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Millennials and chocolate product ethics: Saying one thing and doing another



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ABSTRACT

Because of changes in contemporary American culture, attitudes toward certain product characteristics like clean labels, certified ethical sourcing, and sugar/fat content seem to be changing, especially among Millennials. The present project focused on Millennials' judgment of the importance of various product characteristics in their choice of chocolate confections. After a series of focus groups to inform the design, an experiment was conducted in which participants made a series of choices between product characteristics. The choice data were subjected to a cluster analysis to identify subgroups of consumer preferences and then subjected to multidimensional scaling to visualize the preference space. Most participants showed little discriminability among factors like organic, certified ethical sourcing, and rainforest friendly, a strong preference for clean labels, and more concern about high levels of fat rather than sugar in their chocolate confections. For most participants, their choice behavior reflected minimal concern for ethical factors whereas their public declarations in a focus group suggested otherwise.

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1. Introduction

The consumer landscape is changing. Across the board, consumers are indicating greater interest in issues of healthier eating, ethical sources, organic farming, gluten free, and company ethics (e.g., Holmes & Yan, 2012; Lalor, Madden, McKenzie, & Wall, 2011; Willis, Carpio, Boys, & Young, 2013). The open question is how these stated interests are reflected in actual product choice, both now and for the foreseeable future. Although companies seek to provide the consumers what they want, the consumer may be unwilling to pay the price necessary to provide the desired product. Furthermore, these factors may be important in product sectors that are a significant source of caloric intake (e.g., bread, cereal, meat) but deemed much less important in sectors that are a small segment of the typical diet (e.g., candy).

The purpose of this project was to examine a demographic that will play a large role in the purchasing of confectionaries over the next 30–40 years, the Millennial Generation (MG), by evaluating their stated interest in various factors involving chocolate products, their choice among these factors in limited information environments, and individual differences in consumer behavior.

Although the literature varies in defining MGs, they are recognized as largely including those currently in college and in their lower- to mid-twenties, although some definitions include people currently in their early thirties (Howe & Strauss, 2009). MGs are considered more tech savvy than others, more concerned about the environment, more global in their thinking, more community oriented, less brand-loyal, and with greater expectations of immediate product delivery (Harris, Stiles, & Durocher, 2011). They also espouse greater concern for ethical sourcing and environmentally-friendly products (Gustin & Ha, 2014; Schubert, Kandampully, Solnet, & Kralj, 2010; Sloan, 2014).

Because of their position as a generation with emerging purchasing power, MG attitudes may be a significant predictor of future food choices and thus would drive changes in the food landscape. Although a lot of beliefs about this generation and its attitudes are already determining future direction for companies, a greater understanding of how MG attitudes translate to product choice is necessary, especially in a product category like confections which comprises a small part of the consumer's diet and is consumed as a treat, not as a source of nutrition (chocolate candy, the focus of the present study, represents only 0.6–1.4% of the total caloric intake of the average American, Seligson, Krummel, & Apgar, 1994).

The psychological and consumer research literature is replete with studies of product factors that drive attitudes, but it has also been well documented that differences in attitudes frequently do

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not translate to behavioral changes (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; De Pelsmacker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2006). In an analysis of consumer research abstracts, Köster (2003) found that 68% of the papers only measured attitudes, and of the 32% that assessed attitudes and actual behavior, only 8% (or one-quarter of the 32%) found a positive effect of attitude on food choice with the other studies finding no effect. There also is a significant discrepancy between expressed positive attitudes toward organic foods and their low rate of actual purchases (Pearson, Henryks, & Jones, 2011). Results like these make it imperative that studies of MGs assess not just attitudes but also how and when these attitudes determine food choice. Furthermore, there are factors influencing MG choices of which they are unaware and unable to accurately verbalize (Köster, 2003; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

This distinction between expressed attitudes and choice is often quite large for product factors that carry an ethical component, especially when those attitudes are solicited in a public setting like a focus group (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014; Papaioikonomou, Ryan, & Ginieis, 2011; Vermier & Verbeke, 2006). A social desirability bias may produce pressure to endorse a preference for domestic, environmentally-friendly, or ethically-sourced products in addition to factors like the social responsibility of the corporation producing the product (King & Bruner, 2000). Consumers may not want to publicly admit that price and taste are more important to them than social and ethical factors.

For example, using an anonymous on-line survey Rousseau (2015) studied the effectiveness of organic and Fair Trade labels in chocolate preference among Belgian consumers and found that taste (95%) and price (49%) were endorsed as important factors much more often than Fair Trade (8%) or environmental impact (3%). Clearly, taste and price dominated their decisions. Interestingly, these consumers were willing to pay a premium for Fair Trade chocolate but not organic chocolate. The extent to which people valued these characteristics differed as revealed by a latent class analysis that identified three distinct subgroups: one group (55%) who valued Fair Trade and weakly valued organic, one group (35%) which valued Fair Trade but not organic, and a final small group (10%) who showed no value for Fair Trade or organic. The largest group also represented the youngest consumers in Rousseau's study (mean age = 27 vs. 41 and 44 for the other two groups); thus the group that most valued Fair Trade and (weakly) organic chocolate included a sizeable number of MGs. Given significant cultural differences, however, we did not know whether these results would generalize to an American Midwestern MG sample like that used in the present study.

We conducted a two-stage approach to understanding the attitudes and choices of MGs within the context of chocolate candy consumption. The first stage involved a series of focus groups to familiarize us with the factors that might be at play in our MGs' evaluation and choice of products. The focus groups also gave us a baseline of comparison regarding the stated importance of product factors in a social setting. The second stage leveraged this knowledge to design a choice study to determine the degree to which these factors control choice in a limited information environment and to identify any consistent subclasses of behaviors that define distinct decision profiles for these subgroups (Didier & Lucie, 2008; Rousseau, 2015; Rousseau & Vranken, 2013).

The basic working hypotheses were, (a) in their explicit comments, MGs will evidence commitment to healthier choices, transparency in labeling/ingredients, and concern for corporate responsibility through a commitment to ethically sourced ingredients, organic farming, and sensitivity to environmental impact, (b) many of these commitments will be judged much less important for chocolate candy than for other edibles even in a social setting, and (c) these attitudes will strongly translate into actual choice of candy for a subset of our predominantly Midwestern MGs – most

MG consumers will choose candy based on ingredients unless this information is unavailable.

Because we expected significant individual differences in product factor preference, in our choice experiment the sample size was much larger. The large sample allowed us to group participants into clusters based on shared product preferences and to examine individual differences attributes that might predict a participant's cluster. Our focus was on age because we suspected shifts in preferences as MGs matured, but we also examined sex, geographic origin, speed of responding, and impulsiveness.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

We conducted eight focus groups, four involving younger MGs (18–25 years old) and four involving older MGs (26–35 years old). A structured series of topics explored their attitudes toward chocolate accompanied by a few queries involving general snacking.

The key questions explored were:

1. What characteristics regarding the ingredients of a candy are important to you?
2. What nutritional aspects of a candy do you notice?
3. Are you eating more or less candy than you did five years ago? How much? If there was a change, why?
4. Are you eating more or fewer snack items than you did five years ago? How much? If there was a change, why?
5. Is the character of a company or its leadership important in your choice of which company's products to purchase? If so, describe which factors have affected your choices in the past.
6. Which of the following issues regarding food are important to you and why? Gluten-free, GMO, organic ingredients, use of pesticides, labor source (minors, low pay, ethical sourcing)?

The same person (AWM) conducted all eight of the focus groups. Results were transcribed and examined using a word frequency analysis after filtering out nonfunctional words. The tapes were also listened to and key points summarized by the same investigator (MEY). Given that the goal was to help inform the design of the choice study and not to produce a significant source of data for detailed analysis, the sample size was relatively small and the data were not subjected to a deep analysis.

2.2. Results and discussion

The results are illustrated in the accompanying word cloud analysis focusing on relative frequency of term usage, and by the table summarizing the major themes present in the transcribed interactions.

The word clouds represent the 75 most frequent words produced during the discussions after filtering out most of the words that either have no relevance to the question of interest (e.g., “anything,” “else,” or “thing”) or were so prevalent as to dominate (e.g., “chocolate”, “candy”). In general, it was much more difficult to get the youngest MGs (18–20) to engage in the focus groups because they were dismissive of most of the factors being discussed – it was all about taste. The results are shown in Fig. 1 and clearly show a significant shift from a focus on general factors (nutrition, company, fat, sugar, flavor, and calories), specific ingredients (e.g., peanut butter, coconut, caramel) and brands to a much greater discussion of organic, ethical sources, vegan, non-GMO, and dark chocolate. A summary of the key themes in each group are shown in Table 1.

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