

CONSUMER AWARENESS ABOUT AQUACULTURE IN EUROPE: A COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN IN THE FutureEUaqua PROJECT

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Introduction

Stakeholders believe that consumers play an important role in the promotion of aquaculture, especially regarding organic production (Lembo et al., 2018). Scholars have identified a general low awareness concerning aquaculture (Zander et al., 2018), which varies according to the species (Garza-Gil et al., 2016) and location (Froehlich et al., 2017). This low awareness persists despite media exposure (Papacek, 2018). However, consumers report some concern and awareness about general issues associated with seafood production, such as how it effects the environment (Jacobs et al., 2015a), its impact on the sustainability of fish populations (Bacher, 2016) and its influence on people's health (Jacobs et al., 2015b). Yet, there is lack of awareness about specific production methods, such as integrated multi-trophic aquaculture (IMTA) (Alexander et al., 2016) and labels associated with sustainable production in general (Feucht & Zander, 2015). The main objective of this study was to develop recommendations for social media communication strategies for increasing consumer awareness, perception and acceptance of European aquaculture. The recommendations were based on scientific literature, evaluations of the effectiveness of previous and current communication campaigns, the consumer survey results in previous stages of the FutureEUaqua project and experimental testing of the types of messages in social media that are preferred by consumers.

The FutureEUaqua project focuses on social media as the preferred communication channel to influence consumers. Social media is considered to be the most appropriate channel to reach young consumers, who are a challenging group with falling seafood consumption levels.

Methods

After the evaluation of already available insights, a total sample of 2500 participants was recruited in the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy that were at least 50% responsible for the purchase and preparation of seafood in their household. They participated in an experimental survey and were randomly assigned to balanced groups that were exposed to one of five experimental social media posts that varied in tone (factual vs emotional) and visual representation (text vs text and image). Participants were then asked to evaluate the posts on comprehension, liking and willingness to repost. Participants also responded to explanatory topics, such as open-ended questions and consumer characteristics in terms of global innovativeness, attitudes towards nature, food technology neophobia, health concerns, as well as seafood purchasing and consumption behaviour. The last part of the survey focused on social and demographic characteristics, including region and country, coastal and inland location, occupation, education, household situation, gender, age and income.

Results

The main results from the experiment showed a clear consumer preference for emotional content in social media posts (figure 1).

Female participants seemed to report higher scores in general in this study.

Age did not seem to have a major effect on the experiment. However, younger participants in the study seemed to like the control message less than other age groups, while they preferred the emotional message without a picture the most.

Conclusion

Based on the results, the FutureEUAqua communication strategy will use short, visually attractive and emotionally engaging social media posts to improve perceptions and increase awareness of and acceptance for aquaculture in Europe.

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