Reviewer’s report

Title: Worldwide food recall patterns over an eleven month period: a country perspective

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Reviewer: Bruce W. Traill

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1. This is an interesting paper on an important issue and using interesting data.

2. It is however hard to read. I’m still not entirely clear in my own mind whether the network analysis clarifies the mass of data or complicates its interpretation. Partly this is a matter of the unfamiliar language of network analysis, partly because the authors’ English is not always clear. For example, the following text is from the abstract:

“Results: Network analyses of the reports, based on ‘country making report’ (out-degree) and ‘country reported on’ (in-degree), revealed that the network is organized around a dominant core of countries. These highly active ‘inner core’ countries, in terms of reports, were analysed for reporting (out-degree) made versus reported (in-degree). Ten countries were reported for sixty per cent of all faulty products marketed, with the top 5 countries having received between 100 to 281 reports and the top four making no reports (in the order China > USA > Turkey > Spain). The top ten reporting countries account for three quarters of reports with three >300 (Italy: 406, Germany: 340, United Kingdom: 322).”

The first sentence tells me nothing (perhaps it should appear under methods). The second sentence is unclear—does it mean that the four countries that received most reports for unsafe food themselves made no reports? The USA and Spain made no reports? The interesting results (if clarified) appear not to depend on the network analysis but to be simply a matter of counting.

3. If I were doing this analysis I would start with the premises: (a) developed countries are more stringent (and have the resources) to be more careful checking imports—and will therefore tend to report more. (b) developing countries have less good food safety systems and will therefore export more unsafe food (their products will therefore be reported more). (c) numbers of reports made by a country depend on its level of imports (and type of imports—fresh produce is less safe that canned food); number of reports received by a country depends on its level of exports (and type of exports). I would, at a minimum, weight the number of reports by imports and exports. Then I’d analyse the results by economic status of the country and attempt to draw some conclusions about countries above or below the means (e.g. Italy reports a far higher level of food safety problems than expected with a country with a
relatively low level of imports. It is either highly vigilant or, more likely, using food
safety as a non-tariff barrier. Apart from this one deduction I have found it difficult
to draw interesting conclusions from the results as presented.

4. The network diagrams and tables don’t tell me much either.

5. My recommendation would be to drop the network analysis unless it can be
interpreted more readily and interestingly and lead to interesting subsequent
analysis. Otherwise stick to count data. In either case, extend the analysis to tell
the reader more interesting things than that 10 countries made most reports and
10 received most reports. I am reluctant to call these compulsory revisions
because there is more than one way the authors could proceed. However, I am
unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have made some
revisions.

6. Note I am not able to assess the statistical (network) analysis, though it looks
to be a simple classification procedure.

7. The manuscript needs some language corrections.

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being
published

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests