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Abstract

Contaminated and unhygienic food intake is a major problem in the urban cities of Bangladesh. This raises a serious concern for health of the urban citizens. The research investigates into the attitude of the urban educated people on their awareness of food safety. The findings of the study suggest a high degree of awareness amongst respondents of the attitudinal survey. People with higher educational background show higher degree of awareness of how the quality of food should be maintained. A lack of confidence on the functions of government regulatory agency in testing the food standard is also reflected in the study.

Keywords: Food quality, contaminated food, unhygienic environment, processed food.

INTRODUCTION

Sallis (1992) sees, quality is consistent conformance to a standard. Quality of food is an extremely important aspect of human life as it is directly related to health issue of a person. In Bangladesh, the issue that raises most concern is food safety. Quality control is rarely ensured in Bangladesh starting from the kitchen market to fancy departmental stores. Recent media reports on the malpractice in the food sector has revealed horrifying scenario leading to massive public outcry (The Daily Star, February 7, 2006). Although there is no official statistics on food borne illness, it is perceived to be a major problem in urban areas of Bangladesh. Contaminated food, filthy and unhygienic environment of urban cities result in health hazard which may even cause deaths. The most populous city in Bangladesh is its capital, Dhaka, population of which exceeds 10 million at present (Rahman and Ismail, 2004). The size of the population is projected at about 18.5 million by 2015 (Alam, 2002). Rural migration will be around 70 percent of the total increase in population (Ministry of Agriculture, Malaysia, 2004).

According to Zugarramurdi (2003), people are increasingly concerned about nutrition, food safety at a reasonable cost. Marketers face a set of environmental issues that substantially determine customer acceptance of their products. The definition of *good quality* food, however, may vary depending upon the type of food and the individual's food preference. Some of the important features of quality include wholesomeness, freshness, nutritional value, texture, color, fragrance, and flavor. It was also found that as raw material quality level rises, these variables increase as well as operating costs decrease (Giannini *et al.*, 2001; Zugarramurdi *et al.*, 2002). The results indicated that the quality of raw material has a direct correspondence to the quality of the product. To many consumers safe food means that there will be no danger from harmful elements such as pathogenic microorganisms, naturally occurring toxins and other potentially harmful chemicals which appear to be deliberately added to food products in the country. The presence of microorganisms in food poses the greatest threat to human health compared to all forms of contamination (Rouf, 2004). The consumers also rely on the standards of manufacture particularly to know what ingredients are present and the right mixture and quality of it due to nutritional requirements. The widespread media attention to public

health and malpractices to contaminate food in recent years helped heighten consumer awareness for the safety of food. Government of Bangladesh often intensifies its action against adulteration of food at an irregular basis. Using specially set up *mobile courts* the authority gives a drive to identify punishable offences and file cases under the Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute (BSTI) Ordinance 1985 and Pure Food Ordinance 2005. The areas of malpractices include low quality food, fake licenses, poor or substandard infrastructure, food adulteration, food impurity, incorrect information on quality and weight printed on packet, problems with mixture of ingredients and manufacturing process, and not conforming to expiry date. Mobile courts have found that the yoghurt or the other traditional sweets that we love so dearly are not what they seem. In a survey conducted in February 2005, DCC officials found that 100 percent of examined samples of *rashogolla*, *kalojaam*, yoghurts, and *shandesh* were adulterated. According to the Pure Food Ordinance 1959, at least 10 percent milk fat is mandatory in sweetmeats. But in most cases, the percentage of milk fat is not more than five percent. In most cases, sweetmeat producers or bakeries use toxic colours instead of food colours, which are carcinogens and may cause diseases like cancer and kidney damage, if regularly ingested (The Daily Star, February 7, 2006).

OBJECTIVES

This research paper is an attempt to investigate the nature of perception of urban people on their food intake quality. It particularly focuses on Dhaka city dwellers to find out how conscious they are and tries to provide some useful insights on their attitude towards the quality of food they eat.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

During the year 2006, the inspection on food quality in urban areas particularly in Dhaka gained a momentum leading to widespread media coverage on the nature of the problem that persisted in the society. This was expected to result in a higher level of consumer awareness and greater concern over consumption of processed food. Against this backdrop, this research carried out an investigation on buyers of processed food in the Dhaka city during March-April, 2007.

It is the nature of the research problem that should dictate the appropriate research method; sometimes quantification is required, sometimes not (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992). Questionnaires offer a method of conducting a survey where all respondents are asked exactly the same questions in the same circumstance. To support this method, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1999: 72) noted, "If researchers wish to obtain answers to a number of fairly simple questions then a questionnaire might well be more appropriate". Using a structured questionnaire, the attitudinal survey approached to different types of buyers in large food stores and small shops of the city. During the span of two months, in this research, a total of 150 buyers were willing to be interviewed and responded to the questions. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, version 11.5), which is one of the most commonly used packages for quantitative research methods for data analysis was used to conduct the various analyses of the study (Bryman and Cramer, 1994).

THE HYPOTHESES

To facilitate the attitudinal survey following research hypothesis were tested.

H 1: Regular buyer of processed food

H 2: Quality information printed on package is believable.

H 3: Advertisement of children's food product is always fair.

H 4: BSTI approval is checked before buying food.

H 5: BSTI performs its functions properly.

H 6: High price ensures quality of food.

H 7: Foreign food is preferred to local food.

H 8: Impure food affects our health.

H 9: Packaging affects buying decision of customers.

The Empirical Evidence on Perception on Food Quality

The empirical results of the test of attitudes of respondents are summarized below.

Table 1: Test Result on Hypotheses (Test value = 3)

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
I am a regular buyer of processed food	3.507	149	.001	.26	.11	.41
I believe in quality information printed on product package	15.937	149	.000	1.11	.98	1.25
Advertisement of food product addressed to children is always fair	-3.178	149	.002	-.27	-.43	-.10
We should always check BSTI approval before buying food	13.138	149	.000	1.08	.92	1.24
BSTI performs its functions properly as the quality regulatory institution in Bangladesh	-.975	149	.331	-9.33E-02	-.28	9.58E-02
High price always ensures high quality	-1.010	148	.314	-9.40E-02	-.28	8.98E-02
People are more attracted to foreign foods than our local food.	11.064	149	.000	.81	.67	.96
Consumption of impure food affects your health	15.476	148	.000	1.28	1.11	1.44
Packaging is very important to attract consumer	13.522	148	.000	1.03	.88	1.18

Source: Field Survey, March-April, 2007.

The above evidence suggests that consumers have the habit of buying processed food and they believe the information on quality printed on the product package. In respect of children’s food product, consumers appear to have faith in the advertisement on such products as supported by the test result shown in Table 1. The buyers also have the awareness to check the BSTI approval always before buying food. However, there seems to be less faith on the performance of BSTI as the quality regulatory agency in Bangladesh.

Table 1 also reflects the consumers’ attitude about high price and quality of the product. As the result suggests, high price of a product does not necessarily ensure high quality as perceived by the consumers. There is also an inclination towards buying foreign food compared to local one amongst the buyers. In the assessment of impure food intake, the respondents agree that it leads to health hazard. They also think that packaging is very important to attract consumers.

Production of Quality Food: Education and Gender Response

Table 2 records the respondents’ attitude towards factors that are needed to ensure quality food production. Around 36 percent of the male respondents and about 34 percent of the female respondents say that all three factors namely good quality ingredients, correct mixture of ingredients, and manufacturing process, are important.

Table 2: Gender Response on Production of Quality Food

			Factors that needed for the production of quality food				Total
			Good quality of ingredients	Right mixture of ingredients	Manufacturing process	All of them	
GENDER	Male	Count	7	7	6	55	75
		% of Total	4.70%	4.70%	4.00%	36.70%	50.00%
	Female	Count	17	1	5	52	75
		% of Total	11.30%	0.70%	3.30%	34.70%	50.00%
Total		Count	24	8	11	107	150
		% of Total	16.00%	5.30%	7.30%	71.30%	100.00 %

Source: Field Survey, March-April, 2007

The variation in the responses in terms of differences in educational background is reflected in Table 3.

Table 3: Educational Background and Response on Production of Quality Food

			Factors that needed for the production of quality food				Total	
			Good quality of ingredients	Right mixture of ingredients	Manufacturing process	All of them		
EDUCATION	SSC	Count	2			1	3	
		% of Total	1.30%			0.70%	2.00%	
	HSC	Count	3			22	25	
		% of Total	2.00%			14.70%	16.70%	
	Graduate	Count	15	7	8	54	84	
		% of Total	10.00%	4.70%	5.30%	36.00%	56.00%	
	Master	Count	4	1	3	27	35	
		% of Total	2.70%	0.70%	2.00%	18.00%	23.30%	
	PH.D	Count				3	3	
		% of Total				2.00%	2.00%	
	Total		Count	24	8	11	107	150
			% of Total	16.00%	5.30%	7.30%	71.30%	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, March-April, 2007

Responses show a higher degree of awareness of the presence of the factors amongst graduates compared to respondents who passed only Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate educational levels. Around 36 percent of the graduates responded that all three factors are important.

CONCLUSION

The study in general provides evidence of awareness amongst urban consumers who buy processed food about its quality. In recent years expenditure on food has become one of the largest components of domestic cost of living. Markets these days offer a wide range of processed food. At the same time, the issue of food safety is also gaining importance amongst buyer of such processed food. In future, development of mass market and advent of new technology would help improve the science of food safety and reduce the health hazard due to contaminated food.

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