

# Assessing the consumers' level of understanding of sustainability labels on food. Similarities and differences in two consumer groups

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Master's Thesis

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## Problem Statement

Sustainable consumption is a major instrument to provoke a change in how products are produced, traded and used.

- **Sustainability labels** provide **product transparency** and enable consumers to include sustainability claims in their purchasing decision. But sustainability concerns have to **compete** with a number of other factors, not only price but healthfulness, sensory quality, etc.
- The **profusion of available labels** on the market substantially weakens individual schemes.
- Insufficient and non-transparent labeling criteria result in **consumer distrust and misinterpretation of labeling criteria**.

## Scientific Questions

The scientific questions deal with the problems of **how consumers see and understand certain sustainability labels** and what could be the factors influencing the individual understanding.

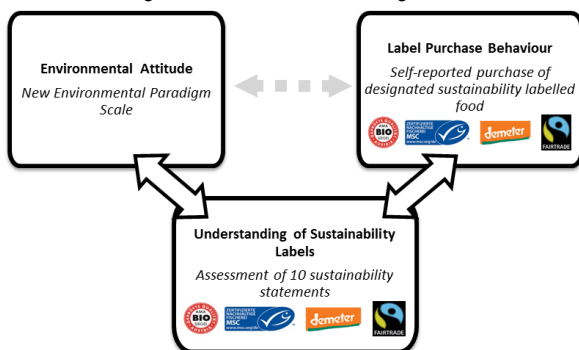


Figure 1: Research model implemented in online survey

## Method: Online survey

The three components of the model and their relations were investigated using four selected sustainability labels on food: **AMA Organic Seal, MSC, Demeter, Fairtrade label**.

Data were collected by means of an **online survey** among **two consumer groups** ( $n_A=141$  and  $n_B=103$ ).

## Results

- Both sample groups belong to the population of **green consumers** and therefore the results are one-sided.
- The overall understanding of the four labels was **medium to high**, that is 7 to 9 points out of 10, with only punctual misunderstandings.
- The understanding was assessed using 10 statements about label criteria which participants evaluated individually.
- The two sample groups were **similar** in that they were equally accurate in their understanding of the label criteria, although group B evaluated three of the four labels **significantly more positive** than group A.
- It was not possible to find a relation between the environmental attitude and the accuracy of the consumers' understanding of the label. This means that among the group of green consumers the **label understanding is equally distributed**.

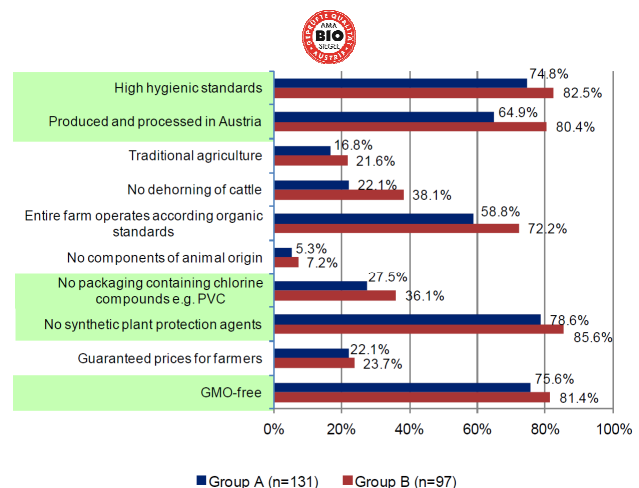


Figure 2: Personal understanding of the AMA Organic Seal in the sample groups (criteria actually included in labeling standards highlighted in green)

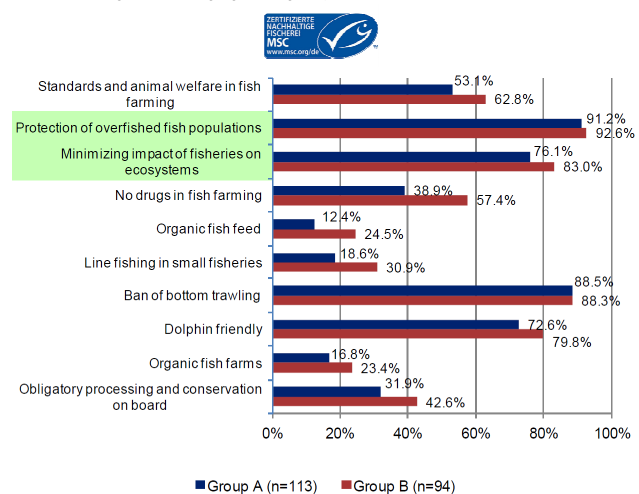


Figure 3: Personal understanding of the MSC Label in the sample groups (criteria actually included in labeling standards highlighted in green)

## Results

- However, **frequent buyers** of products with certain sustainability labels assumed **more criteria** to be included in the labeling standards than in fact are. Nonetheless, their **overall understanding is not significantly more accurate** than that of consumers who buy the label less often.

## Selection of literature

- Brécard, D. (2013).** Consumer confusion over the profusion of eco-labels: Lessons from a double differentiation model. Resource and Energy Economics.
- Hoogland, C. T., de Boer, J., & Boersema, J. J. (2007).** Food and sustainability: Do consumers recognize, understand and value on-package information on production standards? Appetite, 49(1), 47-57.
- Kollmuss, A., & Agyeman, J. (2002).** Mind the gap: why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior? Environmental Education Research, 8(3), 239-260.