Towards a New Framework of Eco-Food Consumption: the Importance of Contextual Drivers

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This study explores how contextual drivers (e.g., cultural values, media discourses, food safety regulations, and geographical characteristics) influence consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward eco-food in the US and Norway. As a result, we suggest a new conceptual framework adding a contextual dimension to our understanding of eco-food consumption.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024329/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Green consumer trends demonstrate that an influential group of aware and ethical consumers has emerged. However, what consumers say about the importance of ethical and environmental issues often differs from their actual behavior, and the share of eco-friendly food in total consumption has remained low (Rousseau and VanKen 2013). Frequently this gap between consumers’ attitudes and their actual buying behavior refers to the so-called attitude-behavior gap (Carrigan, Szmigin, and Wright 2004). The gap can potentially be explained by the multifaceted nature of sustainable consumption. Existing studies mostly focus on individual consumer characteristics, which means that macro and structural causes of sustainable consumption tend to be ignored (Thørgesen 2010). For example, the cultural context needs to be taken into account, as it has a direct influence on social pressure and pro-environmental value orientation (Kumar, Manrai, and Manrai 2017; Strizhakova and Coulter 2013). Thørgesen (2010) argues that both macro factors (e.g., culture) and structural factors (e.g., political regulation, national labelling systems) are more important determinants for sustainable consumption than individual-level attitudinal variables.

This study looks on one particular type of sustainable consumption, namely eco-food (i.e., food encompassing environmental, ethical, and health benefits) and addresses the wider social framework and cultural system in which this type of food is consumed. As a result, we suggest a new conceptual framework that contributes a contextual dimension to our understanding of eco-food consumption. In this way, we extend the existing literature by suggesting that consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward eco-food are influenced by five contextual drivers: (1) cultural values; (2) media discourses (which focus on different issues in different societies); (3) governance and law (different food safety regulations, differences in trust in national/stately systems); (4) geographical characteristics (e.g., country size, access to locally, regionally and nationally produced food); and (5) country-of-origin effect/provenance (preference for national vs. local food).

Our aim is to explore how these contextual factors explain the differences in consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward eco-food in the US and Norway. Both countries are developed and industrialized and contain a growing eco-food market. However, they differ on cultural orientations and other dimensions (country size, food regulations, media discourse, and so on). We can therefore expect differences in the importance of eco-food concerns. To collect the data, we conducted 40 in-depth interviews in Norway and the US (twenty in each country). The researcher began by discussing consumers’ food habits and their salient concerns pertaining to food purchases. The interviewer then explained the concept of eco-food, probing informants’ perceptions of the category and its salience to their purchasing and eating behavior. Moreover, the interviewer probed for contextual factors influencing consumers’ perceptions of eco-food. The interview procedure yielded around 520 pages of transcribed single-spaced text. The research team utilized the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1968) to identify the presence of the contextual drivers discussed in the conceptual framework. In addition, the researchers conducted a media discourse analysis to identify food and eco-food related topics discussed in the media in the US and Norway. We also compared the food safety regulations in both countries.

We discerned the following patterns when comparing responses from Norway and the US. Like previous research (e.g., Carrigan et al. 2004), the current study shows consumers experience an attitude-behavior gap in both countries. Specifically, informants offer two broad reasons for not purchasing eco-food, or for not buying as much as they would have liked – namely, price and access. Nevertheless, interesting differences emerge between American and Norwegian consumers when they explain the reasons for buying eco-food. While American consumers highlight the health benefits, ethical considerations and animal welfare are the most prevalent among their Norwegian counterparts. Moreover, Norwegian consumers exhibit much stronger preferences for nationally produced food, as they consider Norwegian food to be similar to eco-food along the dimensions of safety and ethicality. We argue these differences can be partly explained by contextual factors such as cultural values, differences in media discourse, food regulations, a nation’s geographical characteristics and provenance effects. Norwegian culture emphasizes egalitarianism and harmony and de-emphasizes mastery, which calls for selfless concern for the welfare of others (Schwartz 2006). In contrast, American individualism emphasizes affective autonomy and mastery at the expense of harmony (Schwartz 2006). This combination leads to justifying and encouraging egoistic self-advancement.

This distinction may result in a more functional, self-focused approach to eco-food in the US (with a focus on health and taste benefits), while ethical (and especially animal welfare) issues prevail in Norway. In addition, our analysis reveals that focus on issues in the media differs in the US and Norway. While Norwegian media devotes attention to animal welfare issues, there is still more emphasis on health issues and food safety (e.g., pesticides and hormones) in the US. Our informants confirm the influence of media discourses and refer to recent feature stories in the media while explaining their reasons for buying eco-food. Moreover, Norway has more restrictive food safety regulations (EcoWatch 2014), which can explain consumers’ trust to non-eco-food produced in Norway. Geographical differences may also play a role. Norway is much smaller country than the USA and it can explain the different perceptions of provenance. While consumers in the USA exhibit preference for local non-eco-food, Norwegians perceive local food much broader and prefer all the food produced in Norway.

This study contributes to the existing literature by bringing attention to the contextual factors which were earlier neglected in the literature (Thørgesen 2010). The findings are important for both companies and policy makers as we highlight the importance of taking into account contextual dimensions while promoting eco-food in different countries. However, this study has a number of limitations and more research is necessary. We address only two countries and the research can be extended to different types of cultures, e.g. more collectivistic cultures. We also do not focus on the variations between ethnic groups, which can be especially important in the US. Moreover, there is a need to consider how a combination of product-, consumer- and context-level drivers influences eco-food consumption.
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