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Consumers' Perception and Attitudes Towards Safety of Fruits and Vegetables in Qatar

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Qatar is well known for its natural resources and the country has the highest per capita income in the world, but when it comes to food, the picture is different. The country imports nearly 90% of its food, meaning it is almost entirely dependent on imports to feed more than 2 million people. In 2013 and 2014, Qatar imported nearly 294,757 and 334.744 metric tons of vegetables, and the overall demand for vegetables rose by 16.87% between 2011 and 2014. The countries from which Qatar imports fruits and vegetables may not follow the safe production and processing standards Qatar prefers. When fertilizers and pesticides are used in higher quantities in production or processing than what is needed, they tend to contaminate food and the environment, and may cause diseases when consumed or handled. Many countries misuse fertilizers and pesticides. In fact, Qatar Statistics Authority (QSA) reported that nearly 1.4 billion kg of food was imported in 2012, 7.5% was contaminated due to harmful microbes and/or chemicals (QSA, 2013). A report published by the National Health Strategy (NHS, 2013) indicated that total food-borne diseases recorded between 2008-2011 in Qatar were 11,420, and about 5.4% were communicable diseases. Therefore, food safety alongside food quality is a public health concern for consumers in Qatar.

There is not much known about consumer demand for quality and safety of food in Qatar but also in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC). GCC countries in the past were more concerned with meeting basic food needs of their population. At present, with rising populations and higher per capita incomes, Qatar is developing a world class food safety agency with standards that have relevance for both public health and trade policy issues.

Food safety contributes an extra value to brand equity when marketing food to consumers. Food safety is a credence attribute and hence cannot be guaranteed or marketed. Consequently, attributes that consumers relate to food safety such as appropriate packaging, country of origin, labeling, etc alongside personal characteristics are important to consumers as they decide what to purchase. This research provides an avenue for consumer perceptions,

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knowledge and attitudes toward food safety in fruits and vegetables sold in Qatar to be transmitted to food sellers and policymakers.

This research investigates the extent of Qatar consumers' perceptions, attitudes and knowledge of food safety in both imported and locally produced fruits and vegetables. We investigate whether these perceptions, attitudes and knowledge are different between Qatari and non-Qataris, and whether they are influenced by income levels or not. In addition, the study investigates the relationship between perception and actual behavior when making purchases. Finally we identify the safety and quality attributes consumers consider most important when making purchases of fruits and vegetables.

To understand these research objectives, an initial survey has been conducted. This will be shortly augmented with a larger consumer survey. Preliminary results revealed that tomato is the most commonly consumed crop followed by cucumber and carrots. The data also revealed that both demographic characteristics (income, gender, education) and, fruits & vegetables attributes (such as country of origin, price, freshness and cleanness) are important factors that influence consumers' purchasing decisions.