

Trends in Research on American Consumers' Motivations for Purchasing Eco-friendly Products

Daniel Ayisi Nyarko

Fally Masambuka-Kanchewa, Ph.D.

Sidney Schnor

Iowa State University

513 FarmHouse Lane,

Ames,

Iowa, 50010

Telephone: 515-2948943

Emails: dnayisi@iastate.edu, fallymk@iastate.edu and sidney@iastate.edu

Introduction

In recent years, American consumers' approaches and attitudes toward food have changed drastically. Consumers have become more selective regarding their choices and are curious to know how their food and other agricultural products are produced (Wang et al., 2020). In addition, consumers are curious to know the company's history and their social and sustainability consciousness (Wang et al., 2020). Consumers are attached to brands that reflect their personal identity and values and look for foods and products that are produced under a particular environmental condition, such as eco-friendly (Carbone & Zoellner, 2012). Eco-friendly purchasing behavior has been gaining popularity among Americans in recent years. Many consumers have started demanding quality foods and products that are produced under environmentally friendly conditions (Lin & Chang, 2012). Consequently, food-producing firms implement marketing strategies to persuade consumers by using terms like green products and eco-friendly on food labels. (Lin & Chang, 2012).

Product labels are used for communicating information about products to prospective consumers. The labels, among others, contain nutritional, health, and general information about the products; this information assists consumers in making informed agricultural product purchasing decisions (Azman & Sahak, 2014). However, many Americans find it difficult to make meaning from food labels (Guthrie et al., 2015). As consumers' perceptions and behavior toward agricultural products keep changing, it is prompting researchers' interest in knowing the main force behind this drive. However, not much is known about American consumers' perceptions and purchase behaviors of different agricultural products. Such understanding will assist in addressing any misconceptions about agricultural product labels and assist consumers to make informed decisions.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by social identity theory. Social identity theory postulates that an individual's association to a group provides them with a source of pride as such people make conscious efforts to achieve and maintain positive distinctiveness for the groups (McLeod, 2019). Social identity theory was proposed by Tajfel in 1979 (Trepte & Loy, 2017). He defined social identity as the sense of whom an individual thinks they are, based on their group memberships (Trepte & Loy, 2017). People identify things about themselves by knowing the categories they belong to; they also define acceptable behaviors based on group norms (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Social identification is the group identity tag that one carries after they have categorized themselves (McLeod, 2019).

Past studies have applied social identity to study identities that are cultivated and fostered in youth (Carter, 2014) and in alcoholism and substance addiction correction. Social identity theory is useful in consumer behavior studies because it gives the basis to understand attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors people portray towards brands. Therefore, its application is important for understanding consumers' eco-friendly purchase perceptions and behaviors. We believe that synthesizing past research findings will help to identify areas that need more studies.

Purpose

The study sought to explore the status of research conducted in the U.S on consumers' perceptions of food labeling and eco-friendly products. Specifically, the study sought to address the following objectives.

- Establish the trends in research on American consumer perceptions of eco-friendly products.
- Identify the sources of motivation for purchasing eco-friendly products.

Methods

In this study, a systematic literature review was employed. Using Google Scholar, five terms (Motivation, Product Labeling, 'Eco Labeling,' 'Greenwashing,' and 'Agriculture Product Labeling) were used to search for articles written between 2012 to 2022. This period (2012-202) was chosen because 2012 was reported as the year where there was a decline in purchase of eco-friendly products among consumers (Neff, 2012). The initial search yielded Google 407,800 articles. The next criterion for filtering search results was by title relevance which reduced the number to 115. Only articles whose titles reflected motivations alongside any of four terms were included for further review. After reading the abstracts for relevance, 24 articles were selected for further review. However, only three articles that covered research conducted in the U.S incorporated in the qualitative content analysis. Notes were taken on each source that was read. The findings from each study were systematically analyzed and summarized based on the objectives of the study.

Results

The common themes that emerged from the content analysis on consumers' perception of eco-friendliness were products with good taste, high prices, and sustaining the environment. Consumers perceive eco-friendly products to have good taste, high quality, pricy and sustain the environment (Magdaleno et al., 2021; Purohit, 2012; Hadjimichael & Hegland, 2016). Product satisfaction and positioning, labeling, price, advertisement, loyalty, consumer experience, and promotion of environmental effectiveness were identified as factors influencing consumers' motivations for buying eco-friendly products (Magdaleno et al., 2021; Purohit, 2012).

Conclusions

Based on the systematic literature review, it is concluded that American consumers regard eco-friendly products as high value and are willing to pay a premium for them. Their identity and belief influence their decision to purchase eco-friendly products. Their belief in contributing to sustainability and the influence of their social groups motivate them to purchase eco-friendly products. Many of them depend on food labels for their purchasing decisions.

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

The results indicated that there is limited research in the U.S on consumer perception and motivations for purchasing eco-friendly products. Considering the growing popularity of these products it is recommended that future study focuses on this area especially considering that most Americans are disconnected from agriculture. The research should investigate consumers ability to decipher authentic agriculture food labels, as there are increased reports about fraud when labelling agricultural products (National Archives, 2023).

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