How to Motivate People to Eat Green?

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In the past decades, the relationship between food consumption and the environment has been attracting more and more attention all over the world. From food production, to transport, and then to the final consumption, every stage of the food supply chain can contribute significantly to environmental problems. Unlike other consumption goods, food cannot be substituted, for the simple fact that it is a primary need of human beings. Thus, the dietary choices of individuals are at the same time important environmental decisions. As a result, in order to protect the environment, it is worthwhile to explore what consumers’ food-related environmental beliefs and behaviors are, so that we can know what the most effective and efficient methods are to motivate people to eat green (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

In this literature review, I will first introduce what consumers’ perceived environmental beliefs and willingness are to consume food in an environmentally friendly manner. And then, I will examine how different motives affect people’s choice of consuming food in an environmentally friendly manner. Finally, I will discuss what possible campaign methods there might be to effectively motivate people into eating more eco-friendly.

*Consumer’s perceived environmental benefits and willingness*

According to the modular LCA case study conducted by Jungbluth, Tietje, and Scholz (2000), the most significant food-related decisions contributing to pollution reduction are refusing air-transported products, purchasing relatively more organic products and reducing meat consumption. Interestingly, food products packaging is only of minor importance (Jungbluth, Tietje, & Scholz, 2000).

However, as shown in the study of Tobler et al., consumers’ perceived beliefs and willingness to consume food in an environmentally friendly manner did not seem to be consistent with these LCA results. While consumers generally believed that locally produced and organic food could benefit the environment, they often seemed to overestimate the impact of packaging material. In addition, consumers were often unaware of the relationship between meat consumption and the environment. As for willingness, while most consumers would like to compost their food scraps and buy locally produced food, they were indicating their reluctance to buy organic products and reduce their meat consumption (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

In another study conducted by Lea and Worsley focusing on Australian consumers, similar beliefs and behaviors were found. While reducing the use of packaging was viewed as the most helpful factor in pollution reduction, lowering meat consumption was considered as the least helpful. As for the food-related environmental behaviors, composting of food scraps was the most common behavior, closely followed by purchasing locally grown food. Eating less meat and purchasing organic products scored as the least often behaviors (Lea & Worsley, 2008).

*Effects of different motives on people’s food choices*

Not surprisingly, consumers usually have different motives supporting their diet decisions. As for ecological food consumption behaviors, the motives might not be limited to environmental concerns. In order to examine the relative persuasiveness of the several reasons for ecological food consumption, Tobler et al. (2011) studied the determinants influencing the consumption of seasonal fruits and vegetables and determinants influencing reduction of meat consumption separately. One important assumption they had was that the willingness to consume ecologically occurred gradually in steps instead of as a sudden change. According to the trans-theoretical model, people move from the pre-contemplation stage (“no intention of taking action in the near future”) through contemplation (“intention to change”) and then preparation (“intention to take action in the immediate future with a concrete plan of action”) to action (“lifestyle and behavior have changed”) (Jungbluth, Tietje, & Scholz, 2000, p. 675). The researchers used this model to measure respondents’ willingness to consume food ecologically friendly in their quantitative analysis (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

For the consumption of seasonal fruits and vegetables, the multinomial regression analyses showed that the taste-related motive was the most influential argument and that the preference for natural good was a strong predictor of consumers’ willingness to eat as well. In addition, women and people who finished higher education were more likely to consume seasonal fruits and vegetables. Money was not a significant role in consumers’ decision-making process (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

For the reduction of meat consumption, the multinomial regression analyses indicated that gender was the strongest predictor: Women were more likely to have already reduced their meat consumption (in the action stage) and were more unlikely to show their reluctance to this behavior (in the pre-contemplation stage). In addition, the future benefit to one’s health was another strong predictor. The effect of the ecological motive was mixed. Although people tended to consider changing their behavior, they were less likely to take their consideration into real action. The motive of reducing animal suffering was only partially influential in a way that people were ambiguous in their decision making whether they only wanted to consider it or they wanted it to be in action. Same as the case in seasonal fruits and vegetables consumption, money did not play a significant role in this case as well (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

*Recommendations of campaign methods*

Based on the empirical evidence discussed above, future campaigns addressing eco-friendly food consumption can take two routes simultaneously: One is to better inform people with the specific relation between food and the environment, and the other one is to motivate people using the most effective factors. As for the first route, detailed labeling on the food products might be one method. Different kinds of labeling can be used. The label could indicate where the product was originally grown and how much pollution it caused in its transport. The label could also have an index indicating whether this food is considered as environmentally friendly by specialists and a brief explanation of the reasons. As for the second route, campaigns need to move their excessive focus on food packaging to other more environmentally related factors. In addition, it would be more effective if campaigns could persuade people into believing that seasonal fruits and vegetables have better tastes and reduction in meat consumption is better for their health. Furthermore, future campaigns should also attach more importance to address women, since women are often the household’s gatekeepers and they tended to demonstrate more willingness to adopt ecologically friendly food consumption manners (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011).

*Conclusion*

It is interesting to see that people’s beliefs and willingness to consume food in an environmentally friendly manner are generally not based on the modular LCA prediction: People often overestimate the significance of the impact caused by packaging and underestimate the significance of the impact caused by meat consumption. Since different consumers would value different motives, it is worthwhile finding out what motives could be the most effective ones to persuade people into adopting an environmentally friendly manner. While taste is the most significant predictor in the consumption for seasonal fruit and vegetable, health is the most significant for reducing meat consumption. For future campaigns, they should better inform people with the connection between food consumption and the environment. They should also use the most effective motive factors to persuade people. Finally, women are a group of consumers who might require special attention.

# Works Cited

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