

Own country is best

How country of origin, labels and seasonality affect consumers' environmental and social sustainability perceptions of food

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1 Introduction

- The demand for sustainable food is increasing¹.
 - Simple rules of thumb could help consumers to make more sustainable food choices^{2,3}.
- **How do consumers actually assess environmental and social sustainability of foods?**

2 Method overview

- Online experiments with two different tasks:
 - a) Assess the environmental impact of different food products
 - b) Assess the social sustainability of different food products
- Sample:
 - 305 participants from the Swiss population
 - 51.1% female
 - Mean age: 46 years ($SD = 15$)

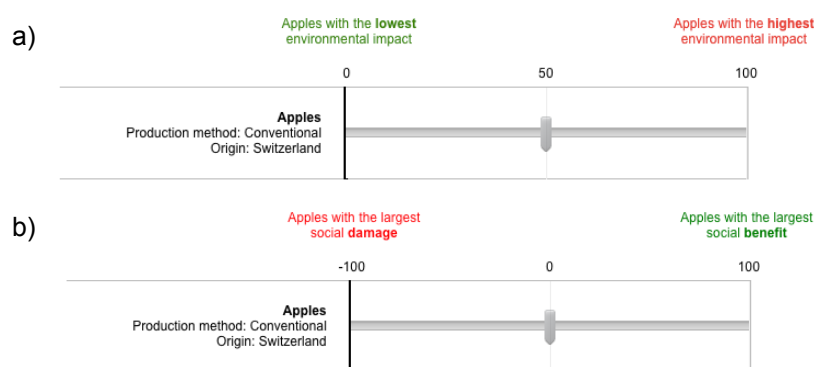


Fig. 1. Scroll bars for assessing a) environmental impact and b) social sustainability

3 Materials

5 product categories:

- Bell peppers
- Apples
- Coffee
- Peppermint tea
- Cane sugar



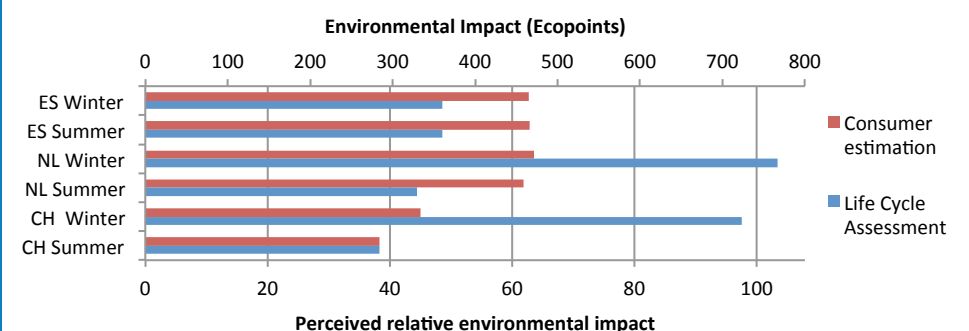
varying in:

- Production country
- Labelling (without label, with organic label, with fair-trade label)
- Seasonality

4 Results and discussion

- Swiss products were always rated most environmental friendly and socially sustainable.
- Production countries were differentiated based on three areas for both social and environmental sustainability assessments: domestic, continental and intercontinental.
- Labelled products were perceived as being most environmentally sustainable (independent of label type, i.e. organic or fair-trade).
- Fair-trade products were rated as most socially sustainable, followed by organic products.
- For some product-country combinations, organic label had more influence on perceived sustainability of imported than of domestic products.
- Seasonality was taken into account by respondents but its effect was highly underestimated.

Fig. 2 Mean perceived environmental impact (consumer estimation) of bell peppers differing in production country and season of purchase compared to the environmental impact calculated with Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)



Note: Country codes according to ISO 3166-1. ES: Spain, NL: the Netherlands, CH: Switzerland

5 Conclusion

Consumers' strategy of using country and label as cues for estimating environmental impact works reasonably well. However, some systematic misconceptions should be addressed:

- **Mode of transport** is mainly neglected
- The effect of **seasonality is underestimated**
- **Little differentiation** is made between the organic and fair-trade labels.

6 References

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