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**DISINFORMATION IN FOOD PRODUCTS: IMPACT ON CONSUMER HEALTH AND BRAND TRUST**

The prevalence of disinformation in food products in Ukraine represents a significant challenge to consumer protection. This phenomenon encompasses the deliberate misrepresentation of the quality, composition, or origin of food items, with the aim of deceiving consumers. The principal forms of disinformation are as follows:

- manufacturers have been known to provide misleading information on product labels. To illustrate, a product may be labelled as "100% natural," yet it may contain artificial additives, preservatives, or colourants such as E211 (sodium benzoate) or E102 (tartrazine), which are chemicals added with the intention of extending shelf life or enhancing colour.

- Frequently, artificial preservatives, flavour enhancers, or colourants are employed in products without being indicated on the labels, or are concealed under other names. Such practices have the potential to impact consumer health, particularly in cases where individuals suffer from allergies or other conditions. A yogurt or dairy product may contain a high sugar level, which may be disguised under alternative names like glucose syrup or fructose. This can mislead consumers regarding the healthfulness of the product.

The adulteration of food products, including milk, cheese, butter, meat and honey, can be achieved through the replacement of natural components with cheaper alternatives. This may involve the use of vegetable fats in place of animal fats or the substitution of natural honey with syrup. Another example is butter that is labelled as "cream" but contains a significant proportion of vegetable fats, such as palm oil. This results in a reduction in production costs, but it also contravenes the established composition standards.

- It is not uncommon for advertisements to make claims regarding the health benefits of a product that are not supported by scientific evidence. For example, claims that specific products facilitate weight loss or enhance immunity are pervasive. A product that is marketed as a means of facilitating weight loss, such as bars or breakfast cereals, may in fact contain elevated levels of sugar or calories. However, manufacturers employ marketing tactics to attract consumer attention.

- On occasion, manufacturers assert that a product is manufactured in Ukraine or in other countries with rigorous quality standards, whereas the raw materials may in fact be sourced from countries with less stringent regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, cheeses or sausage products sold under names similar to protected geographical indications (e.g., "Parmesan" or "Mozzarella") may also lack genuine origin from those regions and are manufactured with cheaper raw materials.

The following section will examine the causes and consequences of such disinformation.

The prevalence of disinformation can be attributed to the profit-driven strategies of manufacturers seeking to reduce production costs. The utilisation of unscrupulous methods can result in a diminution of consumer confidence, a deterioration in food quality, and, in certain instances, an adverse impact on human health.

In Ukraine, legislation exists to combat disinformation in the food sector. This includes mandatory labeling requirements, product inspections and quality standards. Nevertheless, the issue persists due to the presence of imperfect market controls and inspections.

It is incumbent upon consumers to exercise vigilance when selecting products, paying close attention to the ingredients, quality certifications, and to place their trust in verified brands.

In recent times, there has been a notable rise in the prevalence of fake news items, which have the potential to influence consumers in making thoughtless and chaotic purchasing decisions with regard to food products.

The following example is a fictitious account:

Fake 1: It is anticipated that a shortage of food products will soon emerge in Ukraine, necessitating the prompt acquisition of essential supplies. It is important to note that the phenomenon of panic can result in the creation of an artificial shortage. This phenomenon was exemplified by the disappearance of salt from stores and supermarkets following the announcement of a factory shutdown. In some locations, salt was eventually made available again, but at a price that was three or four times higher than the usual market rate. However, within a week, salt was once again available in all stores, with some being imported. Nevertheless, the price exceeded that of Ukrainian salt by a few hryvnias on average.

The second fake news item is as follows: Given that Ukraine has not yet undertaken any agricultural activities, it is inevitable that there will be a shortage of food. During the 2023 sowing season, Ukraine cultivated 9.9 million hectares of land, representing 68.7% of the current season's 14.4 million hectares. Moreover, Ukraine's existing stockpiles, accumulated in previous years, will provide sufficient sustenance for the country's population for the foreseeable future.

Ukrainians have demonstrated a notable improvement in their ability to discern disinformation, as evidenced by the findings of a study conducted by the NGO "Detector Media." This study assessed the media literacy of Ukrainians in 2023, gauging their capacity to critically analyze information, utilize media resources, and comprehend fundamental regulatory principles.

In the year 2023, 52% of the audience of domestic media assessed their sensitivity to disinformation as above average or high. A comparable survey conducted in 2022 revealed that 43% of respondents rated their media competencies at that level, while in 2021, the figure was 37%. In 2023, 11% of respondents indicated that they considered themselves completely incompetent in detecting fake news.

A majority of media content consumers (66%) seek confirmation of news authenticity from other media outlets. Twenty-nine percent of respondents evaluated the reliability of the source being referenced. A quarter of respondents indicated that they seek the primary source of the referenced information.

A total of 18% of respondents indicated that, when verifying information for accuracy, they consider the reputation of the media that disseminated it. Additionally, 13% of respondents stated that they check who owns the media outlet in question.

The proportion of Ukrainians who verify more than 15% of the information they encounter online for authenticity has increased, reaching 33% (up from 24% in 2022). The proportion of individuals who never verify media content has decreased over the past year, from 31% to 26%.

As previously documented, the study measuring the Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians in 2023 revealed a notable degree of sensitivity to distorted content among the Ukrainian population. This indicates that the audience is becoming increasingly proficient in identifying misinformation. A mere 17% of respondents indicated that they rely solely on their intuition to determine the extent to which they can trust a message. This figure was almost identical to that recorded in the previous year (18%), while in 2021, prior to the conflict, it was a substantial 33%.

The proportion of Ukrainians who identify disinformation by searching for source references in materials has decreased from 39% in 2022 to 37%. The proportion of respondents who rely on video and photo confirmation has decreased from 32% in 2022 to 30%. The proportion of respondents who consider the presence of various viewpoints on an event to be a marker of truthfulness has increased from 31% in 2022 to 34%. Furthermore, 46% of Ukrainians believe that the truthfulness of information is determined by its publication in media they trust, a figure that has remained consistent since 2021 (43%) and 2022 (43%).

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