Rural economies in the Spanish region of Aragon: local intention to use high quality saffron in cookery

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Saffron spice is made up of the dried stigmas of *Crocus sativus* L. blossoms and is highly valued in cookery for its colouring, flavouring, aromatic, and healthy properties. Spain is known for the extraordinary quality of its saffron and plays a key role in the saffron world markets. Despite the progressive decline in the Spanish production, saffron is still cultivated in the regions of Castile-La Mancha and, to a less extent, in Catalonia, Aragon and Murcia. In Aragon, a large area of the territory is facing the problem of depopulation and the improvement of rural economies is a great challenge. There is a renewed interest in saffron as a sustainable high value agricultural product of social, cultural and economic importance. The development of the saffron activity in the rural area, joined to the promotion of saffron local consumption, could contribute to unlock the rural potential for competitiveness and sustainability.

The aim of this paper is to analyse local consumers' intention to use high quality saffron for culinary purposes and determine the factors explaining this intention.

A model of the intention to use high quality saffron in cookery was developed based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour proposed by Ajzen in 1991. In this model the intention to consume was assumed to be a function of four variables: the attitudes toward the use, the subjective norms, the perceived behavioural control, and the past behaviour or habits. In addition, sociodemographic and personality characteristics (background variables) were assumed to be mediators in the intention to consume through the variable "attitudes toward the use". The model was specified as a two-equation multivariate ordered probit and estimated using data from an experiment with 202 consumers conducted in Aragon in 2016. The consumers were stratified by age, gender and province of residence. A total of 18 sessions of around 12 participants were carried out. A sample of high quality saffron was presented to the participants in filaments and in a water solution so that they could observe, smell and taste it. Participants were asked to fill in a brief questionnaire to indicate their intention to consume the presented sample in cookery and their socio-demographic and personality traits. Marginal effects were assessed in order to characterize the magnitude of the studied variable influence.

Results gave evidence that attitudes toward the use, subjective norms and past behaviour or habits positively influenced the intention to use saffron in cookery. Nevertheless, the variable: perceived behavioural control was not statistically significant. The background variables positively influencing the attitudes toward using saffron in cookery were: the objective knowledge on saffron, the consumers' belief that saffron is a typical ingredient of the Spanish cuisine and the frequency of cooking; whereas consumers' belief that saffron is easily substituted for other products negatively affected this variable. On the contrary, none of the socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, income level and province of residence) explained the intention to consume high quality saffron in Aragon.