

LEVELS OF CONCERN ABOUT FOOD AND DIET OF JAPANESE CONSUMERS, AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD HAZARDS —RESULTS OF A SURVEY CONDUCTED IN 2003—

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1. Introduction

In recent years in Japan, the nation-wide desire for wellness and a number of food-safety threatening incidents have increased public concerns about food and diet. These concerns are not uniform, which necessitates evaluating levels of these concerns and perceptions of food hazards by the public. The authors have attempted to investigate into these concerns and perceptions, to map risk perceptions, and to compare the risk perception map with those of the general public in the UK reported by Sparks and Shepherd (1994) and Fife-Schaw and Rowe (1996).

2. Procedures

A questionnaire was constructed to categorize the public by the levels of concern about eating, nutrition, health and food safety, and to assess their perceptions of 10 food-related hazards with respect to 14 kinds of risk characteristics. The questionnaire was sent by mail to randomly chosen 3000 citizens residing around Tokyo, and 878 valid responses were returned (adjusted response rate=29.5%). Of the returns, 373 (42.5%) were from men and 488 (55.6%) women, with 17 (1.9%) not indicating their gender. Data were analyzed using the SPSS statistics package. The respondents were categorized into clusters according to their responses, and their perceptions of food hazards were mapped by the analysis of MDS.

3. Results

Respondents were categorized into four clusters: Cluster 1 with low level of concern (n=109); Cluster 2, high level of concern (n=384); Cluster 3, middle level of concern and lower anxiety (n=182); & Cluster 4, middle level of concern and higher anxiety (n=195). As for the level of knowledge about food safety, the frequency of checking food labels, and the preference for domestically produced foods, Cluster2 was rated the highest, followed by Cluster4, Cluster3 and Cluster 1 as the lowest.

Their perceptions of food-related hazards were similar: dioxin, BSE, pesticide residues and O157 were located higher on the 'severity' scale than others; and GMOs and irradiated food were higher on the "unknown" scale. On the map of Cluster1, GMOs and food additives were located lower on the "severity" scale than on the maps of other Clusters. These maps were quite similar to the risk perception maps of the UK general public (see above). These maps were made on the basis of qualitative data of this survey and additional studies are necessary to obtain quantitative data for further elaboration of these maps.

References

- Fife-Schaw, C. and Rowe, G. (1996) Public Perceptions of Everyday Food Hazards: A Psychometric Study, *Risk Analysis*, 16(4):487-500.
- Sparks, P. and Shepherd, R. (1994) Public Perceptions of the Potential Hazards Associated with Food Production and Food Consumption: A Empirical Study, *Risk Analysis*, 14(5):799-806.