

## **The food quality labels: awareness and willingness to pay in the context of Italy**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aims at analysing a) the spontaneous and aided consumers' awareness of food quality labels, b) whether significant differences do exist in the trustworthiness and credibility that consumers express toward food quality labels based on their socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, occupation, and income), c) whether the willingness to pay of consumers for buying labelled products do change based on their socio-demographics. Findings reveal that respondents show little spontaneous and aided awareness of food quality labels. Further, results show that significant differences do exist based on socio-demographic characteristics in the way consumers assess the credibility of food quality labels and are willing to pay a premium price for them. Implications for hotel managers are discussed and suggestions for further research are provided.

**Key Words:** food quality labels, quality labels' awareness, consumers' willingness to pay, socio-demographic characteristics.

### **Introduction and Objectives**

Quality of food products has often been discussed recently. Destination marketers and policy makers are also recognizing the importance of local and typical food products as a leverage to promote the authenticity of their region and related economy (Presenza and Del Chiappa, 2013). Many food products exhibit special characteristics linked to their geographical area, traditional composition or traditional production method, they fulfil above standard quality criteria, or they offer organic origin, healthy benefit, etc. These characteristics have an impact on consumers' food perception and purchase decision making, and their importance has increased as a result of the crises (e.g. BSE) that have shaken the European food market over the past few years, leading to a decline in consumer confidence in the safety and quality of food products (Jahn et al. 2005). The number of consumers interested in health and quality of food products has grown significantly. Consumers have become more exacting, more informed and more critical in their food choices now than they were in recent years. Their requirements for the quality of products are continuously growing, owing to the rising

concerns related to their health. Offering food and agricultural products with identifiable specific characteristics as well as providing more information and the guarantee of food safety and quality have become necessary in order to satisfy consumers. As a consequence, many European Union countries developed consumer protection strategies involving quality labels utilization. Quality labels are a central component of modern consumer policy. They are an important tool for companies willing to communicate a significant higher quality of their food products, in order to gain a competitive advantage in their market.

The paper deals with quality labels utilization in the Italian food products market. Specifically, it aims at investigating the spontaneous and aided consumers' awareness of food quality labels, whether significant differences do exist in the credibility that consumers express toward food quality labels based on their socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, occupation, and income), and whether the willingness to pay of consumers for buying labeled products do change based on their socio-demographics.

## **Literature Review**

Food quality is broader concept than food safety. While food safety as the most important component of food quality means hazard-free product, food quality can be defined as a sum of traits and criteria which characterize food as regards its nutritional value, sensory value, convenience as well as safety for a consumer's health (Sikora and Strada 2003). It is useful in this context to consider how consumers view food quality and safety. According to results of the research study (Van Rijswijk and Frewer 2008) conducted in four European countries (Germany, France, Italy and Spain), there is considerable overlap among responses when consumers were asked to define these terms. However, quality was more frequently defined in terms of "taste", "good product", "natural/organic" and "freshness", whereas safety was primarily defined in terms of "absence of risk" or "harmfulness" and being associated with "health". The differences in answers between the respondents from the different countries included in the study were recognized. Since the paper focuses on the Italian market, only attitudes of Italian participants are mentioned. Italian respondents indicated that a "good product" and "taste" are important definitions of quality. With respect to safety, they were most concerned about "risk" and "healthiness". For most consumers quality and safety are clearly related, however Italian consumers felt that safety was the most important. Consumers indicated that they prefer to use quality indicators in their food choice decisions because they feel they have no way of assessing the safety level of a product, or, alternatively, because they have confidence that the safety of their food is guaranteed.

It is evident that it is necessary to reduce consumer uncertainty about food safety and quality and provide them relevant information in an understandable form (van Rijswijk and Frewer 2008). Among the broad range of applicable tools, special attention have received quality labels (Grunert 2005). Quality label is a term for a graphic symbol that can be put on a product or its packaging indicating that the product or the process to make the product complies with given standards and that this compliance has been certified (Velčovská and Marhounová 2005, United Nations 2007). Quality labels guarantee compliance not only with current standards, but also with additional quality criteria determined in a corresponding certification system (The European Committee for the Valve Industry 2007).

Quality labels are a fuzzy category that covers many different things (Grunert 2005). They can be obligatory and voluntary, general and specific, with regional, national, international or global coverage, awarded by national certification bodies, government institutions, independent organizations (e.g. association of organic farmers), or by private companies. Obligatory quality labels are compulsory for all products in a given product category; they inform that the product meets quality standards necessary for its introduction into the market. Voluntary labels bring competitive advantage for a product and can be placed on products that

have above standard quality. It depends on the producers whether they let their products certify with voluntary quality label. General quality labels address all product quality characteristics, while specific labels are focused only on particular quality characteristics, they can cover quality, safety, organic origin, geographical origin or other specific criteria (Grunert 2005, Velčovská and Marhounová 2005, Velčovská 2012).

As compared to many other food and consumer policy tools, labelling initiatives are quite specific because of their potential direct impact on consumer decision-making (Verbeke and Ward 2006). National quality labels or labels indicating geographical origin and traditional production methods can be important in purchase decision-making. Consumers might prefer products from certain region or country since they are believed to be simply better (i.e. more tasty, healthier). Another reason could be consumer ethnocentrism; consumers might prefer products from their own region or country due to their loyalty to it or because of their preference to support the local economy (Verbeke et al. 2012). Broadly, quality labels inform consumers about specific product characteristics, facilitate identification of a product with certified quality, and promote it (Velčovská and Marhounová 2005). They eliminate the misleading of consumers by non-genuine products, which may be of inferior quality (O'Connor and Company 2005). Quality labels may generate positive associations to product, they can assist consumers inferring product quality and forming quality expectations, which in turn influence a whole range of attitudes and behaviours related to food purchasing. Consumers can make more informed choices about the food they buy. Labels may also increase consumer welfare through providing better consumer protection, and enabling choice to be better in line with preference. Finally, owing to their potential role with respect to product identification, labels can facilitate repeat purchases when satisfaction has occurred (Verbeke and Roosen 2009, Verbeke and Ward 2006, Krissoff et al. 2004, Grunert 2005). If the product holds a recognized label, it may be considered by consumer as a product with added value, as a product having more quality or distinct character (Verbeke et al. 2012). However, the basic assumption for effective functioning of labels to the consumers is their credibility, consumers must trust them. Without the trust, labels cannot influence consumer choices (Krissoff et al. 2004). Furthermore, labels help producers obtain a premium price for their authentic products (O'Connor and Company 2005).

Products with differentiated qualities need to communicate these qualities to consumers, and consumers need to make inferences that will be predictive of the quality experienced later (Grunert 2005).

## **Methodology**

The present study was carried out in order to investigate the aided and spontaneous awareness and consumers' willingness to pay for 10 different food quality labels. Specifically we used four national labels, four European and two global labels.

As regard to the national quality labels we considered as follow:

1. Friend of the Sea: certification of seafood from sustainable fisheries and aquaculture which follows the FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. In particular, only products from stocks which are not exploited can be certified (Art. 30 FAO Guidelines);
2. Garanzia AIAB: released by the Italian Association for Biological Agriculture, this label guarantees that the food is produced according to international bio standards of production;
3. IGT (Typical Geographic Indication): used merely in the wine sector, it certifies that a specific labeled wine comes from a native grape variety from a specific and wide Italian region of origin;

4. DOCG (Guaranteed and Controlled Denomination of Origin): used in Italy in order to indicate the origin of native vineyards and wines from limited and specific geographical areas of Italy. Its protocol is definitely more strict than the one adopted for IGT labeled products.

As regard to the European quality labels we considered as follow (European Commission (2013a):

1. TSG (Traditional Speciality Guaranteed): it highlights traditional character of a product, either in the composition or means of production. In order to be "traditional", proven usage on the market during at least 30 years is required;
2. PGI Protected Geographical Indication: it covers agricultural products and foodstuffs closely linked to the geographical area. At least one of the stages of production, processing or preparation takes place in the area;
3. PDO (Protected Designation of Origin): it covers agricultural products and foodstuffs which are produced, processed and prepared in a given geographical area using recognised know-how;
4. EU Organic farming: it guarantees that the product is produced entirely in-line with the EU organic farming Regulation, or in the case of imported goods, an equivalent or identical strict set of rules.

By 30<sup>th</sup> April 2013, 251 Italian agro-food products (excluding the wine sector) obtained PDO, PGI and TSG labels. It is the highest number of certifications at the EU level (21.90 %), confirming the growing importance of quality agro-food products in Italy. The most frequent in Italy is PDO label (61.75 %), followed by PGI (37.45 %), and only 0.80 % labels are TSG. The most certified product category in Italy is Fruits, vegetables and cereals (39.84 % of all products certified for Italy with PDO, PGI and TSG labels), followed by Cheeses (17.93 %) and Oils and fats (17.13 %) (Velčovská and Sadílek 2013, European Commission 2013b).

Finally, as regard to the global quality labels we considered as follow:

1. Fairtrade label: it certifies that products meet the social, economic and environmental standards set by Fairtrade. Buying Fairtrade products helps struggling producers from developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to improve their lives (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International 2013);
2. Demeter (Products from Biodynamic Agriculture): it is the label used for organically produced food products. The holistic Demeter requirements exceed government mandated regulations. The use of synthetic fertilisers, chemical plant protection agents or artificial additives is excluded and very specific measures to strengthen the life processes in soil and foodstuffs are required (Demeter Biodynamic Quality 2013).

For the purpose of the study, in the period September - October 2012 a convenience sample of 522 Italian consumers from different regions in Italy was reached using a snow ball sampling technique. The questionnaire included items obtained from an in depth study of the literature and was divided into four sections. The first part comprised questions aimed at understanding the spontaneous and aided awareness for labelled products. The second part was mainly concerned about analysing credibility that consumers search when they rely on such products, by using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never; 2 = almost never; 3 = sometimes; 4 = almost always; 5 = always). In the third part, interviewees were asked whether they would pay a premium price in order to buy quality labelled products. The last section focused on socio-demographic information from interviewees, namely age, gender, occupation and level of education and income. Data were coded and analysed using SPSS (version 19.0), using a series of descriptive statistics (T-tests and one way ANOVA).

## **Findings**

Table 1 presents the general profile of the sample population. Interviewees were mainly women (60%). Interviewees are aged between 30 and 39 (32.5%), with a significant number of young respondents between 20 and 29 (23.8%). Concerning the level of education, the majority of people interviewed (46.2%) reported having a high school diploma, whereas 35.1% had a university degree, 7.4 % a postgraduate degree. Finally, 2.9 % of them reported holding a mid-low/low level of education (below secondary school). Types of respondents' occupation were: administrative workers (23.7%), other jobs (19.5%), retired (15.1%), students (12.4%), freelance (11.2%), unemployed (7.4%), executive manager (5.9%), and seasonal workers (4.8%).

**Tab. 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (valid %)**

<b>Gender</b>		Seasonal worker	4.8
Male	40	Unemployed	7.4
Female	60	Student	12.4
<b>Age</b>		Other	19.5
20-29 years	23.8	<b>Income level (annual net income)</b>	
30- 39 years	32.5	<10.000	33.6
40- 49 years	15.6	10.000- 14.999	15.7
50- 59 years	11.7	15.000- 19.999	17.3
60- 69 years	16.4	20.000- 24.999	12.0
<b>Level of education</b>		25.000- 29.999	10.6
None	0.2	30.000- 34.999	3.2
Below secondary school	2.9	35.000- 39.999	3.0
Secondary school	8.2	40.000- 44.999	1.6
High school	46.2	45.000- 49.999	1.8
University degree	35.1	50.000- 59.999	0.3
Postgraduate degree (Master. PhD)	7.4	60.000- 69.999	0.9
<b>Occupation</b>		70.000- 79.999	0
Administrative worker	23.7	80.000- 89.999	0
Executive manager	5.9	90.000- 99.999	0
Freelance	11.2	>100.000	0
Retired	15.1		

Table 2 shows the mean values of the importance that consumers assess to 14 attributes, when purchasing food in their daily life. Above all, customers tend to pay more attention to the expiring date of the product (M=4.46; SD=0.908), the benefits connected to the consumption of specific products (M=4.21; SD=0.857), the ingredients of the product (M=4.14; SD=0.940), and previous positive experiences with the product (M=4.03; SD=0.973). The presence of a quality label on the package of a product is ranked as being an important criteria (M=3.49; SD=1.127).

**Table 2 – The importance of food selection criteria in consumers' daily life**

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
Aesthetics of the package	2.73	1.127
Ingredients of the product	4.14	.940
Presence of nutritional information	3.72	1.093
Expiry date	4.46	.908
Brand of the product	3.21	1.041
Country of origin	3.94	1.029
Presence of a quality label on the top of the package	3.49	1.127
Positive purchase experiences of the same product	4.03	.973
Positive word of mouth from relatives and friends	3.14	.987
Influence of advertising	2.58	1.138
Priorities of my family	3.91	.928

Price	3.99	.920
Benefits for my health	4.21	.857
Promotions (discounts)	3.79	1.059

As regard to the spontaneous awareness, 70% of the interviewees were reported not having any knowledge in relation to food quality labels, while 30% declared to remember the name of some of them. Among these, 85% of the answers were appropriate, while 15% were reported as incongruent. As shown in table 3, three Italian quality labels (DOCG, DOC, and IGT) and two EU quality labels (PDO, PGI) are the most well-known among the ones considered in the study (except from the DOC label which is not included). Moreover, when considering the spontaneous awareness connected to the different labels studied, interviewees are reported to be more familiar with the PDO label (17.1%).

**Table 3 – Spontaneous awareness of different quality labels (valid %)**

<b>EU Biological Agriculture</b>	12.8	<b>Demeter</b>	2.1
<b>TSG</b>	10.4	<b>Garanzia AIAB</b>	5.6
<b>PGI</b>	16.9	<b>Friend of the Sea</b>	5.2
<b>PDO</b>	17.1	<b>IGT</b>	21.5
<b>Fairtrade</b>	15.5	<b>DOCG, DOC</b>	25.1

Table 4 displays the aided awareness of the quality labels analysed (i.e. not only logo awareness, but also awareness of the meaning of the label). Once more, Italian labels, such DOCG and IGT are well recognized among the interviewees, together with the PDO label.

**Table 4 – Aided awareness of different quality labels (valid %)**

<b>EU Biological Agriculture</b>	21,5	<b>Demeter</b>	1.5
<b>TSG</b>	19.4	<b>Garanzia AIAB</b>	5.6
<b>PGI</b>	26.5	<b>Friend of the Sea</b>	5.6
<b>PDO</b>	33.1	<b>IGT</b>	29.4
<b>Fairtrade</b>	16.5	<b>DOCG</b>	41.5

When asked to assess the credibility of the labels displayed in the questionnaire, almost the 50% of the interviewees have no knowledge of some labels, namely Demeter, Garanzia AIAB, Friend of the Sea. The general trend, shown in table 5, demonstrates that a little amount of people interviewed trust the food quality labels (for example, 27.1% of the customers declared to trust almost always PDO labels; 27% stated to trust the PGI label only sometimes).

**Table 5 – Perceived credibility of different quality labels: frequency (valid %)**

	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Almost always	Always	I don't know
<b>EU Bio Agriculture</b>	6.9	7.9	23.4	21.3	10.6	29.9
<b>TSG</b>	5.4	7.1	25.1	22.8	8.4	31.2
<b>PGI</b>	3.3	6.9	27	24.1	11.9	26.8
<b>PDO</b>	3.5	6.5	22.5	27.1	13.8	26.5
<b>Fairtrade</b>	6.5	10.2	18.5	14.8	12.3	37.7
<b>Demeter</b>	9.8	10.3	16.3	5	2.7	55.9
<b>Garanzia AIAB</b>	5.9	6.9	22.8	11.9	6.5	46.0
<b>Friend of the Sea</b>	6.3	7.1	24.3	12.3	3.3	46.7
<b>IGT</b>	4	9.6	21.5	20.3	13	31.6
<b>DOCG</b>	4	8.4	19	24.8	18.8	25

Table 6 and table 7 show whether significant differences occur in interviewees assessments, related to perceived credibility of labels, based on their socio-demographic characteristics. In

particular, when the gender of the people interviewed is considered, no significant differences are observed between males and females (table 6).

**Table 6 - Perceived credibility of labels by gender: independent t-test**

	Mean	T-Test
<b>EU Bio Agriculture</b>		
male	4.20	1.546
female	4.07	
<b>TSG</b>		
male	4.29	1.284
female	4.07	
<b>PGI</b>		
male	4.20	.025
female	4.13	
<b>PDO</b>		
male	4.21	.251
female	4.20	
<b>Fairtrade</b>		
Male	4.39	1.695
female	4.24	
<b>Demeter</b>		
Male	4.58	.173
female	4.42	
<b>Garanzia AIAB</b>		
Male	4.48	.492
female	4.44	
<b>Friend of the Sea</b>		
Male	4.39	.088
female	4.41	
<b>IGT</b>		
Male	4.29	1.486
female	4.20	
<b>DOCG</b>		
Male	4.25	1.681
female	4.18	

On the contrary, significant differences are reported when considering the credibility of quality labels in relation to occupation and income level of the people interviewed (Table 7). In particular, the occupation plays a major role in influencing the credibility for labels such as TSG, Demeter, IGT, DOCG; while the income level positively affects the trustworthiness for TSG and PDO labels.

**Table 7 - Perceived credibility by age, education, occupation and income level: one-way ANOVA (\*significant at 0.05 level; \*\* significant at 0.01 level)**

	Age	Education	Occupation	Income
<b>EU Bio Agriculture</b>	.917	1.704	1.329	1.861
<b>TSG</b>	.656	1.145	<b>2.962*</b>	<b>2.832*</b>
<b>PGI</b>	1.705	.944	1.503	1.868
<b>PDO</b>	.839	1.624	1.390	<b>2.688*</b>
<b>Fairtrade</b>	.646	2.666	2.464	.814
<b>Demeter</b>	.470	2.124	<b>3.655**</b>	1.109
<b>Garanzia AIAB</b>	.828	1.733	1.960	1.801
<b>Friend of the Sea</b>	.440	2.617	1.203	1.967

<b>IGT</b>	1.704	1.973	<b>3.556**</b>	1.545
<b>DOCG</b>	.469	1.766	<b>2.952*</b>	2.046

When asked to assess customers' willingness to pay (WTP) a premium price for products with quality labels, the majority (57.3%) of respondents stated they would pay a premium price, while 42.7% wouldn't. Tables 8 and 9 display whether any significant differences do exist in the way people show their WTP based on gender, age, education, job, and income level. In particular, only one significant difference is observed in interviewees' willingness to pay a premium price for cheese ( $t=3.090$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), with males ( $M=2.84$ ) declaring they will spend more for such product than females ( $M=2.22$ ).

**Table 8 - Willingness to pay by gender: independent t-test (\*significant at 0.05 level)**

	Mean	T-Test		Mean	T-Test
<b>1 lt of milk</b>			<b>½ kg of pasta</b>		
male	2.07	.732	male	2.16	2.359
female	1.94		female	1.77	
<b>250 g. of butter</b>			<b>1 kg of cheese</b>		
male	1.71	.377	male	2.84	<b>3.090*</b>
female	1.65		female	2.22	
<b>1 kg of meat</b>			<b>2 yoghurts</b>		
male	2.77	2.071	male	2.07	.546
female	2.37		female	1.97	
<b>1 kg of fruit</b>			<b>1 kg of biscuits</b>		
male	2.51	.826	male	2.15	1.914
female	2.34		female	1.82	

Moreover, the willingness to pay a premium price is highly correlated between the income level and some specific products (cheese: 4.294,  $p<0.01$ ; milk: 3.682,  $p<0.01$ ; biscuits: 3.185,  $p<0.01$ ). Significant influences are also evident in WTP for butter and meat, based on the income level.

**Table 9 - Willingness to pay by age, education, job and income level: one-way ANOVA (\*significant at 0.05 level; \*\*0.01 level)**

	Age	Education	Job	Income
<b>1 lt of milk</b>	,767	2,254	1,820	<b>3,682**</b>
<b>250 gr of butter</b>	,873	,961	<b>4,491*</b>	<b>2,948*</b>
<b>1 kg of meat</b>	,178	2,596	<b>3,074*</b>	<b>2,990*</b>
<b>1 kg of fruit</b>	,705	2,090	1,904	2,059
<b>½ kg of pasta</b>	,260	1,754	2,321	2,092
<b>1 kg of cheese</b>	1,447	2,046	2,201	<b>4,294**</b>
<b>2 yoghurts</b>	,480	<b>4,296*</b>	1,544	2,479
<b>1 kg of biscuits</b>	,394	1,245	1,706	<b>3,185**</b>

Moreover, job influences the WTP for butter and meat: executive managers tend to pay a premium price for these products (butter:  $M=2.86$ ; meat:  $M=3.20$ ). Finally, only one significant difference (4.296,  $p<0.05$ ) was observed for people having a below secondary school education level ( $M=3.60$ ) in relation to the WTP and higher price for yoghurts.

## Discussion

The present study investigated the spontaneous and aided consumers' awareness of food quality labels and whether significant differences do exist in the credibility that consumers

express toward food quality labels and in their willingness to pay based on socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, occupation, and income). Findings reveal that respondents show little spontaneous awareness of food quality labels, often misinterpreting the proper meaning of the labels observed. Higher spontaneous awareness, more than 20%, was observed only for national labels DOCG, DOC, and IGT. Similarly, the aided awareness is low, with national food quality labels (DOCG, IGT) and EU PDO, PGI and Bio label being the only labels properly recognized by respondents. Findings show that significant differences do exist in the way consumers assess the credibility of food quality labels based on occupation and income. On the contrary, differences do not exist based on age, gender and education. Further, Italian consumers were reported being willing to pay slightly higher price for specific type of products with quality labels. As regard to this, the willingness to pay a premium price is highly correlated between the income level and some specific products, some significant differences were observed also based on gender, education, and occupation.

### **Limitations**

Aside from the theoretical and managerial contribution of the study, there are some limitations. Firstly, the sample cannot be considered representative of Italian consumers, even though its size is quite significant, seen that is mainly a convenience sample. Secondly, findings cannot be generalized because of the particular method of sampling we used (i.e., snowball sampling). Further, in the present study we focused our attention just running quite basic statistics (descriptive statistics, Anova and t-test). Finally, the attention was given only to Italian market and only to the most frequent quality labels used in this market.

### **Future research**

Besides the limitations just discussed, the present study does highlight several possible future research paths. Firstly, it could be interesting to carry out a cluster analysis by using the same sample we used in the present study to identify different segments of Italian consumers and describes their different attitudes toward the labels, and willingness to pay a premium price for quality labels. Further, the study could be repeated in other countries in order to compare consumers' attitudes and verify whether differences based on the cultural background do exist. It should be investigated via cross-cultural comparison when studying the consumers' attitude and behavior toward quality labels. Finally, it would be interesting to move forward with this study not only on food products market, but also for other categories of products.

### **Managerial implications**

Findings of this paper help producers of certified foods to better understand the specific issues related to consumers' perception and consumption behavior of food quality labels, thus providing useful information to support their marketing strategy. Specifically, they underline a need to carried promotion and communication activities in order to increase the consumers' awareness and credibility of quality labels and/or to increase the value that they give to them, so that they will be able willing to pay a premium price.

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