

Can Consumers' Beliefs of Genetically Modified Food Products Advance Food Security in South Africa: Consumers Tell the Truth

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Abstract

Introduction: Food security is particularly affected by food wastage; job losses; unemployment; the COVID-19 pandemic; climate change; population growth, poverty and currently the Ukraine war leading to food price increases globally. Although genetically modified (GM) food products can assist in addressing food insecurity, whilst contributing to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 and addressing zero hunger, a dearth of research exists on consumers' current beliefs toward GM food products, in order to sustain food security, which this study aimed to explore.

Methodology: A qualitative methodology within a constructivist paradigm was used with a phenomenology, descriptive and exploratory research design. Purposive, convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants, residing in the Midlands, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa to gain insight from an agricultural point of view, who were male or female and above the age of 18 years. After thirty-two online interviews - held and recorded on Microsoft Teams - data saturation was achieved. The data was transcribed verbatim and thematic data analysis was used. Ethics clearance was obtained.

Findings and Discussion: The five themes that emerged showed that an altered state of existence associated with GM food products (Theme 1) due to being unnatural through technological intervention, thereby challenging religious beliefs. Consumers believed that GM food products have production benefits (Theme 2) which can benefit the environment and increase crop yields whilst enhancing food security. They also believed that there are consumer-related benefits to GM food products (Theme 3) including nutritious food products at a reduced price with a longer shelf life. Consumer beliefs revealed production concerns (Theme 4) which could impact GM seed usage whilst giving GM companies more power in terms of the sale of seeds. Consumers remained concerned regarding their long-term health (Theme 5).

Conclusion: Currently, after the existence of GM food products for some time, consumers still have certain beliefs about the benefits and some concerns associated with GM food products, which could create purchase hesitation. Should food security become a further concern, the GM Food Industry should focus on promoting the benefits of GM food products and remedy consumer beliefs, to negate compromising food security in South Africa.

PRESENTER BIOGRAPHY: SONE VAN ZUYDAM

Sone grew up and attended school in the scenic Midlands surrounded by the Drakensberg and feels privileged to still live in this beautiful part of the country. Sone is working in the Educational Industry in the finance department. Sone currently holds a Master's degree in Consumer Science and is a full-time PhD student which is motivated by her passion for research and understanding consumers' behaviour. Sone thoroughly enjoys sport, gardening, playing the alto recorder – which she received Honours for at school level –, reading and spending time with her family which helps Sone to maintain balance in her life. Sone is also an animal lover. She is a hard-working individual who strives to be the best that she can be.