

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND DRINK CHOICES: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Natalia Maehle, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway

Roberta Capitello, University of Verona, Italy

Contact details: natalia.mehle@hvl.no; roberta.capitello@univr.it

ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR GAP FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND DRINK:

- ✓ The attitude-behaviour gap is demonstrated in many studies (e.g., Carrigan et al., 2004; Grunert et al., 2014)
- ✓ Most consumers claim to be willing to buy sustainable food products
- ✓ However, the share of responsibly produced food and drink in total consumption has remained low

BACKGROUND



EXISTING RESEARCH ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND DRINK CONSUMPTION:

- ✓ Lacks a generalized perspective on sustainable food consumption
- ✓ Mostly focuses on the individual consumer characteristics influencing sustainable choices (e.g. environmental concern, consumer identity, and family considerations)
- ✓ Macro and structural causes of sustainable consumption tend to be ignored, especially in a cross-national comparative perspective

THERE IS A NEED FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF VARIOUS FACTORS INFLUENCING ACTUAL SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR:

- ✓ The multifaceted nature of decision-making concerning sustainable food choice is one of the reasons for the observed attitude-behaviour gap
- ✓ It is necessary to consider a wider range of determinants of the sustainable food choice
- ✓ Macro factors (e.g., food culture) and structural factors (e.g., political regulations, national labelling system) are in many cases more important determinants for the sustainability of food consumption than individual-level attitudinal variables

RESEARCH FOCUS

- ✓ The current study proposes a new theoretical framework mapping the effects of different factors (macro, structural and individual) influencing consumers' sustainable food and drink choices in a cross-national perspective
- ✓ The theoretical framework will be tested in a number of quantitative (e.g. online consumer survey, online experiments) and qualitative (e.g. in-depth individual interviews with policy makers, stakeholders and consumers, focus group interviews) studies

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

FOOD AND DRINK CHOICE AS AN EVERYDAY LIFE COMPROMISE AND A SOCIAL DILEMMA:

- ✓ Scholars highlight the positive individual attitude towards sustainable claims when other purchasing criteria (e.g. price, taste, nutritional contents) are satisfied (e.g., Mueller & Remaud, 2013; Van Loo et al., 2015)
- ✓ However, a consumer's choice for or against sustainable food and drink can be also framed as a social dilemma (van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011)
- ✓ The consumer must weight individual motives, such as food quality and healthfulness considerations, up against collective or social interests such as better environment and reduced emissions (Auger et al., 2008; Minton et al., 2018)
- ✓ Food choice often reflects compromises in everyday life, and is usually urged by situational factors rather than by individual consumer preferences (Holm & Kildevang, 1996)
- ✓ Moreover, limited availability and variety of sustainable foods represent obstacles to desired sustainable consumer choices (Grunert et al., 2014)

SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS AS CREDENCE GOODS:

- ✓ Consumers hardly evaluate health and environmental impact of food products before purchase, or experience it post purchase; pro-environmental features are difficult to compare and judge proficiently (Peschel et al., 2016)
- ✓ The multitude of branded sustainable labels and the high diversity in labelling schemes are further challenges in this regard → even when consumers are motivated to consume more sustainable foods, they become confused and skeptical about pro-environmental and social impact (Ginon et al., 2014)
- ✓ Scholars also argue that different types of sustainable claims (e.g., 'organic' vs. 'climate friendly') vary in their effect on consumers (Sirieix et al., 2013)
- ✓ Moreover, the importance of sustainable claims varies for hedonic and utilitarian food products (Maehle et al., 2015)

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF FOOD AND DRINK CHOICES:

- ✓ Kumar et al. (2017) show that cultural context (individualistic or collectivistic culture) has a direct influence on social pressure and pro-environmental value orientation
- ✓ Thørgesen (2010) argues that both macro factors (e.g. food culture) and structural factors (e.g. political regulation, national labelling system) are more important determinants for the sustainability of food consumption than individual-level attitudinal variables
- ✓ Moreover, Thørgesen (2017) finds that food-related lifestyles differ significantly across European regions (e.g. Central Europe vs. Northern Europe vs. Southern and Eastern Europe), leading to variations in the sustainability of everyday food choices
- ✓ Grunert et al. (2014) criticize existing research for its lack of the focus on the strategical implications, e.g. public strategies encouraging sustainable consumption and their relationship with the salience of the concept of sustainability in the mind of consumers

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND DRINK CHOICES

MACRO FACTORS

- Food culture
- Food education
- Social campaigns
- Advertising
- etc.



STRUCTURAL FACTORS

- Labelling schemes
- Food and drink regulations
- Product availability and accessibility
- Distribution systems
- Transport system
- Urban vs rural linkages
- etc.



INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

- Life values and goals
- Search for convenience
- Brand loyalty
- Importance of price
- Food routines
- Healthy lifestyle
- Food-related lifestyle
- etc.



MAIN IDEA:

- ✓ Sustainable food and drink choices are determined not only by individual but also by macro and structural factors and therefore differ across European countries
- ✓ As a result, there is a need to adjust accordingly public policy and marketing strategies for promoting sustainable food and drink consumption

EMPIRICAL APPLICATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

FURTHER RESEARCH:

- ✓ The current study is the first stage of a large European research project aimed at identifying drivers, barriers and strategical implications of sustainable food and drink consumption
- ✓ On the next stage, the suggested theoretical framework will be tested in five European countries (Italy, Germany, Norway, Romania and Sweden) representing different cultural and geographical contexts and food and drink styles

CONTRIBUTION:

- ✓ We provide more comprehensive understanding of sustainable food and drink consumption that can be used to develop the effective public policy and marketing strategies for promoting sustainable food and drink choices



The current study is a part of the research project **SUSCHOICE** supported by ERA-Net SUSFOOD2. **SUSCHOICE** is a transnational project. It is part of the ERA-Net SUSFOOD2 with funding provided by national sources (MIUR-Italy, RCN-Norway, FORMAS-Sweden, PM-BLE-Germany and UEFISCDI-Romania) and co-funding by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.