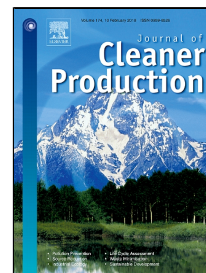


Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S0959-6526(17)33230-4
DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.12.236
Reference: JCLP 11631
To appear in: *Journal of Cleaner Production*

Received Date: 18 April 2017
Revised Date: 12 October 2017
Accepted Date: 27 December 2017

Please cite this article as: Yvonne Feucht, Katrin Zander, Consumers' preferences for carbon labels and the underlying reasoning. A mixed methods approach in 6 European countries, *Journal of Cleaner Production* (2017), doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.12.236

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Consumers' preferences for carbon labels and the underlying reasoning. A mixed methods approach in 6 European countries

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Abstract

The present research explores whether carbon labels are an appropriate and effective tool for increasing climate-friendly food consumption in Europe. Using a mixed methods approach which combines choice experiments and a questionnaire with qualitative face-to-face interviews, the preferences and willingness to pay for carbon labels and claimed climate-friendliness are explored in six European countries. Our results show that the presence of a carbon label increases the purchase probability and that consumers are willing to pay a price premium of up to 20% for a carbon label in all countries included in the investigation. Regarding the design of a carbon label, a combination of a horizontal scale in traffic light like colors with an absolute number of CO₂-equivalents is preferred. But consumers are willing to pay higher price premiums for local products than for carbon-labeled products in most study countries. They tend to subsume climate-friendliness together with local and/or organic production under the umbrella terms 'eco-friendly' and 'ethical behavior'. Since they lack knowledge and problem awareness with respect to climate-friendly consumption, consumers are frequently overstrained with respect to climate-friendly buying decisions. Consumers expect policy makers and retailers to set up appropriate structures to support climate-friendly consumption. Given this, the contribution of a carbon label to a more climate-friendly consumption might be limited without the structural support of policy makers and retailers.

Keywords: Carbon footprint labeling; consumer research; climate change; climate-friendly food; mixed methods; choice experiments

1. Introduction

At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in December 2015, a global agreement on the reduction of climate change was negotiated - the so called Paris Agreement. In the agreement, the signing parties committed themselves to limiting global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC, 2016). In order to meet this target, the agreement calls for collective efforts to combat climate change. This includes a widespread public engagement, embracing the industry as well as individual citizens.

One way of combatting climate change as an individual citizen is to engage in a climate-friendly lifestyle (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009). In this respect, food consumption constitutes an important field of action since it contributes significantly to the total greenhouse gas emissions (Vanclay et al., 2011; Vanhonacker et al., 2013).

List of abbreviations: CE: choice experiments; CO₂_A: experimental carbon label using a horizontal scale; CO₂_B: experimental carbon label adapted from the EU energy label; DE: Germany; ES: Spain; FR: France; IT: Italy; MSC: Marine Stewardship Council; NGOs: non-governmental organizations; NO: Norway; UK: United Kingdom; WTP: willingness to pay

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