Sustainable consumption in Australia: What do Generation Y consumers know about their food choices?

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on sustainable marketing by reviewing recent studies on individual’s awareness and perceptions of the environmental impacts of their food choices. Then empirical qualitative results from a cohort of Generation Y (Gen Y) respondents (being current university students around 20 years old) in Australia are presented. These results examined their understanding of sustainable food through investigating factors motivating their food choices and the importance they place on environmental issues.

Results indicated that they have a wide range of perceptions about a sustainable diet as well as specific views about sustainable behaviours in the context for food purchases, consumption, how food is produced and the types of food purchased. In conclusion the understanding of sustainable food amongst this group of Generation Y consumers in Australia is inadequate.

Introduction

Concern about the long term impact on the natural environment of high levels of global consumption associated with mass consumerism, particularly in developed countries, has led to the emergence of a relatively new focus for marketing, that of sustainable consumption research. Not surprisingly food is a major focus for this. Food is a daily choice for all citizens and the food system is a large contributor to global warming, at around 20% of greenhouse gas emissions (Friel, et al., 2009).

With increasing urbanisation of the population in most countries, including Australia, people increasingly rely on shop-bought foods and producing their own food has become less popular. This has led to the consumption of more processed foods, increased food packaging and food having to travel longer distances from producer to the consumer, all of which have a negative impact on the environment. However, the emphasis of most Government campaigns related to food consumption in Australia has been on the notion of eating for improved health outcomes. Thus the population is establishing an awareness of the impact that their food choices have on the environment from other sources.

Literature Review

When investigating individual’s awareness and perceptions of sustainable food, one of the primary issues that needs to be considered is the multiple ways in which people understand the issue. Customers find the different terminologies used confusing, such as organic, green or environmentally friendly (Bhaskaran, Polonsky, Cary, & Fernandez, 2006) or cage-free or natural (Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007). Such ongoing confusion over terminology has been noted as one of the reasons why sustainable development hasn’t been widely incorporated into curriculums in higher education in the UK (Cotton, Warren, Maiboroda, & Bailey, 2007). This highlights the need to ascertain the range of perceptions people have about sustainable food.
Interestingly, research has also shown that consumers see Government and industry as being responsible for the environmental impacts of the food system. For many people food is taken for granted and in their busy lifestyles they do not attempt to find out where their food comes from or how it was produced (Kriflik & Yeatman, 2005).

In addition to minimum levels of health and hygiene, packaged food products in Australia already have nutrition labelling. Further some have environmental labels, such as carbon foot-prints, food miles, and certified organic. Although the value of these for consumers varies as many feel overloaded with information when they are making their purchases (Umberger, Scott, & Stringer, 2008).

Research has identified that some consumers feel certain retail outlets provide more environmentally friendly food than others, such as local food outlets (Pearson & Bailey, 2009) which include farmers markets (Conner, Colasanti, Ross, & Smalley, 2010). Also some food production systems are seen to be more sustainable. The organic production system is an example where a certification mark on individual products in the retail outlet provides information for the consumer. Growing some of your own food is also seen as being good for the environment and has the additional benefit of influencing consumer’s understanding about food and where it comes from. Although it has been reported that it is not very important to younger adults (Kriflik & Yeatman, 2005), such as those in Gen Y.

Within all of this discussion about the sustainability of different food products and associated purchases it is important to note that expressing a concern does not always result in a behaviour that is consistent with it. This is widely known as the attitude-behaviour gap and is evident in many areas of consumer behaviour. For example, it has been reported that valuing organic food production methods does not necessarily correspond with purchase and consumption of organic foods (Bellows, Onyango, Diamond, & Hallman, 2008) and this may be related to the barriers of high cost of many organic products and their limited availability (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). Thus it is not only access to knowledge, but capacity to purchase, from both a financial perspective and in terms of geographic access, that impacts on consumer choices. Hence the promotion of some sustainable food choices may impact on inequalities in society in terms of those who can afford certain food choices as well as those who have the time to pursue these food options (Dowler, 2008).

Some research suggests that many people have an innate desire to ‘do the right thing’ and lead more environmentally friendly lifestyle but they lack the knowledge and understanding of what constitutes best practice when it comes to sustainable food (Bhaskaran, et al., 2006; Duffy, Fearne, & Healing, 2005) as well as having difficulty identifying environmentally friendly products in the retail environment (Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008).

Research from the UK investigating the public’s understanding of sustainable food has reported that for most consumers the primary link is to a healthy diet (Defra, 2007). This association is created through aspiring to eat regular meals that comprise a balanced diet which includes a range of healthy products such as fruit and vegetables combined with quality meat and dairy products.

Even those who do have some knowledge about the sustainability of their food choices may be misguided. For example, recent research in Australia has reported that consumers believed that the decreased use of packaging was the most important aspect of environmentally
friendly food consumption, whereas lower meat consumption was seen to help the least (Lea & Worsley, 2007). This directly contrasts the latest scientific recommendations on how to make diets more sustainable by the Sustainable Development Commission in the UK (SDC, 2009). This report placed the highest priority on three areas, namely: lowering meat and dairy consumption, consuming less low nutritional value products, and reducing food waste. The other lower priority behavioural change areas identified are: increasing consumption of seasonal and field grown (as opposed to glasshouse production) fresh fruits and vegetables, fish only from sustainable sources, increasing consumption of organic food, reducing energy use in food purchases and cooking, and finally, drinking tap water rather than from bottles.

Based on the diversity of issues raised in the literature, both from consumer studies and the scientific evidence, there is value in gaining an understanding of contemporary beliefs and behaviour of Australian consumers.

Methodology

The exploratory nature of the research question led to the use of focus group discussions combined with a brief survey that used open response questions. Content analysis was undertaken of this qualitative data. A total of 30 respondents enrolled in a second year undergraduate marketing unit (Advertising Strategy) at the University of Canberra participated. There was an almost equal split across the genders as well as some living in catered college rooms, others renting with unrelated adults, and some living at home. The majority classified themselves as Australians, although some had parents who were born overseas. A small minority were overseas students from a variety of Asian countries.

The majority of the participants were aged between 19 and 21, with only two mature age students. Thus most were born around 1990 and hence are around the middle age group for Gen Y which is variously defined as those born in the mid 1970s to the early 2000s. Hence, the ability to generalise from this research is limited as it only gathered information on a narrow age, education and geographic cohort of Gen Y individuals.

To create a relevant frame of reference for the respondents, whilst avoiding directing their thoughts, respondents were asked to think about sustainable food consumption. Then the two main prompt questions were ‘What comes to mind when someone asks you what a sustainable diet is?’ and ‘How could you make your own diet more sustainable?’

Results and discussion

The discussion of results has been grouped according to the main themes identified in the literature review. It starts with consideration of the multiple ways in which consumers understand the idea of a sustainable diet. This is followed by discussion of the context for food purchase, where it was consumed, and how it was produced. The final section of results discusses the types of food purchased.

Range of perceptions about a sustainable diet

There are multiple ways in which people understand the term sustainable diet. Without identification of the use of sustainable in relation to the impact on the natural environment,
use of the phrase ‘sustainable diet’ led many respondents to connect ‘diet’ with an eating pattern that was aiming to achieve a specific personal outcome, such as losing weight. Further, in this context ‘sustainable’ was linked with how long it lasted, such as sticking to the specific diet for as long as possible. Whilst other respondents had a very succinct view that a sustainable diet is one that “maintains a balance between the environment, indulgence and healthy eating.” or “food that is both good for the environment as well as humans.”

When sustainable diet was linked with the impact on the natural environment some respondents felt overwhelmed by the issue. As one respondent stated “the term is not clear enough to bring the message about what a sustainable diet is. It’s a bit complicated for me to understand.” This was echoed by another who stated that “It’s a very broad topic – I don’t really have a grasp on what defines a sustainable diet.”

**Context for food purchase**

Respondents provided a number of suggestions for how to increase the sustainability of their food choices in relation to where the food was produced and purchased. Whilst a preference was expressed for purchasing food that had been grown (and/or processed) locally, including growing some of their own food, it was recognised that making this an essential criteria would restrict choice. However, it was generally felt that it was not necessary to import food from overseas as they felt a diverse and interesting diet could be sourced from within Australia.

Respondents did not have strong views about the sustainability of the different type of retail outlets, such as food service, supermarkets and complementary retail outlets (such as food co-operatives and farmers markets). However, some mentioned that take-away food outlets were seen as being less attractive, mainly because they tend to sell more junk food which has limited value for their overall health, rather than because of any direct negative impact on the environment.

A major area of concern was how much food was purchased. This had an impact on food wastage as well as the amount eaten. Many respondents simply stated that they wanted to “waste less food” or “buy what they need... don’t overbuy or over eat.” In addition, some felt that “putting food waste into the compost” which “improved the health of the garden” as well as being an example of “recycling products properly.”

Finally, some respondents felt that they lacked the will, as well as information, to make their diet more sustainable. With comments like “needing a strong determination to go through the process needed” and the desire to “Get more information on this area.”

**Context for food consumption**

How the food was eaten was also seen as being important. Respondents generally felt that reducing snacks in favour of three balanced meals a day was better for their health and that this had an indirect positive impact on the environment. In line with previous research (Defra, 2007) respondents made a strong association between a sustainable diet and a healthy diet as evidenced by comments such as the “continuous practice of eating healthy foods” where healthy was mainly associated with eating fresh fruits and vegetables.

**How food was produced**
A number of respondents suggested that home-grown food was more sustainable, however, they all recognised the difficulties associated with finding the time and land to do this. In addition, some respondents suggested that organic produced foods were more sustainable. Comments included “green food... health for the body and no added chemicals... organic food... is original and raw.’

**Types of food purchased**

It would appear that respondents make a very strong link between type of foods purchased and the sustainability of their diet. There was a very strong preference for reducing purchases of products with large amounts of packaging, particularly plastic packaging as well as plastic bags. In addition, recycling this packaging with the benefits of “biodegradable containers and wrapping” were mentioned.

Also here was a general desire to reduce purchases of highly processed foods which included those low nutritional value junk foods that tend to have high levels of salt, sugar and fat. These reductions were substituted with increased purchases of more natural products with fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, water and fruit juices all being mentioned. Interesting, there was very little mention of reducing red meat purchases and an associated low level of knowledge about its negative impact on the environment. Although a few did mentioned the environmental advantages of being a vegetarian or vegan.

**Conclusion**

The results from this research indicate that the understanding of sustainable food amongst the cohort of Gen Y consumers in Australia is inadequate. This is because there are many gaps in their knowledge as well as areas where their perceptions are inconsistent with the latest scientific recommendations.

These consumers are missing knowledge about the important area of lowering meat and dairy consumption. This has already been identified in previous Australian based research (Lea & Worsley, 2007). However, they do know about the other high priority areas of consuming less low nutritional value products and reducing food waste. In the other lower priority areas these consumers have knowledge about the benefits of increasing purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables, organic products and consuming healthy drinks. However, they lack any awareness about the other low priority areas. These include: reducing energy use in food purchases and cooking; purchasing fish from sustainably managed sources; the benefits from purchasing according to seasonal production patterns (and the issues associated with outdoor rather than glasshouse grown vegetables) as well as the environment advantages associated with drinking tap water rather than from bottles.

Thus it is necessary to validate these qualitative findings with a quantitative survey from a representative sample of the Australian population to identify the priority areas for consumer education. As one respondent stated “It’s a long way before sustainable diets become the norm... it’s a work in progress.”
References


