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Beef healthiness and nutritional enhancement in beef as perceived by European consumers

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Abstract

Introduction: A trend towards a higher awareness of health with respect to food intake has been noticed during the last years. This makes the concept of health in relation to beef production and consumption a highly relevant research topic.

Objective: To investigate beef healthiness and nutritional enhancement in beef as perceived by European consumers. The research is under the scope of ProSafeBeef project - Pillar 5 Consumer Issues: Safety and New Products. Pillar 5 will focus on assessing consumer expectations with respect to beef safety, healthiness and on consumer acceptance of new technologies and novel beef products and processes.

Method: Eight focus groups, each with between 7 and 9 participants were conducted in the capital cities of Germany, Spain, France and the United Kingdom in May 2008. In total 65 individuals aged between 19 and 60 years took part in the discussions. The focus group discussions were based on a common topic guide, translated into each language. The guide consisted of several sections, including one designed to elicit information on their opinions about beef healthiness and nutritional enhancement of beef.

Results: Consumers associated health with wellbeing, an absence of disease and a good quality of life. Healthy beef was associated with a certain bias towards a “romantic view”, a concept of the traditional encompassing grass-fed beef, raised outdoors with natural food. A healthy cut of meat was expected to be

natural and without additives and hormones that could affect human health. Meat is considered a component of a healthy diet from participants in all countries. It is also considered a good source of protein and iron. Although consumers believed that beef should not be consumed on a daily basis, they recognised its nutritional value and its contribution to a healthy diet. Participants in the German and British groups were more concerned than others about the amount of beef that one should eat. Overall, consumers evaluated beef healthiness by a combination of intrinsic (e.g. flavour, colour and general appearance) and extrinsic (e.g. price, expiry date, labels or certifications, and brands) attributes or cues. Most consumers considered lean and “natural” beef to be the healthiest type: the more processed beef is, the less healthy it is believed to be. In the eyes of European consumers, healthiness also depends on how animals were fed and kept, how the meat was processed, and whether or not additives were present in the final product. Consensus existed associating unhealthy meat with BSE, poor general hygiene, a low price and excessive processing (marinating, canning, use of additives). The concept of restructuring and nutritionally enhancing beef with enzymes after removal of excess fat and connective tissues was rejected by the most of the focus group participants. For most respondents, the government (both national and European) should be responsible for beef healthiness. The role of industry is to improve beef healthiness, in particular through its research branches. At the farm level, veterinarians and farmers were felt to be responsible for the healthiness of beef, while each actor at every step in the food chain was perceived to have a share of responsibility for monitoring and guaranteeing beef healthiness.

Conclusion: This study provides some important findings about beef healthiness and nutritional enhancement in beef based on a research conducted with European consumers. Beef healthiness is assessed by a combination of intrinsic (e.g. flavour, colour and general appearance) and extrinsic (e.g. price, expiry date, labels or certifications, and brands) attributes or cues. Beef is considered healthy food, as long as “naturalness” is assured. Nutritional enhancement was not perceived as a positive technology by European consumers, mainly due to lack of knowledge and misunderstandings, suggesting that food industry could better communicate the benefits of such technology to consumers.