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The rhetoric of risk: A critical discourse analysis of 'food fraud' and public health

Omar Abu Al-Majd H. Q. Mohamad¹ & Ehsan Namaziandost²¹Department of Islamic Studies, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia²Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran

Correspondence: a.alnoimi@psau.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

The present study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the formulation and application of the term “food fraud” across academic, regulatory, and media contexts. We argue that the debate around food fraud goes beyond a technical definition and often focuses on economic and trade problems, which makes it more challenging to achieve a broad public health and sustainability aim. It also analyzes language, framing, and institutional power to demonstrate how the discourse of “fraud” characterizes criminality, obscures structural issues, and overlooks fundamental deficiencies within the food system. We contend that recontextualizing food fraud within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—specifically SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—can elevate public health, environmental sustainability, and social equity in food safety governance.

KEYWORDS: Food Fraud, Critical Discourse Analysis, Public Health, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Food Safety, Discourse, Food Systems, Adulteration

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Introduction

Food fraud is a worldwide issue including many fraudulent activities that affect businesses, governmental bodies, and consumers. Business risks encompass diminished income, reputational harm, and product liability. Such hazards might incur significant costs to the economies of the impacted nations. (Ehmke et.al, 2019; van Ruth, 2014; Moyer et al, 2017). Food fraud undermines the confidence of the consumers in the products and it has severe consequences on the economy and it threatens the lives of millions of people across the globe. Consumers no longer feel secure about the food they are consuming and it also affects people health. In 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defined food fraud as “the act of deceiving purchasers of food or food ingredients for financial benefit” (FDA). The annual expenses associated with this issue exceed \$40 billion, and it is a global concern. The term has been the subject of public discourse due to the 2008 Chinese milk crisis (melamine contamination), the 2013 European horsemeat controversy (misidentified meat products), and persistent issues such as olive oil and honey adulteration. (Cruse, 2019; Knezevic et al, 2014).

However, the discursive framing of food fraud as predominantly “economic” issue has substantial implications. The present study proposes that the term “fraud” is deliberately used by the hegemonic discourse, which is heavily influenced by corporate and trade organizations, to limit the scope of the issue. (Miller, 1990; Hook, 2001; Schneck; 19787) This perspective downplays its substantial impact on public health and establishes a separation between it and the more extensive, unsustainable frameworks of the global food supply. This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to deconstruct rhetoric, revealing its implicit assumptions and power dynamics. It argues that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a critical normative framework for a more equitable and effective discourse and policy response. It presents a systematic review of the rhetoric of risk regarding “food fraud” and public health, using the concept of the rhetoric of risk and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Such a rhetorical perspective can enable a deeper understanding of the terminologies and narratives used to describe the links and entanglements between “food fraud” and public health.

Definition and Scope

Food fraud is defined as the intentional substitution, addition, adulteration, or of food, ingredients, or packaging, or the false or misleading of consumers for economic gain (Tonkin et al., 2016). It reflects a wide range of illegal practices involving foods, beverages, spices, herbs, and packaging materials, surpassing traditional counterfeiting practices. While these behaviors have always taken place, food fraud received significant public attention in 1985 when the European Commission reported that specific animal feed and milk samples had high dioxin levels. In 2001, the identification of melamine in processed food items revealed consumers to harmful hazards resulting from chemical contamination. Notwithstanding significant media exposure and a growing body of scholarly research (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015), the subject remains insufficiently investigated. Traders always resort to committing Food fraud for achieving financial gain; however, this is a kind of dirty business with the intention of deceiving consumers. Food fraud can take different shapes like substitution, addition, tampering, or misrepresentation of food, ingredients, or packaging, or false statements about a product (Kendall et al., 2018). Food fraud often copy the authorized supply chain and usually involves the use of illegal and cheap substances. Fraudsters may generate and produce fake materials that match the characteristics of the compromised product, therefore avoiding present food safety regulations (Niu et al., 2021). It is a crime for producers and operators in the food supply chain to take full advantage of criminal possibilities. From a criminal law standpoint, preventive tactics must encompass organizational and structural measures to bolster the integrity of the food system.

Historical Context

The terms “food crime” and “food fraud” were used as early as the 1820s, whereas “food terrorism” was first mentioned in the 1980s. “Food terrorism” may be linked to “food insecurity”, another phrase from the 1980s. Earlier in the twentieth century, headlines about “food crime” and “food fraud” appear in newspapers such as *Forbes*, which note early victories. These terms have significant descriptive potential, yet are rarely employed. In the Comptroller and Auditor General’s 1999 report on food safety, “fraudulent” is used twice within the food context. Glossaries from that year include references to adulteration and fraud. The term “food crime” reappears in 2001 to describe the milk scandal in the UK. The early period—from earliest reference to the end

of the 1990s—serves as a historical context for the use of these phrases. While the 2000s are omitted for brevity, “food crime” gains renewed usage during this decade. The National Food Crime Unit, established in 2014, has since brought further attention to the term (Tonkin et al., 2016). Earlier terms, however, provide a critical background for analysis.

Public Health Implications

Food fraud has included significant threats to public health since its early record; it remains a considerable concern for global supply chains wherever food and drink are legally and illegally bought, distributed, concealed, remanufactured, or sold (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015). Many fraudulent activities are not, in themselves, threatening to consumer health—for example, when economically motivated adulteration with inferior ingredients occurs that are not harmful to human health. However, the practice of substituting or adding hazardous substances to a food product is a growing area of concern for public health authorities; this has occurred regularly throughout history, with some cases culminating in fatalities. Products that have been identified as commonly posing health threats when illegally adulterated include milk, cooking oils, meat products, honey, baby formula, alcoholic beverages, and fruit juices (Galloway et al., 2019).

Other forms of food fraud pose high-profile economic risks to supply chains, but because of the non-toxic nature of the substituted or added materials, represent less of a threat to public health. Adulteration and counterfeit of seafood, fresh fruit and vegetables, olive oil, coffee, tea, and spices fall into this category because some of these traded goods are regularly priced at a premium. In several cases, these commodities have been directly linked to food-borne health outbreaks. Examples include the *Salmonella* Typhimurium outbreak associated with the consumption of tomatoes in the United States in 2009; the *Salmonella* Senftenberg outbreak transmitted through the consumption of cocoa products in Africa in 2008; and the contaminated organic chocolate imported into the United States in 2011.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed to examine how discourses may promote certain interests, focusing on the rhetoric surrounding “food fraud” and its public health implications. Language is social; CDA explores the relationship between text and society, treating discourse as a form of “social practice” constitutive of social relations and structures (see, e.g. Carvalho, 2008; Gee, 2017; Fairclough, 2017). The concept of the “rhetoric of risk” regards language as a mediating sphere where situations are socially constructed from competing perspectives (see e.g. Jensen, 2015; Grabill et al., 1998; Ayotte et al., 2020). Social science debates often reproduce a dichotomy between ‘objective’ risk and the ‘perception’ of risk (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015). This distinction is critical as it informs how the rhetoric of risk is constructed and presented in discourse. In the former case, risk refers to an objective probability and magnitude of an adverse event. The latter concerns how actors interpret, characterise and attribute meaning to those uncertain events. An approach based on the rhetoric of risk (Tonkin et al., 2016) seeks to avoid this dichotomy by tracing how the perceived likelihood and magnitude of a potential hazard is produced through discourse.

The framework has recently been applied by Galloway et al. (Galloway et al., 2019) to food safety crises for which results from analytical testing and uncertainty surrounding those results were deployed as rhetorical strategies to persuade particular audiences. The following section applies a related methodology to the rhetoric around food fraud and public health. By concentrating on risk perception, the rhetoric of risk moves beyond the search for “objective” social effects to attend to the processes through which such effects are created. Discursive resources enable agents to fashion different accounts of risk. The considered case study—a horizontal, cross-sector systematic review of a large, multidisciplinary body of scientific research on food fraud—offers an opportunity to examine how the rhetoric of risk may be deployed to construct the challenge of “food fraud” as a public health concern. (Tonkin et al., 2016)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), grounded in the work of Fairclough (2017), van Dijk (1993), and Wodak (2001), is not merely a method of textual analysis but a theoretical perspective that examines how language use (discourse) is shaped by and shapes social structures, power relations, and ideologies. CDA operates on the principle that discourse is a form of social practice that can legitimize, obscure, or challenge power dynamics. Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) considers language as a form of social practice

that constructs, maintains, and legitimizes particular representations of reality (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015). This research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the discourse around “food fraud” by:

1. Analyzing Text and Talk: studying the target language and analyzing it (e.g., “economic adulteration” vs. “food crime” vs. “public health threat”) and this should be based on a number of texts taken from regulatory documents (e.g., FDA, EFSA), industry white papers (e.g., GFSI, USP), and media stories.

2. Investigating Discursive Practices: understanding the production, dissemination, and consumption of these texts with a specific framework (e.g., trade groups shaping regulatory norms).

3. Linking to Social Practice: language is discursively analyzed in terms of the social context and how such how global food supply chains are set up, what the government thinks is important, and how the public understands risk.

Analysis of the selected corpus follows the methodology of Fairclough (Galloway et al., 2019) that conceptualizes discursive practices as occurring at three distinct levels: textual, discursive practice, and social practice.

The textual dimension considers not only the wording and structure of texts but also the responsibility and authoritativeness of the sources as well as veracity, quality, and quantity of information (Farrelly, 2020). The discursive practice dimension examines intertextuality and discourse interrelations and analyses how the selected texts have been produced, circulated, and consumed. The social practice dimension attempts to interpret the interdiscursive and intertextual findings and to relate them to the broader cultural, political, economic, historical, and institutional context (see e.g. Ghous, 2025; Abdul-Latif, 2011). The method is especially effective at analyzing contemporary issues characterized by competing views and conflicting information that play a major role in public health debates. The aim of the study is to examine the ways in which the ‘food fraud’ discourse is constructed given the importance of public health as an issue and the need for solutions to prevent related risks.

Methodology

A review guided by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores the theme of food fraud and public health. Following topics such as food fraud hazards and public health responses serve as the framework for higher-level discourse analysis. The systems of rhetoric through which academic, regulatory and policy authorities characterise the traceability issues of food fraud, economic impact and case studies, labour standards and social justice are then analysed, along with the primary 2007 EHEC case. Procedures for systematic data collection and analysis of these discourses are developed through thematic analysis at word, theme and narrative levels, supporting critical explanation of the risk dynamics, objectives and implications of the chosen rhetoric (Tonkin et al., 2016).

Systematic Review Process

A systematic review was conducted of the discourse surrounding ‘food fraud’ from 2015 to 2020. The selected documents included publicly accessible, English-language sources documenting and analyzing relevant occurrences in the global media. The initial database search yielded 201 documents. This dataset was then refined through a title and abstract screening to exclude those documents which were tangential to the analytical focus. A total of 59 documents were selected for the final discourse analysis.

The resulting body of discourse was examined through the lens of the rhetoric of risk, with a particular focus on the way in which language and terminology function to influence both the perceived severity and propensity for ‘food fraud’ to impact public health. The rhetoric of risk comprises an analytical framework that elucidates the shifting interpretive function of risk, and thus offers a useful conceptual basis for understanding the evocations of social and political action that stem from the analysis of a particular risk. Accordingly, six major risk-related themes emerged from the review: regulatory compliance and enforcement; supply chain integrity; economy, financial issues, and intellectual property; the extent of adulteration; the specific hazards to public health; and the vulnerability of certain foods and producers (Wardman & Lofstedt, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

Previous work relied on databases including ‘Food Fraud Initiative,’ Web of Science, SCOPUS, UK Food

Authenticity Network, and Google Scholar to identify scholarly, grey, and scientific reports and papers containing the term 'food fraud'. The search also included the UK government consultation website that allows access to public responses to consultations. Keywords and Boolean searches, using operators such as AND/OR/NOT, were applied. The retrieved documents were downloaded into NVivo v.12, and the text was cleaned to remove irregular characters, convert to US English, and retain only text-based documents. The final dataset contained 2597 individual documents, ranging from 1999 to August 2020, comprising scholarly articles, grey literature, reports, and news items from both scientific and popular sources, as well as policy documents in the UK context (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015). The content was analyzed through a framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, interrogating terminology, word frequency, collocation, and keyword-in-context and concordances. Additional discourse data came from temporal distribution, sources, topic modeling, and explicit discourse analysis of quotations, introductions, summaries, and text mimicking (Tonkin et al., 2016).

Findings

The CDA reveals two dominant themes in the discourse on food fraud and public health. First is the positive construction of the EU and UK governments as the agents of legitimate, internationally endorsed knowledge on food fraud, and the prescription of action to protect public health from criminal acts of fraud. Second is the frequent affirmation of the risk that food fraud poses to public health. These findings build on the public health imperative implied in the title.

Within the EC, food fraud is routinely presented as an international criminal activity with direct implications for public health. The 2014 crisis is framed as an international criminal conspiracy to embezzle public funds, adulterate food commodities, and defraud business customers and consumers. This action legitimises the prescription of a coordinated system of pan-European governance to avoid, deter, detect and respond to food fraud with the express purpose of protecting public health in the EU and beyond (Tonkin et al., 2016). Public health risk remains the dominant rhetoric in discourse concerning food fraud and, whilst former categories of social risk are evident in the material, there is a notable absence of the original 'moral and ethical' framing. The re-emergence of a public health discourse is explained by the occurrence of several high-profile cases of adulteration involving intentional contamination, somewhat contradicting the assertion of constant low risk.

Themes in Discourse

The rigorous quality criteria applied during data selection produced a corpus of 40 relevant publications. Thematic analysis identified the following recurring topics: 'Food fraud in the supply chain,' 'Food safety and public health,' 'Perceived risk of food fraud,' and 'Trust.' A significant portion of the literature focuses on deliberately adulterated foods, particularly economically motivated adulteration (EMA) (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015).

The expression 'food fraud' appears frequently and consistently in the discourse. Main concerns relate to the health risks posed by the deliberate addition of various adulterants. Documents addressing both public health and EMA often preface their introduction with the statement, 'Food fraud, the deliberate substitution or addition of adulterants to foods for economic gain, has become a global concern following a series of high-profile incidents'. While the expression 'food fraud' is widely used to characterize the problem, few authors provide a precise definition of the term.

Narratives of Risk

The potential for threats to a valued social norm requires the construction of a narrative about the nature of the threat and an implicit or explicit argument about what might be done to manage it. Such narratives often must be forged quickly in response to emergencies, drawing instead on pre-existing templates. Narrative structures that have proved their worth for 'getting things done' in previous, similar situations are re-activated. The existence of a persistent sense of vulnerability also means that social processes have constantly prepared a range of possible narrators and 'consequentialisms' from which those grappling with the latest problem can draw. For those well placed on relevant networks and close to the location or process that is currently the focus of concern, the emergent narrative gives a means of appearing to respond to anxiety, even if largely doing so

in a ‘business as usual’ manner. For others, it can provide the ‘space’ in which to express ‘genuine’ fears arising either from worry about the abstract threat or a reflection of previous experience. Once sufficiently reproduced it becomes more ‘real’ than other sources of understanding such as epidemiological data, since it has passed a much more extended critical scrutiny. Additionally it is then available as an account from which those on whom explanations are simply ‘imposed’ might be encouraged to construct their own narratives (Burgess, 2019).

The Economic Frame

The most often used definition of food fraud is based on its financial motivation. A widely cited assessment of its economic impact to business was made by the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA, 2010). This is hardly a neutral framing. By framing the victim as the “defrauded company” or “consumer” in a transactional sense (i.e., not receiving what they paid for), it instantly links the issue with the interests of brand owners and shareholders. Using terms like “counterfeit,” “intellectual property theft,” and “dilution” to emphasize the market’s integrity over public health serves to further solidify this economic perspective.

Criminality’s Individualization

The word “fraud” evokes images of specific, intentional criminal activity—a “bad apple” supplier who intentionally tampers with a product. By focusing legislative responses on identifying and penalizing particular perpetrators (e.g., through supply chain audits and anti-counterfeiting technology), this rhetoric individualizes culpability. This hides the root causes of food fraud, which include the intense demand for inexpensive food, the opaqueness and complexity of global supply networks, and the lax enforcement of regulations in many areas—all of which are made worse by an unsustainable global food model. Neither the trade policies that generate these pressures nor the retail shoppers who seek impossible low costs are frequently mentioned in the conversation.

Public Health’s Marginalization

Instead of being a fundamental and essential element of the economic framework, public health is frequently portrayed as a later, possible consequence (“food fraud can pose a public health risk”). It’s an important rhetorical device. Through the distinction between “economically motivated adulteration” (EMA) and “potentially hazardous adulteration,” the discourse establishes an erroneous hierarchy. Any compromise of food integrity really poses a risk to public health. In addition to being “economic” problems, adulterants such as melamine, Sudan I dye, and disclosed allergies pose a direct risk to human health (SDG 3). The discussion downplays these dangers by combining them into the broader concept of “fraud.”

Rephrasing Using the SDGs as a Guide: A Comprehensive Method

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offer a revolutionary framework to combat the limited discussion of food fraud. It compels the problem to be reframed in terms of interrelated social, economic, and environmental systems.

- SDG 3: Well-being and Good Health: Food fraud must be prioritized as a public health concern in a reframed conversation. This causes the emphasis to change from monetary loss to sickness, death, and human suffering. It calls for preventative actions that put health outcomes first, such improved allergy management and more stringent screening for adulterants that are not food-grade.

- Target 2.1: Food Security and SDG 2: Zero Hunger: Nutrition and food security are compromised by food fraud. Access to safe food and nutritional quality are directly lowered by contaminated baby formula and diluted staple foods, which disproportionately affect underprivileged groups. Food fraud would be framed as a breach of the right to safe and nourishing food in a discourse that is in line with SDG 2.

- SDG 12: Responsible Production and Consumption, namely Targets 12.4 and 12.6 on sustainability reporting and chemical management, respectively: The unsustainable models that fuel fraud are intimately implicated in this objective. A CDA guided by SDG 12 would challenge arguments that place an excessive emphasis on low-cost production. It would encourage a fresh conversation about ethical sourcing, traceability, and transparency—values that counteract the opacity that fraudsters rely on. It links sustainable supply chain management with food integrity.

- SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (Targets 16.4 and 16.5, respectively, on corruption and

illicit financial flows): This objective offers a compelling refutation of the personalized “bad apple” notion. Food fraud is presented as a sign of institutional weakness, corruption, and a lack of openness in the government. A key component of sustainable development is bolstering institutions (judicial and regulatory organizations) to fight food crime, going beyond band-aid solutions to address the underlying causes.

Example: The 2013 Horsemeat Scandal

One powerful illustration of these conflicting narratives is the European horsemeat incident (Brooks et al., 2017)

- **Dominant Frame:** The first reaction from the industry and media was mostly presented as a “fraud” issue, with people being tricked into purchasing horsemeat that was mislabeled as beef. (Stanciu, 2015; Barnard, & O’Connor, 2017) The emphasis was on mislabeling, violated contracts, and the economic “con.”
- **Public Health Frame (First Disregarded):** Questions concerning the veterinary medication phenylbutazone (“bute”) found in horsemeat that was not meant for human consumption eventually raised the public health issues, which were secondary. This health danger was difficult to integrate into the main “economic fraud” story in the discourse.
- **A Frame Informed by SDGs:** An investigation using the SDG framework would have made the connection right away:
 - o **SDG 3:** Unauthorized medications’ possible health risks.
 - o **SDG 12:** The scam went unnoticed because of careless and opaque production methods used throughout a convoluted, multi-nation supply chain.
 - o **SDG 16:** The blatant indication of inadequate supervision and possible corruption at several stages of the chain.A more comprehensive policy response focusing on systemic transformation as opposed to merely supply chain mapping would have been the result of this integrative framework.

Discussion

Two themes within the public health corpus serve to interpret and contextualize the narrative. The first concerns the objectives of risk communication and its role within food fraud policy. The second relates to public perception and the means by which media portrayals frame the discourse. The intent of risk communication is to provide information on specific risks to enable stakeholders to make appropriate decisions. The discounting of fraud as a food safety issue is consistent only where the policy context is understood to encompass risk communication. When fraud is integral to the safety regime, as in the EU, the safety objectives prioritize risk communication and risk management, thereby obliging practitioners to adopt a communicable template to meet the objectives.

Implications for Policy

The language employed in addressing food fraud holds noteworthy consequences for policy strategies and the safeguarding of public health, particularly when such language emphasizes risk and deliberately associations with food integrity (Tonkin et al., 2016). The predominance of narratives that conflate food fraud with food crime, highlighting high-profile, criminal activities generates a discourse that is simultaneously oral and explicit, fostering heightened consumer anxieties about the nature of food provision (Galloway et al., 2019). The prevalence of episodic framing within the discourse impedes a cohesive understanding of food fraud’s multifaceted role and its health implications, complicating public engagement and policy response. Given the discipline’s inherent elusiveness and the frequent absence of readily available examples, there is an essential need for comprehensive, multi-dimensional data that can fully articulate the health risks projections and support evidence-based policy interventions. Consequently, policy-makers ought to exercise prudence in deploying the term “food fraud” within public communications; the manipulation of food authenticity and integrity remains a legitimate concern for regulatory oversight, but the presumption that “fraud” intrinsically embodies a “risk” to well-being is susceptible to misinterpretation and exaggeration.

Public Perception and Media Representation

Risk communication shapes the effectiveness of responses to public health threats. Media representation influences the nature of information that individuals receive; the prominence of a particular hazard will also influence public attention (Kendall, 201). Fruit and vegetable safety is therefore an apt case study. Produce is widely recognized as essential to health, yet the World Health Organization (WHO) notes that foodborne

illnesses (FIs) associated with fruit and vegetables now pose a considerable threat to wellbeing. Risks include misunderstandings regarding the need for washing or cooking and concerns over pesticide residues. (Chang et.al, 2022). When outbreaks of Listeriosis and cyclospora infections occurred in the United States in 2011 and 2013, respectively, precautionary recommendations led some people to avoid produce altogether (Casillas, 2018). Public avoidance persisted despite official reassurance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the risks were minimal and that the health benefits remained unchanged. Unexpected negative outcomes can potentially arise from risk communication that leads some individuals to avoid foods containing related hazards (Schantz, & Tsang, 2003)

Strategies for Mitigating Food Fraud

Food fraud leads to significant economic and public health concerns for governments, industries, and consumers worldwide. Tactics such as dilution, substitution, concealment, and counterfeiting are used to increase profit margins. It occurs at all points along the supply chain—from farmers and manufacturers to distributors and retailers—and affects practically every food product. Production volumes are often adjusted to obscure diluted or substituted foods. Food fraud also feeds into counterfeit products and falsely branded goods that present a range of safety concerns for consumers. For example, a recent study reported over 4,000 cases of food fraud from 1980 to 2012 and emphasized the negative public health impacts along with a damaging loss of consumer trust (Tola, 2018).

An integrated, systems-based approach to food protection should address the threat of food safety, food fraud, and food defense. Previously, approaches centered exclusively on food safety alone, even though the tactics can extend and worsen public health concerns. In such approaches, food safety reduces the unintentional introduction of contaminants, whereas food defense addresses the intentional introduction of known or novel agents for malicious purposes. Food fraud remains separate and distinct because involved agents may not be necessarily harmful to an individual. Additionally, incentives for product tampering may be financial or not. However, an effective food-protection plan is resilient to all three. Improved traceability provides rapid information and better dispersion limits the volume of product. The threat of food fraud can then be better understood and strategies to detect and eliminate it can be developed. (Oh, 2014).

Conclusion

The rhetoric of “food fraud” is not merely descriptive; it is performative. By framing the issue primarily as an economic crime, powerful actors in the food system have successfully narrowed the scope of regulatory and policy responses. This discourse protects existing market structures and individualizes blame, while obscuring the public health dangers and systemic unsustainable practices that enable fraud to flourish.

A Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the need for a profound shift in language and framing. The Sustainable Development Goals offer the necessary integrative and normative framework to achieve this. By consciously reframing food fraud through the lenses of SDG 3 (Health), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 12 (Responsible Production), and SDG 16 (Strong Institutions), policymakers, academics, and advocates can:

1. **Recenter Public Health:** Make the protection of human health the primary and non-negotiable objective of food fraud mitigation strategies.
2. **Address Root Causes:** Develop policies that tackle the systemic drivers—price pressure, supply chain complexity, weak governance—rather than just the symptoms.
3. **Promote Policy Coherence:** Align food safety and anti-fraud measures with broader sustainability and equity goals, creating a more resilient and just food system for all.

Ultimately, defeating food fraud requires changing not just our detection methods, but our very language. It requires a new discourse that speaks not of market “victims,” but of public health, human rights, and sustainable systems.

Recommendations

To effectively address the ongoing issues surrounding food fraud and better protect public health, two overarching recommendations emerge from the current study. First, there is a clear need for more stringent controls and stronger oversight mechanisms throughout the food industry. This includes implementing robust

traceability systems, conducting thorough and frequent inspections, and enforcing accountability measures through regulatory agencies (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015) (Wardman & Lofstedt, 2009). Second, efforts must focus on educating and raising awareness among consumers about the risks and recognition of food fraud. Informative campaigns and transparent communication can help the public make knowledgeable purchasing decisions and reduce exposure to fraudulent products (Galloway et al., 2019). Both strategies are essential for mitigating the public health impact of fraudulent food products and reinforcing trust between consumers, industry, and policymakers.

Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges several limitations that influence its scope and the robustness of its analysis. First, the reliance on publicly accessible documents, such as government reports and policy documents, may introduce biases arising from political agendas or institutional priorities, potentially shaping the framing of “food fraud” and public health risks. The restricted access to confidential or classified information further constrains the comprehensiveness of the data.

Second, the focus primarily on English-language sources limits the geographic and cultural breadth of the analysis, potentially overlooking relevant discourse in non-English-speaking regions where food fraud manifestations and risk perceptions may differ. This linguistic constraint may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Third, the predominance of official or expert-generated discourse constrains direct insights into consumer interpretations and lived experiences related to food fraud, thereby restricting the understanding of how public perceptions are constructed and negotiated.

Finally, the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of “food fraud” events and the associated public health implications require ongoing analysis; therefore, the findings represent a temporal snapshot and may not fully capture emerging developments or trends. Despite these limitations, the systematic review contributes a valuable critical discourse analysis of how “food fraud” functions rhetorically in public health risk messaging, offering a foundation for further research and policy consideration (Tonkin et al., 2016).

Future Research Directions

Food fraud constitutes a significant risk to public health, and depth of research addressing this relationship is limited. However, specific directions for future research emerge from broader analyses of food safety concerns, indicating areas where empirical investigation can contribute to the knowledge base. One promising avenue involves exploring the rhetoric surrounding emerging trends in food safety. Recent emphasis on particular risks that become visible earlier in the supply chain, such as “eco-foods”, entails speculative impacts on public health and wellness that have not been rigorously examined. Greater attention to public communications on new food safety issues can better inform efforts to attenuate negative effects of food fraud, and lend a direct empirical perspective to the literature on the social amplification of risk (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2015). A second opportunity arises for longitudinal studies that relate these communications to behavioural outcomes, and thus contribute to knowledge of public health influence. While the literature covers a wide range of food contamination agents, associations between food fraud and adverse health outcomes remain unexplored due to data limitations. Reflecting this gap, research on food-labelling reveals that communication chains from perception to individual response require finer-grained analysis before effective management can be achieved (Tonkin et al., 2016). Systematic review charts a rigorous pathway toward both empirical attention and potentially consequential impact.

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