

THE IMPACT OF CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHOCOLATE PRODUCTS WITH SUSTAINABILITY LABELS ON BUYING PROCESS

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Abstract:

The consumer attitudes towards different products have a significant impact on the decision whether to purchase the product or not. Over the last 20 years a lot of initiatives have started communicating sustainability-related information about food products to consumers. The sustainability labels (among the prominent ones are the Fair Trade labels) are increasingly appearing on chocolate products. The main objective of this labelling is to inform the consumer in a way that can promote sustainable consumption. This paper evaluates consumer attitudes towards chocolate products with sustainability labels and analyses the determinants of their willingness to purchase these products. Data were collected by means of an online survey implemented among students (aged between 19 and 35, total sample size of 72 respondents) in Slovenia. The majority of the respondents expressed positive attitudes towards sustainability issues. On the other hand, a quarter of respondents have never heard from chocolate products with sustainability labels. Statistical analysis revealed that respondents from urban areas, aged between 27 and 35, with higher income, healthy lifestyle and positive attitudes towards sustainability issues, are more willing to buy sustainability-labelled chocolate products. However, the results of the survey also indicate that sustainability labels at that time do not play a major role in consumers' choices when deciding to buy a chocolate product.

Keywords: consumer, attitude, chocolate product, sustainability, label, impact, buying process

1. INTRODUCTION

The consumer attitudes towards different products have a significant impact on the decision whether to purchase the product or not. Consumer attitudes can be defined as a composite of a consumer's beliefs about, feelings about, and behavioral intentions toward some object – within the context of marketing mostly a brand or retail store (Musek Lešnik, 2013).

These components are viewed together since they are highly interdependent and together represent forces that influence how the consumer will probably react to the object.

Over the last 20 years a lot of initiatives have started communicating sustainability-related information about food products to consumers. Social and environmental sustainability has become a matter of growing interest to consumers (Euromonitor International, 2013). Therefore food labelling has been widely used by producers in order to communicate their added value of food products to consumers. The main objective of this labelling is to inform the consumer in a way that can promote sustainable consumption. We have to point out that concrete use of information, provided through sustainability labels, is related to consumer's understanding of these labels, including his/her ability to process this information correctly.

However, whether consumers gain from being provided with this information depends on their relative transaction costs for becoming informed and how receptive they seem to be to the messages (Caswell, 1998). The use of sustainability labels on food products allows producers to emphasize quality or the presence of specific attributes. The prominent sustainability labels are the Fair Trade labels that are increasingly appearing on chocolate products.

The fourth stage of buying process, in which consumers evaluate different products on the basis of varying product attributes, is heavily influenced by one's attitude, as "attitude puts one in a frame of mind: liking or disliking an object, moving towards or away from it" (Kotler et al., 2009). We can mention another factor that influences the evaluation process; this is the degree of involvement. For example, if the customer involvement is high, then he/she will evaluate a number of products; whereas if it is low, only one product will be evaluated.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of consumer attitudes towards chocolate products with sustainability labels on buying process. We have tried to analyze the determinants of consumer's willingness to purchase chocolate products with sustainability labels. The paper consists of three parts. In the first part we defined consumer attitudes, sustainability-labelled chocolate products and buying process. In the next part we described the empirical research findings, and finally, the last part consists of some conclusions.

2. CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND CHOCOLATE PRODUCTS WITH SUSTAINABILITY LABELS

2.1. Consumer attitudes

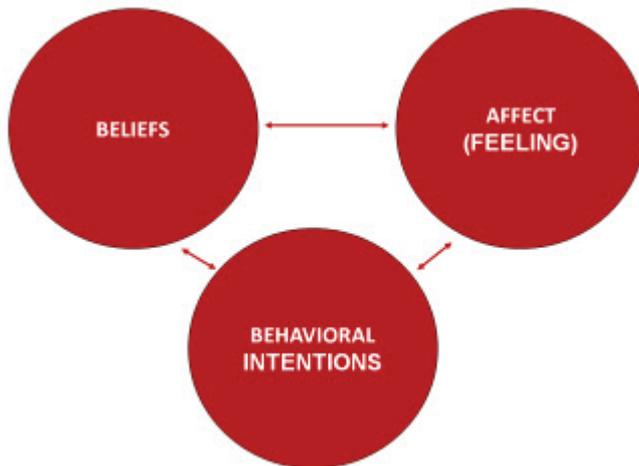
Attitudes have been defined as relatively stable opinions containing a cognitive element and an emotional element (Wade and Tavris 1996). Consideration has also been given in social psychology to the question of whether or not schemas elicit affect.

The consumer attitudes play an important role in consumer behaviour. When deciding on his/her purchase, the consumer will buy the product, which is his/her favorite one. Therefore it is very important for companies to know the attitudes of their consumers.

Regarding to literature, *multicomponent model* is the most influential model of attitude, where attitudes are evaluations of an object that have cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Nastran Ule (1997) emphasizes that the *cognitive* component of attitudes refers to the beliefs, thoughts, and attributes that we would associate with an object. Many times a person's attitude might be based on the negative and positive attributes they associate with an object. The *affective* component of attitudes refers to your feelings or emotions linked to an attitude object. Affective responses influence attitudes in a number of ways. For example, many people are afraid of snakes. So this negative

affective response is likely to cause you to have a negative attitude towards snakes. The *behavioral* component of attitudes refers to past behaviors or experiences regarding an attitude object. As we already mentioned above, consumer attitudes can be defined as a composite of a consumer's beliefs (cognitive component) about, feelings about, and behavioral intentions toward some object – within the context of marketing mostly a brand or retail store. Figure 1 shows the interaction between these three components.

Figure 1: Model of consumer attitude



Source: Katz in Musek Lešnik, 2013

The first component is *beliefs*. A consumer may hold both positive beliefs toward an object (e.g., coffee tastes good) as well as negative beliefs (e.g., coffee is easily spilled and stains papers). In addition, some beliefs may be neutral (coffee is black), and some may differ in valence depending on the person or the situation (e.g., coffee is hot and stimulates--good on a cold morning, but not good on a hot summer evening when one wants to sleep).

The second component is *affect*. Consumers also hold certain feelings toward products or other objects. Sometimes these feelings are based on the beliefs (e.g., a person feels nauseated when thinking about a hamburger because of the tremendous amount of fat it contains), but there may also be feelings which are relatively independent of beliefs. For example, an extreme environmentalist may believe that cutting down trees is morally wrong, but may have positive affect toward Christmas trees because he or she unconsciously associates these trees with the experience that he or she had at Christmas as a child.

The behavioral intention is the third component. It tells us what the consumer plans to do with respect to the object (e.g., buy or not buy the brand).

Katz (in Musek Lešnik, 2013) classified attitudes into four different groups based on their functions. These are *utilitarian*, which provides us with general approach or avoidance tendencies, *cognitive*, which helps people to organize and interpret new information, *ego-defensive* (attitudes can help people protect their self-esteem) and *value-expressive* which is used to express central values or beliefs.

Consumers often do not behave consistently with their attitudes for several reasons, such as *ability, competing demands for resources, social influence, measurement problems*. Measuring attitudes is difficult. In many situations, consumers do not consciously set out to enumerate how positively or negatively they feel about objects. When making a marketing research, we often use Likert scales.

2.2. Chocolate products with sustainability labels

The sustainability labels are increasingly appearing on chocolate products lately. Informed choice, such as in the case of nutrition labelling, is hoped to empower people to consume more sustainably (European Commission, 2008). About 15 years ago, some Dutch and French producers started to communicate sustainability labels on their chocolate products. The number of these sustainability labels has rapidly increased by now and this may result also in consumer confusion when deciding to buy such products. That is why it is very important for consumers to understand the concept of sustainable consumption. Sustainable Consumption can be define as "the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations" (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994). We are convinced that sustainability labels give consumers the opportunity to take into account ethical and environmental considerations when making a decision about buying a chocolate product. Certainly, it does not mean that the most of consumers will actually buy such products. It probably depends on their motivation to make use of sustainability labels and on their ability to understand the real meaning of these labels. Therefore the meaning of the labels should be as clear as possible. We are sure that even less motivated consumers may purchase sustainability labelled products if they clearly understand what these stand for. If they are unclear, even a very motivated consumer will not prefer to buy such sustainable product. Some studies has been investigating consumer attitudes towards sustainability labels on chocolate products. However, their results cannot be simply generalized. Many studies suggest that consumers are willing to pay extra money (up to 10% surcharge) for Fair Trade labelled products (Zander et al., 2010). On the other hand, perceived higher price is the most important reason not to buy a product with sustainability labels (Grunert, 2011).

Kimura et al. (2012) found that sustainability labelled purchases are not just influenced by intrinsic motivation for ethical issues, but can also be affected by extrinsic social factors such as the concern for one's own reputation among peers. We found out that the majority of studies suggest that many consumers are motivated to behave sustainably, while the minority of them are ready to translate their motivation into actual sustainable food choice and consumption. In our opinion this is usually related to the fact that sustainable chocolate products are more expensive.

As far as we are informed, Slovene chocolate products do not carry sustainability labels. There are some French and German chocolate products with sustainability labels available on Slovene market. We also have not noticed any Slovene study about consumer attitudes towards chocolate products with sustainability labels.

3. BUYING PROCESS

The buying process can be divided into five stages. These stages were first introduced by John Dewey in 1910. These five stages are (Vukasović, 2013):

1. Problem/Need recognition
2. Information search
3. Evaluation of alternatives
4. Purchase decision
5. Post-purchase behavior

These five stages are a good framework to evaluate consumers' buying decision process. However, it is not necessary that customers get through every stage, nor is it necessary that they proceed in any particular order. For example, if a customer feels the urge to buy chocolate, he or she might go straight to the purchase decision stage, skipping information search and evaluation. The fourth stage (purchase decision) is heavily influenced by consumer attitudes towards different products. In the next part of our paper we will take a look on our research.

4. THE RESEARCH

4.1. Research methodology

Data were collected by means of an online survey implemented among students (aged between 19 and 35, total sample size of 72 respondents, who liked to eat chocolate) of 6 different HEIs in Slovenia. 69 % of respondents were female, 31 % male. 80 % of students came from HEIs focused on social, business and educational studies, 20 % from the HEIs focused on mathematics, science and agriculture.

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of different questionnaires found in the literature. The questionnaires were distributed by e-mail and also by using social media. The most used measurement technique was five-grade Likert scale (1-strongly disagree; 5- strongly agree).

Data was analyzed by MS Office and statistical package SPSS. The statistical analysis was mostly based on calculation of mean values and Pearson correlation.

4.2. Research results

Firstly we analyzed some demographic data. The average personal monthly income of the respondents was 560 €. The lowest was 225 €, the highest 1234 €. We decided to divide the respondents into two groups regarding to their income. The first group involves monthly income up to 560 € (72,2 %), the second above 560 € (27,8 %). 67 % were not employed, the rest 33 % were employed. We also established two age groups; Age Group 1 (19-26 years old) and Age Group 2 (27-35 years old). Age Group 1 consist of 50 respondents (69,4 %), Age Group consists of 22 respondents (30,6 %). 68 % of respondents were undergraduate students (bachelor), 32 % of respondents postgraduate (master) students. 62,5 % of respondents lived in urban areas, 37,5 % in rural areas. Then we analyzed answers of our respondents about sustainability issues (Table 1).

Table 1: Claims connected to sustainability

Sustainability issues	Mean	Standard deviation
I try to save energy	4,04	0,43
I practice car sharing	2,86	0,32
I try to minimize waste	4,12	0,34
I use transport with low environmental impact	3,43	0,23
I contribute to environmental organizations	3,31	0,31
I am concerned about the conditions of life in the developing countries	4,01	0,21
I prefer to eat chocolate products that are packaged in an environmentally friendly way	4,00	0,25
I prefer to eat chocolate products that are produced without exploiting children	4,02	0,32
I prefer to eat chocolate products where cocoa was grown using sustainable agriculture practices	4,06	0,35

It can be said that our respondents were quite sustainable oriented. The respondents highly agreed (4,12) with the importance of minimizing their waste. On the other hand, the respondents did not often practice car sharing (3,31). The last finding can be connected to Slovene habit that almost every one prefers to drive its own car.

Because of the lack of space in this paper we could not write down and analyze every question we asked our respondents. We also found out that 56 % of the respondents treated their lifestyle as

“healthy.” Significant is also, that 25 % of the respondents have never heard about chocolate products with sustainability labels. We also asked respondents to rank the determinants when they decided to buy a chocolate product. The majority (52 %) set to the first place price, only 18 % set there sustainability labels. This ranking was for us quite expected because the monthly income of most respondents is under Slovene average. At the end of our questionnaire we asked students whether they were willing to pay more for sustainability labelled chocolate. We also compared answers regarding to Age Group and Monthly Income. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Willingness to pay (WTP) more for chocolate products with sustainability labels

WTP	Mean
All respondents	3,25
Age Group 1	2,50
Age Group 2	4,00
Monthly Income Group 1	2,64
Monthly Income Group 2	3,86
Urban areas	3,45
Rural areas	3,05
Healthy lifestyle	3,97

We can claim that older respondents (27-35 years old) with healthy life style, who have higher monthly income and live in urban areas, are more willing to pay higher price (in comparison to “normal” chocolate products) for chocolate products with sustainability labels. The majority of older respondents (Age Group 2) are employed so they have higher monthly income. People in urban areas are obviously more concerned about the concept of sustainability. We can explain this also with the fact that in urban areas there are many shops, where consumer can buy different (also sustainability labelled) chocolate products.

Table 3: Correlation between the claim A “I prefer to eat chocolate products where cocoa was grown using sustainable agriculture practices” and Claim B “Willingness to pay (WTP) more for chocolate products with sustainability labels”

Correlations		Claim B	Claim A
Claim B	Pearson Correlation	1	,048
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,917
	N	72	72
Claim A	Pearson Correlation	,048	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,917	
	N	72	72

Table 3 shows us correlations between two claims mentioned above. We can see that there is no strong correlation between preference to eat chocolate products with sustainability labels and WTP for this product. We can conclude that the price is the most important factor when deciding to buy chocolate products with sustainability labels.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We live in a time when sustainability issues play an important role in a consumer’s life. A significant number of consumers in the world are indeed willing to pay extra money for chocolate products with sustainability labels. Lotz et al. (2013) have stated that previous studies have shown that sustainability labels might yield a positive effect which is transferred to the product.

In our study we found out that respondents from urban areas, aged between 27 and 35, with higher income, healthy lifestyle and positive attitudes towards sustainability issues, are more willing to buy sustainability-labelled chocolate products. According to ranking of the determinants of consumers’ willingness to purchase these products, the price plays the most important role. This fact was expected because in our online survey took part students from Slovene HEIs who were mostly not employed and who had quite low income compared to average monthly income in Slovenia.

We are convinced that the majority of consumers in Slovenia have positive attitudes towards chocolate products with sustainability labels. On the other hand, sustainability labelled products will be able to play a major role in buying decision process when their prices will be lower.

Summing up, we are particularly pleased that the respondents were aware of the importance of sustainable development. That can help us to preserve our planet Earth.

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