

# Sustainable Marketing and Consumers' Food Preference

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Consumers can contribute to the sustainability of the agri-food system by choosing products and performing behaviors that are environmentally, socially, and economically friendly. They are increasingly interested in buying organic, short supply chain, and local food. In this sense, food attributes such as origin, production process, and nutritional characteristics become essential in guiding their purchasing decisions. Marketing tools such as labeling schemes and information campaigns play a key role in facilitating consumers in their food choices. The analysis of consumer preferences is a fundamental phase in the development of strategies for sustainable agriculture and food marketing. The information frame that the numerous studies conducted in this field have generated to date, however, risks being undermined by the advent of COVID-19. This new context indeed brings to the attention of researchers the question of the possible variation in the preferences and purchasing behavior of consumers. In light of this event of a global magnitude, it appears particularly interesting to analyze the effects on consumers' preferences, and their habits, in view of identifying new models of sustainable marketing, capable of steering consumption toward products with a lesser environmental impact and, at the same time, to support the local agriculture and food sector.

In that sense, this Special Issue is covering different aspects related to food consumption and presents contributions focusing on the analysis of consumers' food preferences and sustainable marketing strategies taking into account the influence of COVID-19 on eating habits. This editorial intends to point out key aspects of the contributions to highlighting their importance and stimulating scientific awareness and understanding.

Starting by highlighting an original research paper contributed to this Special Issue, Cordero-Ahiman et al. (Contribution 1 (see Appendix A)) in "Responsible marketing in the traffic light labeling of food products in Ecuador: Perceptions of Cuenca consumers", address traffic light labeling of food products, a scheme providing information to consumers about the nutritional characteristics of food and allowing comparisons among similar products. The study analyzes consumer understanding of traffic light labels in the urban area of Cuenca, Ecuador. The authors performed a cross-sectional investigation by collecting 384 surveys. The econometric models' results showed that education, knowledge of labeling, and knowledge of marketing were related to a superior likelihood of having a higher understanding of traffic light labels. Moreover, the authors found that income, knowledge of traffic light labels, illnesses, and knowledge of marketing were associated with people being more likely to use traffic light labels. An interesting finding is that consumers who stated the COVID-19 pandemic to have influenced their eating habits presented a greater probability of using traffic light labels. The authors conclude that traffic light labeling is an effective responsible marketing tool in Ecuador. However, they highlight the need of performing campaigns to educate consumers about responsible eating for increasing their food security, the nutritional value of their diets, and reducing the risk of non-communicable diseases.

Contribution 2, written by Errach et al., is entitled "Sustainability labels on olive oil: A review on consumer attitudes and behavior". The study reviews the literature about



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labels carrying sustainability information on olive oil including a focus on consumers' preferences for the product. In total, 42 articles were analyzed and three typologies of labels were identified: origin labels, environmental labels, and social-cultural labels. The findings reveal that origin labels are the most present sustainability labels in olive oil. Consumers living in producing countries are more sensitive to origin labels and are more likely to purchase oil from their country. Concerning environmental labels, the authors observed that organic certification is sometimes considered more important than geographical certification. However, the main reasons for consuming organic oil are personal motivation such as better tasting and safety, not altruistic reasons such as environmental sustainability. Social and cultural labels were studied only in two papers confirming that consumers are sensitive to the cultural importance of olive oil. The authors conclude their review article by stating that, in general, consumers' attitudes towards olive oil carrying sustainability labels are positive and they are willing to pay more for those products. However, the main drivers of consumption are not linked to sustainability. The authors call for new contributions in analyzing consumers' preferences for olive oil sustainability labels.

An analysis of the changes in consumers' diets during the COVID-19 pandemic is performed in Contribution 3 written by Gerini et al. in their original research paper entitled "Adherence to the Mediterranean diet and COVID-19: A segmentation analysis of Italian and US consumers". A sample of 1228 respondents, including 726 from Italy and 502 from New York, participated in the survey by filling in an online questionnaire about their dietary habits before the pandemic, during, and after the lockdown of 2020 indicted to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Mediterranean diet was taken as a reference as it is considered a dietary model universally recognized as healthy by the scientific community. The authors observed a general increase in fruits, vegetables, sweets, and snack consumption during the pandemic. This tendency shows a progressive worsening in adherence to the Mediterranean diet in Italy and the United States during the pandemic. Moreover, the authors identified four homogeneous consumer groups concerning the adherence to the Mediterranean diet before the pandemic, and during and after the lockdown. The "Worsened" were those whose adherence to the Mediterranean diet diminished as a consequence of increased consumption of nearly all the food categories during the lockdown period. The "Moderate" maintained consumption of each category constant. The "Virtuous" consumers were those whose adherence to the Mediterranean diet was the highest and remained constant during the pandemic. The "Least careful" consumers were those with the lowest adherence before the pandemic, which declined further during and after the lockdown. The study shows the negative impacts of the pandemic on the dietary habits of Italian and US consumers, in part linked to emotional eating, which is a cause for concern about the potential future impacts on the health of consumers. Concluding, the authors recall the attention of policymakers for increasing consumers' awareness about correct eating habits and for implementing policies aimed at promoting healthy diets.

Contribution 4 entitled "How collectivism affects organic food purchase intention and behavior: A study with Norwegian and Portuguese young consumers" is written by Roseira et al. The article explores organic food consumption behavior in Norway and Portugal by considering collectivism, a cultural dimension referring to the preference society has for the social framework. The authors extend the model of the Theory of Planned Behavior by adding constructs such as the perceived price of organic food, availability, health consciousness, environmental concern, and collectivism. The implementation of a structural equation model demonstrated that collectivism has a positive impact on attitude, subjective norm, perceived price, and environmental concern towards organic food. However, collectivism did not have a statistically significant impact on product availability and health concerns. Moreover, the authors found that attitude, subjective norm, perceived price, health consciousness, and environmental concerns have a positive impact on intention to purchase organic food, even though availability does not influence intention. In line with other studies, Roseira et al. find a positive impact of intention on organic consumption behavior. Concerning the differences between the two countries,

the positive impacts of collectivism on availability and availability on purchase intention are significant only in Portugal. This contribution reveals that higher collectivist-oriented consumers are those who give relevance to the environment and subjective norms and are the most inclined to buy organic products. The authors conclude their article by proposing to policymakers and companies to consider the impact of culture, i.e., collectivism, when designing their strategies for fostering organic food consumption.

The contributions of this Special Issue provide a broad examination of consumers' preferences towards sustainable food and diets and their related marketing implications. This area is an ongoing field of research with the challenge of providing valuable and effective insights for all the stakeholders involved in sustainability goals for safe eating and resilient and green food systems of the future. We would like to thank all the authors for their valuable contributions to this Special Issue providing new important insights into sustainability and consumers' food preferences. We also thank the reviewers for their comments and suggestions that helped to improve the significance of the contributions. Finally, we also would like to thank the staff of MDPI for their constant and valuable support.

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## Appendix A. List of Contributions

1. Cordero-Ahiman, O.V.; Vanegas, J.L.; Fernández-Lucero, C.A.; Torres-Torres, D.F.; Ayaviri-Nina, V.D.; Quispe-Fernández, G.M. Responsible marketing in the traffic light labeling of food products in Ecuador: Perceptions of Cuenca consumers. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 3247.
2. Erraach, Y.; Jaafer, F.; Radić, I.; Donner, M. Sustainability labels on olive oil: A review on consumer attitudes and behavior. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 12310.
3. Gerini, F.; Fantechi, T.; Contini, C.; Casini, L.; Scozzafava, G. Adherence to the Mediterranean diet and COVID-19: A segmentation analysis of Italian and US consumers. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 3823.
4. Roseira, C.; Teixeira, S.; Barbosa, B.; Macedo, R. How collectivism affects organic food purchase intention and behavior: A study with Norwegian and Portuguese young consumers. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 7361.