

EXAMINING FOOD PREFERENCES IN THE FACE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES

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INTRODUCTION

The dietary preferences of consumers have been changing rapidly in the last decade, especially as consumers realise that their food choices, apart from having health implications, also come with environmental consequences. The environmental consequences of food production relate to their greenhouse gas emissions (i.e., carbon footprint), and utilisation of water (i.e., water footprint). In addition, there is a potential risk that food production may lead to water quality degradation. Critically, while trends in consumers' food preferences suggest support for climate change mitigation efforts, less is known about the value consumers place on other environmental attributes, particularly the risk to water quality associated with food production. In this study, we examine Irish consumers' preferences for environmental attributes implicit in food products, with a specific focus on how much they value the potential risk to water quality, carbon, and water footprints.

DATA AND METHODS

The study uses data from an online survey conducted in October 2021 and administered to a nationally representative sample of Irish consumers. Additionally, the survey specifically targeted adults that regularly make decisions with respect to buying meat and vegetables and excluded those who do not prepare meals at home regularly. Overall, a total of 1,249 respondents completed the survey with the analysis focusing on three food product types: beef, chicken, and vegetables. Our analytical approach allowed for the differentiation of

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consumer cohorts based on preferences, beliefs, and the value they place on the environmental attributes presented in each food type.

RESULTS

Generally, across the food types, relative to products with high environmental impacts, consumers prefer beef, chicken and vegetables labelled as having lower environmental impacts. These preferences are more pronounced with the beef and chicken products in contrast to the vegetable product. The analysis classifies consumers into three broad cohorts based on their preferences.

For the beef product, two of the three cohorts, totalling 67% of consumers, are willing to pay premiums for products with lower environmental impacts, i.e., low carbon or water footprints or low risk to water quality. For the chicken product, all three consumer cohorts are willing to pay a premium for a chicken product produced in a more environmentally sustainable manner. For example, among consumers who expressed willingness to pay a higher price premium, these ranges from 25% to an excess of 100% for beef or chicken produced with a moderate versus high risk of water pollution. For the remaining consumer cohorts, the price of the food product was the primary factor driving purchasing decisions. There was no clear-cut distinction between the different cohorts of vegetable consumers in terms of their values and preferences. Perhaps this may be because the majority of these respondents feel they already engage in sustainable consumption behaviour when consuming vegetables.

There were no readily identifiable socio-demographic factors that are correlated with consumers that are willing to pay a premium associated with environmentally sustainable food production. Instead, the research finds that consumers' beliefs, especially those related to environmental issues, are a key driver of their food purchasing decisions.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over 60% of respondents in this study have preferences related to the environmental attributes of food products and expressed a potential willingness to pay a premium for such products (though preferences vary across consumer cohorts and food types). The challenge for food policy is to effectively translate this interest into actual purchasing behaviours. The extent to which this can be done may significantly impact farming and the agri-food industry, moving environmentally sustainable food products from niche to mainstream. Understanding what differentiates consumer cohorts as well as the factors that drive sustainable consumption beyond traditional socio-demographic characteristics would serve to support targeted climate change mitigation efforts from a sustainable food consumption perspective. This research suggests that targeted communication and information dissemination on the environmental impacts of food production at point-of-sale benefits consumers by enabling them to make informed purchasing decisions.

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