also mainly done by women.

QUOTES
"I want to choose the products by myself, I want to see them in order to choose them." ("care" group)
"I like to go shopping quite often in order to buy fresh products, on the market." ("care" group)
"I go shopping in various places. I buy a lot of organic products." ("concern" group)
"I like the market: the products are more fresh, I know the retailers." ("pleasure" group)
"We go shopping once a month, in medium size shops." ("indifference" group)

2.2. Food choice

In all groups, the participants recalled several major criteria for the choice of food products: **quality, price and taste** are the three main dimensions. More or less they were all present in the views expressed by participants of all groups:

- in the "care" group, the participants particularly stressed the importance of quality, - "good food" being associated with fresh, appetising and tasty food - diversity and balanced diet;
- in the "concern" group, most consumers appeared to be regular buyers of organic products and they paid special attention to quality and taste of food: in their mind, organic food is more natural and tasty, but also more expensive than standard food.
- in the "pleasure" group, special attention was paid to the brand, the quality-price ratio as well as to the pleasure of eating good food. Some participants were occasional buyers of organic food and the idea that food available in Paris is not as good as food available on the countryside was widely shared.
- in the "indifference" group, food choice was mainly driven by the price, especially on basic items (pasta, milk, butter …). Quality was important for meat and poultry products.

[1] In Paris, there are supermarkets and small shops but no hypermarkets.

QUOTES

"I pay attention to the diet of my children: nowadays, a lot of children are obese, it is the Mc Donald's generation." ("care group")
"One must have a balanced diet and find pleasure in eating at the same time." ("care" group)
"Organic vegetables taste better, the tomatoes are firm." ("concern" group)
"I have lived on the countryside: here, food is tasteless." ("pleasure" group)
"I watch the prices of products. Some low price products are as good as expensive ones." ("indifference" group)

At that stage, some items - such as risk and safety, genetic technologies, information, packaging and convenience as well as ethical considerations - did not spontaneously emerge from the discussions.
In all groups, participants agreed on the fact that **consumers have a very large choice** when it comes to food products and that this choice has been increasing. The wide range of possible choices is perceived more or less positively:

- a majority of participants appreciate to be able to buy different products and try new foods, even if they do not use this possibility every time they go shopping: choice is perceived in a positive way, it is associated with some sort of pleasure and convenience. Consumers stress the fact that choice is particularly wide for some categories of "modern" processed products, such as sauces, ice creams or frozen foods.
- on the other hand, choice is also perceived as excessive and confusing for the consumers.

In this context, **consumers tend to rely more and more on their own expertise**, based on their experience and tastes: they tend to make their own selection among this wide range of products and do not hesitate to select certain products from specific shops, in order to maximise both their satisfaction and the quality-price ratio.

QUOTES

"There is too much choice, for example for yoghurts: it would take years to try them all !" ("care" group)
"It is nice to be able to taste various products." ("care" group)
"I test many products: when they suit me, I keep on buying them." ("concern" group)
"In some food departments, there is too much choice, it takes too much time to choose." ("pleasure" group)
"Discount shops try to offer the same choice as regular shops: the products have quite the same packaging." ("indifference" group)

2.3. Information

When choosing a food product, consumers take into account information about it: apart from its price and brand, they look at the **composition, the best-before date and the origin of the product**.
Their degree of vigilance varies according to the type of product: they tend to seek more information for new or unknown products or brands and for certain products (meat).
The attitude towards information appeared to be **quite different among the four groups, the "care" and "concern" group showing a higher level of vigilance**:

- the participants of the "care" group paid special interest to **nutritional information** about the food products: their attention to health issues and their perception of the close links between food and health might explain this attitude. They appeared **quite critical** of the way consumers

are informed about the food they consume: they consider that it is very difficult to understand the labelling, to determine "what is natural and what is chemical" and to know exactly what is in the product. Processed food such as tomato sauce, canned soup or prepared meals were cited as "bad" examples.
- the "concern" shared similar preoccupations. They also pointed out the fact that nowadays, "**it is impossible to be 100% confident** in the information we are given".
- the "indifference" group showed less interest for information issues in their food choices: above all, they rely on "visual" aspects of the products, such as **packaging and presentation**, perceived as more or less "attractive". They seldom read the labelling, even though some participants do think that it is an important item.

QUOTES

"I look at the composition: the content of sugar, salt or fat." ("care" group)
"They put too many things in the products, we do not understand, there is no explanation, everything is coded." ("care" group)
"In most tomato sauces, it is incredible, there is no tomato inside." ("care" group)
"I look at the (quality) label, the composition, the origin, the way the cattle was bred." ("concern" group)
"I am very suspicious about the information given after the Chernobyl accident: they tried to hide some information from us". ("concern" group)
"I like to know where the product comes from". ("pleasure" group)
"I don't ask myself too many questions: I look, I touch. If I like it, I take it." ("pleasure" group)
"I look at the packaging, the colour, the aspect of the product." ("indifference" group)
"The labelling is useless. We are already fed up with advertisements." ("indifference" group)

3. Trust and Safety

3.1. Perception of food production

Most participants only have a **very vague idea** of the passageways through which a food product arrives on their table. Even for those who have visited a food factory (cheese dairy, slaughterhouse, chocolate factory…), the food chain evokes **very negative images and judgements**.
Similar results were obtained in the four groups:
- processed, industrialised food products are defined as "spoiled", "altered": they are opposed to home made, natural products (vegetables "from the garden"),
- these products convey very strong and scary images of the food industry (slaughterhouses and battery farming),
- as a matter of fact, consumers know very little about the food processing techniques: the food industry is perceived as a "black box".

QUOTES
"I have visited a cheese dairy: it was nice and appetising" ("care" group)
"When you see the product in the supermarket, you can hardly imagine how it has been processed." ("care" group)
"In Normandy, the products (cheese, cream …) do not taste the same: it seems that the trip to Paris takes something away from them." ("care" group)
"Since I visited a slaughterhouse, I stopped eating meat." ("concern" group)
"The chicken are fed with their own faeces." ("concern" group + "indifference" group)
"I do not buy the tomatoes produced in Bretagne: the water is polluted with fertilisers." ("concern" group)
"Take the canned sauerkraut, it is scary: I wonder where the meat they put in it comes from." ("pleasure" group)
"If you keep on thinking about it, you don't want to eat anymore." ("pleasure" group + "indifference" group)

In that context, a majority of the consumers we met, especially those who belong to the "indifference" group, would rather not learn too much about the way food products are produced: "**the more you know about it, the less you want to eat**" is a widely shared idea. In a way, it seems that despite the choice they are offered, these consumers have the feeling of being held "hostage": they have no other choice than that of buying and consuming these products and of "trusting" the food industry.
On the other hand, a chunk of the population, widely represented in the "concern" group, shows a much more voluntarist attitude: these consumers try to orient their food choices, by buying fresh products on the market as well as organic food and by avoiding several industrial products. They think that recent crisis as well as the scandals revealed by the media have shown that **consumers should not trust the food industry** as they used to in the past. These consumers want to know how the food they eat is produced and are ready to pay a bit more for "good food". However, they do not think that organic farming is above any suspicion.
In all groups, meat was very often cited at that stage of the discussion: clearly, consumers are **more attentive in their food choices for meat products**, especially since the "mad cow" crisis occurred. Even those who have a budgetary constraint on their food expenses declared that they buy meat from the butcher shop instead of the supermarket and that they preferably choose "branded" meat products (the brand "Charal" was often cited as a reference). The "butcher" appears like a guarantee of quality and safety.

3.2. Perception of food safety

On the whole, safety does not appear as a very sensitive issue for consumers – or at least not as sensitive as it has been in recent years. Of course, when asked if they pay attention to food safety, they express their preoccupation and cite several risk factors, but overall **they do not appear to be very worried about it**. In France, the effects of the last BSE crisis, which occurred in October 2000, seem to have faded away.
However, among the four groups, the **participants of the "care" and "concern" groups** expressed more detailed and structured views on food safety, somehow showing a **higher degree of preoccupation**. They evoked several risk factors among which those generated by the transportation of food products and the disruption in the cold chain and those linked to fraud among producers and retailers. Meat and fish are frequently associated with such risks. Risk of fraud is also cited for organic

products. On the other hand, well-informed consumers also pointed the fact that regulations and controls exist that ensure food safety and that it is impossible to "sterilise" everything we eat.

QUOTES

"Nowadays, I don't eat tuna fish anymore, it is contaminated with mercury." ("care" group)
"They put something on meat and fish to make it look more fresh." ("care" group)
"It is not possible to get a product which is 100% safe." ("care" group)
"I have worked in a supermarket, everything is very well controlled." ("care" group)
"We don't know, we buy according to what we know. There are some risks that we can reduce individually and others that we cannot control." ("concern" group)
"There is also diabetes and obesity." ("concern" group)
"Taste is the most important thing." ("pleasure" group)
"No: during the BSE crisis, I kept on eating beef, meat was less expensive." ("indifference" group)
"During the BSE crisis, I stopped cooking meat for my children. For me, I don't care." ("indifference" group)

In the "indifference" and the "pleasure" groups, the question on safety issues induced answers on a more general scale and direct references to the "mad cow" crisis. In particular, the participants of the "indifference" group did not seem to be very sensitive to safety issues.
Consumers also expressed their **lack of knowledge** in that field as well as the feeling, already stressed previously, that they have no other choice than to trust the food chain: in case of doubt, they have **no individual way of making sure that the food they consume is safe** and that is why they tend to rely on their own perception of the product, based on its aspect and its taste.

3.3. Responsibility for food safety

When asked whom should be in charge of food safety issues, participants among the four groups expressed very similar views:

- in the first place, the responsibility of ensuring food safety belongs to the **State, the government, the Health Ministry:** they are responsible for enforcing food safety laws and protect the citizens. However, no clear distinction was made between who should be in charge of / responsible for safety issues and who should carry out controls. Most consumers believe that an independent body should be in charge of food safety.
- a majority of consumers acknowledge that **sanitary controls** are led at various levels of the food chain (producers, retailers, markets, restaurants, imports…) but most of them are convinced that **these controls are insufficient**, in terms of number and means (personnel, financial).
- the fact that the food chain generates, in terms of safety, a **chain of shared responsibilities** has also been evoked by several participants, whatever the group they belonged to. Of course, farmers and producers (food industry), as well as retailers and carriers, are identified as the major links in the food chain, each of them generating possible failures or frauds. Some participants also underlined the fact that consumers should assume their share of responsibility, when their own behaviour is a risk factor (disruption of cold chain, lack of food hygiene…).

QUOTES

"The State, the Health Ministry." ("care" group)
"Once, I had a problem in a restaurant. I wrote to the DGCCRF and they controlled it." ("care" group)*
"The State protects the citizens." ("care" group)
"The State, the producers, the public authorities … there are laws to protect consumers." ("concern" group)
"The rules are never respected, we cannot be 100% confident." ("concern" group)
"The State and the government should ensure that law is respected, but citizens should also say that they want to eat good, safe food." ("concern" group)
"Producers ? it's business, one cannot trust them." ("pleasure" group)
"We have been deceived several times, it's like Chernobyl: who should we trust now ?" ("pleasure" group)
"There should be an independent and honest organisation, but it's never the case." ("pleasure" group)
"Even a public agency would try to hush up any affair, because there is big business behind." ("indifference" group)
*"60 millions de Consommateurs** ? nothing stops them, they fear nobody." ("indifference" group)*
** Fraud squad; ** consumer organisation*

Finally, participants are both **sceptical and fatalistic** about food safety issues: they consider that even the State and public authorities are not trustworthy and that there will always be players breaking the law in order to protect their vested interests or maximise their profit. This distrust, based on the idea that "the system is perverted, spoiled", is frequently illustrated by reference to the scandal that occurred in France in the field of blood transfusion ("scandale du sang contaminé"). The reference to the "mad cow" crisis is also very frequent: consumers point out the fact that, at a certain stage, actors of the food chain knew the cattle was fed on bone meal and did not ignore the possible impact on human health.

3.4. Situation of France towards food safety

There was consensus across all four groups on two views:
- on the one hand, there has been **significant improvements in food safety**: health and safety standards have increased, as well as sanitary controls, the alert system enables the consumer to be informed in case a product is found unsafe and, globally, producers are more aware that safety is a major issue,
- on the second hand, it is **impossible to avoid all risks**: all participants acknowledged that it is possible that an unsafe food arrives on their table, and that, more generally, sanitary crisis occur in France.

Consumers' views on the French situation regarding food safety is overall quite positive: in their opinion, the recent crisis and particularly the BSE episodes, have changed the attitude towards risks, by **making people more aware and by increasing the number of controls**. Participants stressed the fact that consumers' associations had gained power and influence, that people are more inclined to complain now than previously if food is not at the required standard and that food producers are not out of reach anymore.
The **comparison with other countries** was frequent in the "concern" group in which several participants were frequent travellers: the situation in France is opposed on one side to the situation of

the USA where food is “sterilised” and on the other side, to under developed countries (Africa, China, Egypt…). The fact that several participants had not been sick when travelling in such “southern” countries conducted the group to put things into perspective: “in the past, food hygiene was more limited but people were not sicker !”
The comparison with other European countries (Denmark, Germany, Spain …) led to the conclusion that the situation in France was under control, as if consumers tried to reassure themselves.

QUOTES

“Listeria still comes back, even if the hygiene rules are stricter.” (“care” group)
“The biggest scandals have already occurred. Now, there are more controls.” (“care” group)
“Consumer’s attitudes have evolved. We are more aware now”. (“care” group)
“Food safety has increased. Now, there are freshness chips on the products.” (“concern” group)
“Today, people complain when something goes wrong.” (“concern” group)
“Major problems will not occur anymore.” (“pleasure” group)
“We are informed on television when there is problem with salmonella, it’s a good thing.” (“pleasure” group)
“In France, we are well protected compared to underdeveloped countries.” (“indifference” group)
“It is safer, but ten years ago, there were less imported food products.” (“indifference” group)
“In the past, we were not aware of problems, now it’s all given a lot of media coverage.” (indifference” group)

3.5. Food scares and GMO

When asked what food scares have worried them most, participants of the four groups tended to **list all food scares** they were aware of rather than indicate the hierarchy of their fears. In many cases, consumers made direct reference to a category of product (meat, eggs, chicken, pork, wine, oil…) rather than to a type of risk. Answers were very similar among all groups, the following scares being acknowledged by the majority of participants: **BSE** (with frequent reference to the current “Buffalo Grill affair”), **salmonella, listeria** (“rillettes”, cheese…), **dioxin-contaminated chicken, mouth-and-foot disease and hormone-fed veal**. To a lesser extent, mercury in fish, contaminated / unsafe drinks (Coca-Cola, Perrier), adulterated wine or olive oil were also cited among food crisis.
In all groups, the **lack of morality of economic players** was unanimously denounced: producers are seen as greedy for gain, seeking to maximise their profit, whatever the consequences for the consumer. Participants denounce the fact that the whole society is **only driven by economic or financial motives**, far from “humane” considerations. The recent European regulations on chocolate was cited several times as an example of “bureaucratic” decision, in which economic considerations have prevailed over quality standards.
Even if participants are quick to criticise our “modern society”, they do recognise that, as citizens and consumers, they are partly responsible for the situation, described as a **vicious circle**: consumers keep asking for more choice and lower prices whereas producers keep seeking profit.

QUOTES

"I was shocked by the way the mouth-and-foot disease was eradicated: even though it can be treated they killed all the animals, for economic reasons only. In a way, we have broken the deal we have with animals." ("concern" group)

"We keep driving at high speed on the highway and afterwards we don't want to eat something … it's a question of risk acceptance." ("pleasure" group)

"It's a vicious circle: consumers want low price products and producers want to earn more and more money." ("indifference" group)

"The mad cow ? they used bone meal because it's cheaper, they want to produce more." ("indifference" group)

"GMO scare me. It's not natural, they alter the cell. We will get less resistant." ("Care" group)

"I don't know, I feel ignorant. I will wait and see what comes out of it." ("care" group)

"The long term effects are unknown, the risk is not measured." ("concern" group)

"We already eat exogenous DNA, that doesn't worry me. What scares me, it's the environmental effects. The safety-first principle has not been respected." ("concern" group)

"It's a big lie, nobody needs GMO, it's not meant to feed the poor people. It's only there for money." ("concern" group)

"The scientists don't agree with each other. What they say is conflicting." ("pleasure" group)

Regarding the issue **genetically modified foods**, there was a wide consensus amongst participants who, in majority, rejected such techniques and products:

- GMO are seen as **unnatural and dangerous**, primarily because they annihilate the boundaries between species,
- consumers consider that there is **not enough information** available: they have difficulties to understand the terms of the debate, which is very controversy among the scientific community,
- they have the feeling that genetically modified foods are already on the market and that **consumers are not well enough protected** (the labelling rule of 1% has been cited),
- they are worried about the **long terms effects** of GMOs on living organisms, biodiversity and environment, and consider these risks have not been evaluated: once again, they think that the safety-first principle has not been respected and that we are "playing God" by manipulating the genes,
- the arguments used by the pros ("GMO will feed the planet") are seen by a majority of participants as dishonest and hiding true and disputable **economic motives**,
- last but not least, **no direct benefit of genetically modified foods for consumers** was cited by the participants.

A small minority of participants, mostly men, acknowledged some **possible benefits of genetically modified food**, at a collective scale: biotechnology represents the current agricultural revolution, GMO will decrease the use of chemicals and pesticides, genetically modified foods represent a major chance for third world countries, etc.

Finally, it was clear that all groups shared a "fear of the unknown" and that consumers try to adopt a **precautionary attitude**: they do not want to eat genetically modified food as long as their harmlessness and their direct benefits for consumers will not have been demonstrated and proved.

4. Communication

4.1. Information and trust

In the four groups, there was quite a consensus on the information issue, even though the views that were expressed were far from being univocal. The major result that stemmed from the discussions is that **any kind of information on food safety / risks is almost automatically suspected** of being either false, incorrect or manipulated.

Most **information sources are seen as unreliable and non-independent** from one another:

- producers and retailers are suspected to keep things secret in order to maintain their sales and profit,
- government is seen as protecting the vested interests of the food industry, which represents a powerful lobby and job provider,
- scientists are suspected of conducting research funded by the private sector.

Consumer organisations (60 Millions de Consommateurs and Que Choisir) appear like the most reliable source of information, but the limits of their means of investigation and action have also been stressed. However, several participants considered that these organisations had gained power in the past years and that their influence should keep on growing in the future.

In the four groups, the views expressed on the **role of media** and above all of television were very ambivalent:

- on one side, consumers think that the media have truly **contributed to fuelling the public debate** on food safety and revealing the illegal practices of certain actors (producers, retailers…),
- on the other side, the **media are suspected of collusion** with the powerful food industry: some participants consider that journalists are not fully free to express themselves, because the media are financially dependent from the major industrial players.

Participants also underlined the fact that media often lookout for sensational stories and that, in particular during the BSE crisis, the coverage of food risks issues is often excessive. But at the same time they acknowledge that television programmes have contributed to making consumers more aware of certain issues. Popular TV shows such as “Capital” or “Zone Interdite” have often be cited as examples of programmes which contribute to “lift the veil”.

QUOTES

“There is not enough information. I read the labelling but I don’t understand everything.” (“care” group)
“They manage to hide information from us. If we want to find it, we have to look for it. It shouldn’t be that way.” (“care” group)
“It’s time consuming. Everyone doesn’t have access to internet.” (“care” group)
“It’s not easy to come up with your own opinion.” (“care” group)
“If there’s no impact on health, why should we talk about it”. (“indifference” group)
“People with kids are more aware, they want to protect their kids’ health.” (“indifference” group)
“Organic products are maybe not organic. We don’t know.” (“indifference” group)
“They [producers] don’t want to talk about it, it would decrease their sales.” (“indifference” group)
“They have lied to us, now we are reluctant to believe them” (“pleasure” group)
“They should make TV programs in which everything would be explained.” (“pleasure” group)
“Media, journalists are not free, they cannot tell the whole truth, because they are funded by the big food companies.” (“concern” group)
“It’s sometimes difficult to make the difference between an advertisement and an informational report.” (“concern” group)
“I don’t believe everything the scientists say.” (“concern” group)
“I trust Que Choisir and 60 millions de Consommateurs.” (“concern” group)

4.2. Role of consumers

The views diverged, within and across the four groups, on the capacity of consumers to express their “power” by boycotting:

- some participants thought that nowadays **consumers had more power** in their hands and that boycotting was the best way for them to express this collective power,
- others were much **more sceptical**, considering that consumers had no real power and could always be manipulated. Some participants stressed the negative impact of boycott on employment or the fact that boycott was very difficult to implement, given the high number of products and brands which are sold by huge companies such as Nestlé or Danone.

Overall, a majority of consumers, represented in the “indifference” and “pleasure” groups, are **not willing to spend time looking for information** on food safety. Most consumers consider they should be provided with information on this issue, but that they should not have to spend time and energy to find it by themselves. Internet is of course identified as a possible source of information, but, put aside the fact that all consumers do not have access to the web, it is considered as time consuming.
As a matter of fact, consumers have real difficulties to express their demands and expectations concerning information in a structured way. Their words are full of **paradox**: they want “easy to read and understand” information, they do not want to spend time and energy on this issue, they expect reliable information but they distrust most sources of information, they have a very ambivalent judgement on the role of the media…
In the end, and this was very clear in the groups, consumers have the **feeling of being lost** and held “**hostage of the system**” at the same time. Of course, they consider food and food safety as important issues, directly connected with health issues (at least for those who feel concerned with their health and that of their family…), but their distrust in the “whole system” seems to be deeply an-

chored. This probably explains why consumers' attitudes appear like a "cocktail" of fatalism, revolt and disillusion.

5. Main findings

In all groups, **quality, price and taste** are the three main criteria for the choice of food products. Participants agreed on the fact that consumers have a **very large choice** and that this choice has been increasing. The wide range of possible choices is perceived either positively - by consumers who are attracted by new products - or negatively - when it is perceived as excessive and confusing.
Overall, consumers tend to rely more and more on their own "**expertise**", based on their experience and tastes: they tend to make their own selection among this wide range of products in order to **maximise their satisfaction** and the quality-price ratio. When choosing a food product, consumers take into account information about it: apart from its price and brand, they look at the composition, the best-before date and the origin of the product. The attitude towards information appeared to be quite different among the four groups, the "care" and "concern" group showing a higher level of vigilance.
In all groups, the food chain evoked very negative images and judgements, the food industry being perceived as a "**black box**". Processed, industrialised food products are defined as "spoiled", "altered": they are opposed to home made or natural products and they convey very strong and scary images of the food industry (slaughterhouses and battery farming).
In that context, some consumers, especially those who belong to the "indifference" group, would rather not learn too much about the way food products are produced: "the more you know about it, the less you want to eat" is a widely shared idea. In a way, these consumers have the feeling that they have **no other choice** than that of buying and consuming these products and of "trusting" the food industry.
On the other hand, a chunk of the population, widely represented in the "concern" group, shows a much **more voluntarist attitude**. They think that recent crisis as well as the scandals revealed by the media have shown that consumers should not trust the food industry as they used to in the past and that they should be more vigilant and demanding.
On the whole, safety does not appear as a very sensitive issue for consumers - or at least not as sensitive as it has been in recent years. Of course, when asked if they pay attention to food safety, they express their preoccupation and cite several risk factors, but overall they **do not appear to be very worried** about it and they tend to adopt a "fatalistic" attitude. Among the four groups, the participants of the "care" and "concern" groups expressed more detailed and structured views on food safety, somehow showing a higher degree of preoccupation. In the "indifference" and "pleasure" groups, the question on safety issues induced answers on a more general scale and direct references to the "mad cow" crisis.
In the first place, the responsibility of ensuring food safety belongs to the **State, the government, the Health Ministry**. Most consumers believe that an independent body should be in charge of food safety. A majority of consumers acknowledge that sanitary controls are led at various levels of the food chain but most of them are convinced that these controls are insufficient. Farmers and producers, as well as retailers and carriers, are identified as the major links in the food chain, each of them generating possible failures or frauds. But consumers should also assume their share of responsibility.
Participants are both **sceptical and fatalistic** about food safety issues: they consider that even the State and public authorities are not trustworthy and that there will always be players breaking the law in order to protect their vested interests or maximise their profit. On the other hand, they acknowledge that there has been significant improvements in food safety and that it is impossible to avoid all risks.

When asked what food scares have worried them most, participants of the four groups essentially cited BSE, salmonella, listeria, dioxin-contaminated chicken, mouth-and-foot disease and hormone-fed veal. In all groups, the lack of morality of economic players was unanimously denounced: producers are seen as greedy for gain, seeking to maximise their profit, whatever the consequences for the consumer.
Regarding the issue genetically modified foods, there was a wide consensus amongst participants who, in majority, rejected such techniques and products: **GMO are seen as unnatural and dangerous**, the available information is confusing and consumers feel they are not well enough protected. **Long terms effects** of GMOs are of major concern to well-informed consumers. In such a context, consumers try to adopt a precautionary attitude.
In the four groups, there was quite a consensus on the **information issue**, even though the expressed views were far from being univocal. The major result that stemmed from the discussions is that any kind of information on food safety / risks is almost **automatically suspected** of being either false, incorrect or manipulated. Consumer organisations appear like the most reliable source of information. In the four groups, the views expressed on the role of media and above all of television were very ambivalent, both positive and negative.
The views diverged, within and across the four groups, on the capacity of consumers to express their "power" by boycotting, some participants considering that consumers had gained power while others were much more sceptical.
Most consumers considered they **should be provided with information** on food safety, but that they should not have to spend time and energy to find it by themselves. Internet is of course identified as a possible source of information, but it is considered as time consuming. As a matter of fact, consumers have real difficulties to express their demands and expectations concerning information in a structured way and their words are **full of paradox**.
In the end, and this was very clear in the groups, consumers have the mixed feeling of **being lost and held "hostage of the system"** at the same time. Of course, they consider food and food safety as important issues, but their **distrust** in the "whole system" seems to be deeply anchored. This probably explains why consumers' attitudes appear like a "cocktail" of fatalism, revolt and disillusion.

6. Researcher's evaluation

In France, food scares are anchored in a **general context of anxiety**: consumers, already worried about unemployment, urban violence, road safety, natural hazards …, seem to have integrated food safety into their preoccupations. The Chernobyl accident as well as the "contaminated blood" scandal which both occurred in the mid-80's have contributed to trigger public scares on sanitary issues and to "discredit" public policies in that field. Food scares came to their climax during the two major BSE crisis in 1996 and 2000.
Moreover, **nutrition and eating patterns** have become, in the late period, a subject of deep **public concern and debate** among the media and the public authorities: the increase of obesity, the growing number of food allergies as well as the impacts of nutrition on public health have been strongly highlighted, drawing consumers' attention to the quality of the food they purchase. On the other hand, in their food consumption habits, French consumers are deeply attached to values such as taste, pleasure and conviviality: in their daily choices, they do not appear to be very worried about food safety. For example, consumption of beef is almost at the same level as it was before the last BSE episode.
However, today's "discomfort" of consumers in front of food safety issues is real and can be explained by several reasons:

- they acknowledge that there has been **significant improvements** in food safety but even if one can hope that the sanitary system will now prevent any major crisis to occur, recent crisis make them remember that **nobody is immune** and that such problems can always occur,
- at their individual level, consumers feel powerless to evaluate the safety of a food product and therefore **they feel at the mercy of producers and retailers**: of course, they consider that any food product put on the market should be 100% safe, but they denounce the lack of morality of economic players,
- consumers, standing at the end of the food chain, tend to minimise their **share of responsibility** and maximise that of the actors of the food chain (farmers, producers, carriers, retailers).
- as a consequence of its industrialisation, the food chain is perceived as a **"black box"** while processed products convey negative images: participants are quick to criticise our "modern society", but they acknowledge its benefits in terms of choice and prices of food products and partly feel responsible for the present situation.

The **attitude of consumers towards information** on food safety is quite **ambivalent**:

- of course, as often when asked if they are satisfied with the available information, most consumers **demand more information** on risks and food safety. This demand is directly connected to the loss of points of reference: in order to be reassured and to control their food choices, consumers would like to know more about the way food products are processed.
- on the other hand, they also show some kind of **reluctance**: the idea that "the more you know about the way food is produced, the less you want to eat" is widely shared and a majority of consumers do not want to spend time looking for information on food safety or even reading the labelling.

Obviously, consumers do not feel comfortable with that type of information, which they think they cannot understand, because it is too technical or too complicated. The frequent reference to the fact that "before, these things were unknown", somehow means that consumers seem to have suddenly discovered food risks issues (with the outbreak of sanitary crisis), but that they were not prepared to deal with such an issue: things had not been clearly explained before and consumers felt betrayed.

Concerning **trust**, any kind of information on food safety / risks is almost automatically suspected of being either false, incorrect or manipulated and most information sources are seen as unreliable and non-independent: as a result, the feeling that no-one can be trusted seems to be deeply anchored. Consumers are reluctant to trust either the food industry or the government. They are more inclined to trust consumer associations or an independent body, but they consider that food safety should be guaranteed by public authorities.

Once again, consumers seem to be quite "lost" and they show an overall distrust towards public authorities: they seem to know little about the food safety system (which is obviously quite complicated given the number of actors involved …) and, in particular, they seem to ignore the existence of the French Food Safety Agency. The visibility of the sanitary controls is also quite limited.

At that stage, it appears clearly that a major effort has to be done in order to clearly explain food safety issues to consumers and help them take over these issues without yielding to fatalism, distrust or fear.