

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How confident are you in the ability of experts to provide reliable information? Evidence from a choice experiment on microplastics

Peter King 

Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
Email: P.King1@Leeds.ac.uk

(Received 13 June 2024; revised 13 February 2025, 22 March 2025; accepted 28 April 2025)

Abstract

Policy making in areas of scientific uncertainty may be shaped by the public's stated preferences (SP). SP surveys provide respondents with information about the scenario, typically from expert sources. Here, we tested whether respondents' pre-existing confidence in the ability of experts in general to provide reliable information was associated with (a) status quo bias, (b) response certainty and (c) willingness to pay (WTP) estimates. Using 670 responses to a 2020 choice experiment on microplastic restrictions in the UK, we show that being *ex ante* more confident was significantly related to less frequent status quo choices and higher response certainty. However, we only observed differences in mean WTP for our 'microplastics released' attribute. Our findings suggest that confidence in expert-provided information shapes how respondents engage with SP surveys, particularly in contexts of scientific uncertainty. Future work to further understand determinants and consequences of perceived expert trustworthiness would be insightful.

Keywords: choice experiment; entropy balancing; microplastics; uncertainty; experts

JEL classification: Q51; Q53; Q58

1. Introduction

Where scientific uncertainty persists, public confidence in expert-provided information plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards policy issues (e.g., Salanié and Treich, 2009; Sundblad *et al.*, 2009; Bennett, 2020). Whether the public trusts expert-provided information is an important aspect of many policy issues including vaccine uptake (c.f., Larson *et al.*, 2018; Sturgis *et al.*, 2021), climate change (e.g., Sundblad *et al.*, 2009) and how much to invest in adaptation and mitigation (Salanié and Treich, 2009). Prior research has evaluated how respondent beliefs about the trustworthiness, that is,