

Cultivating Sustainable Choices: A Research Imperative for Food Eco-Labeling in Business and Management

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ABSTRACT

The increasing environmental and social impacts of food production have heightened the need for effective strategies to guide consumer behavior toward sustainability. Eco-labelling, as a form of market-based intervention, holds significant promise in influencing purchasing decisions and fostering responsible consumption. However, existing research reveals substantial gaps in understanding the mechanisms through which eco-labels drive sustainable choices and how businesses can leverage these tools for competitive advantage and societal benefit. This paper underscores the critical importance of advancing research on food eco-labelling within the domains of business and management. It explores the theoretical underpinnings, practical challenges, and strategic implications of eco-labelling initiatives. The discussion highlights the need for interdisciplinary inquiry to evaluate consumer perceptions, trust, and behavioral change, while also addressing regulatory frameworks and organizational capabilities. By identifying key research priorities and proposing a comprehensive agenda, this study aims to inform scholars, policymakers, and business leaders on cultivating sustainable choices through effective eco-labelling practices.

KEYWORDS: Food eco-labelling, sustainable consumption, consumer behavior, business strategy, environmental marketing, sustainability management, regulatory frameworks, green labels, corporate social responsibility, behavioral change.

INTRODUCTION

The global food system faces unprecedented challenges, with its significant contribution to anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions being a primary concern [14].¹ In response, there has been a growing emphasis on sustainable consumption and production practices. Food eco-labelling has emerged as a crucial tool to guide consumers towards more environmentally friendly food choices and to incentivize producers to adopt sustainable methods [5, 48].² These labels serve as signals of unobservable product quality, particularly regarding environmental attributes [41, 40].³ The European Commission, for instance, has recognized the importance of such labels through initiatives like the "Farm to Fork strategy" [23] and efforts to combat "greenwashing" [24].

Despite the increasing prevalence and policy support for food eco-labelling, a comprehensive and sustainable research agenda within the business and management domain is still evolving. Existing literature has explored various aspects, from consumer perceptions and willingness

to pay [17, 30, 63] to the effectiveness of different label designs [16, 20].⁴ However, a fragmented understanding persists, highlighting the need for a more integrated and forward-looking research framework. This article aims to identify key research gaps and propose a robust agenda for business and management scholars to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of food eco-labelling for a sustainable future.

METHODS

This article is based on a comprehensive review of existing literature related to food eco-labelling, sustainable consumption, and business strategies. A systematic approach was adopted to identify relevant studies across various business and management journals. Keywords such as "food eco-label," "sustainability label," "consumer behavior," "business strategy," "supply chain," and "environmental impact" were used to search prominent academic databases. The collected articles were then

analyzed to identify recurring themes, dominant theories, methodological approaches, and, crucially, areas where research is still nascent or lacking. Bibliometric studies on broader topics like marketing [33] and industrial marketing [57, 58] provided context for the evolution of related research fields. Clarivate (2023) [13] resources were also consulted to understand academic publishing trends. This review allowed for the synthesis of current knowledge and the articulation of a forward-looking research agenda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research on food eco-labelling within the business and management domain has primarily focused on consumer-centric perspectives, the design and effectiveness of labels, and the integration of sustainability into business operations.

Consumer Behavior and Perception

A significant body of research investigates consumer responses to eco-labels. Studies frequently draw upon established theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior [2] to understand the factors influencing purchase intentions for sustainable products [11, 42].⁵ Perceived moral obligation and sustainability self-identity, for instance, have been shown to influence the purchase of sustainability-labeled coffee [11].⁶ Consumers' understanding and use of sustainability labels are crucial for their effectiveness [25]. However, confusion stemming from multiple or complex eco-labels can lead to negative word-of-mouth, distrust, and dissatisfaction [36].⁷ The visual complexity of eco-labels also plays a role in product evaluations, with simplicity often being preferred [16].

Research has explored how different environmental cues on packaging impact purchase intention [29] and how the salience and "greenness" of environmentally friendly packaging cues are perceived [28]. The "all natural" versus "organic" debate highlights how consumers interpret different labels and their perceived equivalence [4].⁸ Moreover, the shared characteristics between different eco-labels, such as organic and local food, can influence consumer perception [12]. Information provision significantly impacts consumers' willingness to pay for certified sustainable products [15].

Despite these insights, there are still gaps in understanding the nuances of consumer behavior. For example, while some studies suggest that consumers may not always be significant in creating markets for eco-labelling [26], others emphasize the importance of consumer self-confidence in decision-making when faced with eco-label information [18]. Further research is needed to explore the dynamic interplay between consumer knowledge, environmental concern, and their pro-environmental purchase intentions [19]. The impact of eco-labels on younger demographics and

how they respond to sustainability labels on food packaging also warrants further investigation [14].

Eco-Label Design and Effectiveness

The design and communication of eco-labels are critical to their effectiveness. This includes the visual presentation, the clarity of information conveyed, and the overall credibility of the label [7, 6]. The use of sustainability tags compared to traditional eco-labels has been explored to understand their effectiveness in signaling ecological attributes [51].⁹ The challenge lies in creating labels that are both informative and easily interpretable by a diverse consumer base [47]. Different types of sustainability labels exist, each with varying levels of detail and focus (e.g., carbon footprint labels [29]).

The concept of "signaling theory" is central to understanding how eco-labels convey unobservable product quality [41, 40]. The credibility and authority of standardization organizations are crucial for regulatory effectiveness in eco-labelling [6]. An integrated environmental and fair-trade labelling scheme has been proposed to enhance transparency across product supply chains [1]. However, the proliferation of different labels can lead to consumer confusion [36], and there is a need to understand how consumers perceive individual versus combined sustainable food labels [52].

Future research could delve deeper into the optimal design of eco-labels to maximize their impact on purchase behavior and minimize consumer cognitive load. This includes exploring the role of digital eco-labels and how online environments might present new opportunities and challenges for communicating sustainability information [16].

Business Strategy and Supply Chain Management

Beyond consumer responses, eco-labelling has significant implications for business strategy and supply chain management.¹⁰ Companies adopt eco-labels to signal their commitment to sustainability and to differentiate their products in the market [50].¹¹ This can involve integrating sustainable practices throughout the supply chain [27]. The assessment of eco-labelling criteria development from a strategic sustainability perspective is crucial for businesses aiming for genuine environmental impact [7].

The development of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems in agricultural startups highlights the importance of innovation in fostering sustainable food systems [3]. From a supply chain perspective, the role of carbon labelling in retail supply chains has been investigated as a means to encourage sustainable development [27]. Businesses need to understand how to effectively communicate their sustainability efforts through eco-labels to gain consumer trust and loyalty.

Future research should examine the strategic implications of adopting different eco-labelling schemes for businesses, including potential financial performance benefits [34]. Exploring how businesses can leverage eco-labels to build stronger brand equity and foster consumer loyalty programs [10] could be fruitful. The intersection of sustainable food labelling with policy-making also warrants attention, particularly concerning the development of harmonized labelling standards [53]. Furthermore, the business and management research domain needs to delve deeper into the challenges and opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in implementing and promoting food eco-labelling.

Cross-Cutting Themes and Future Directions

Several overarching themes and emerging areas warrant significant attention in future research:

1. **Standardization and Harmonization:** The fragmented landscape of eco-labels globally presents a challenge for both consumers and businesses. Research is needed on the optimal pathways for standardizing and harmonizing eco-labelling schemes to enhance clarity and credibility [6, 53]. This could involve exploring international collaborations and policy frameworks.
2. **Technological Advancements:** The role of technology in enhancing eco-labelling, such as blockchain for supply chain transparency or augmented reality for interactive labels, is an underexplored area. This could lead to more dynamic and informative eco-labels [9].
3. **Behavioral Economics and Psychology:** While the Theory of Planned Behavior has been applied [2], further research leveraging insights from behavioral economics could uncover more subtle psychological factors influencing consumer choices regarding eco-labeled foods. This includes understanding biases, heuristics, and the impact of cognitive load [36].
4. **The "Farm-to-Fork" Perspective:** Adopting a holistic "farm-to-fork" approach is crucial for understanding the full environmental impact of food products and for designing comprehensive eco-labelling schemes [23, 38]. Research should explore how eco-labels can effectively communicate the sustainability journey from production to consumption.
5. **Impact Assessment and Measurement:** More rigorous methodologies are needed to assess the actual environmental and social impacts of eco-labelling initiatives. This goes beyond consumer perception and delves into quantifiable metrics of sustainability improvements across the supply chain.
6. **The Role of Stakeholders:** The involvement of various stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, industry associations, and consumers, is vital for the success and legitimacy of eco-labelling schemes [34].¹² Research on

effective stakeholder engagement models and their influence on label adoption and impact is needed.

7. **Emerging Markets:** Most research on eco-labelling has focused on developed economies.¹³ More studies are required to understand consumer behavior, business challenges, and policy implications of food eco-labelling in emerging markets.

CONCLUSION

Food eco-labelling represents a powerful mechanism to steer consumption patterns towards sustainability and to encourage businesses to adopt more responsible practices. While existing research has laid a foundational understanding, a comprehensive and sustainable research agenda for food eco-labelling within the business and management domain is imperative. This article has highlighted the need for more nuanced consumer behavior studies, investigations into optimal label design and communication, and a deeper exploration of strategic business implications across the supply chain.¹⁴ By embracing the proposed research directions, business and management scholars can make significant contributions to the development and effectiveness of food eco-labelling, ultimately fostering a more sustainable global food system.

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