



Research report

Barriers to climate-friendly food choices among young adults in Finland

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine how young adults in Finland perceive barriers to climate-friendly food choices and how these barriers are associated with their choices. The participants were 350 university students of the social and behavioral sciences who completed a questionnaire during class. The study found that the barriers the participants perceived as being the most relevant were different from those that were associated with the omission of climate-friendly food choices. High prices were perceived as the most relevant barrier, but were only weakly associated with the participants' food choices. Instead, habit and disbelief in the effects of food consumption on the climate were found to be the barriers that had the greatest association with climate-friendly choices. Moreover, women considered high prices and poor supply more important compared to men, whereas men considered disbelief and habit more important. In addition, vegetarians perceived fewer barriers than those who followed other diets. The findings increase our understanding of young adults' perceptions of barriers to climate-friendly food choices, as well as their effects.

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Introduction

In 2011, a total of 89% of Europeans perceived climate change as a serious problem, ranking it as the second most serious problem the world faces today. However, only 53% had taken some kind of action to combat climate change (European Commission, 2011). It thus appears that there are barriers which prevent climate-friendly action.

The current study aims to identify and better understand the perception of barriers to climate-friendly food consumption. It has been estimated that some 10–20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are derived from food production and consumption in developed nations (FAO, 2006; McMichael, Powles, Butler, & Uauy, 2007). From a consumer point of view, "climate-friendly food consumption" embraces the whole process of food use, from selecting, purchasing, cooking, and storing food to waste management and recycling. In practice, climate-friendly food consumption would ideally mean that people would limit their intake of dairy and meat products, reduce their use of cars for food shopping, use energy-efficient refrigerators and food-preparation devices, and avoid wasting food (Garnett, 2007).

This study focuses on the perceptions of the barriers to climate-friendly food choices among young adults in Finland. Finland is a wealthy Northern European country where concern

about climate change is relatively low; students, however, are among those who are most likely to perceive climate change as a serious problem (European Commission, 2011). From the viewpoint of mitigating climate change through food consumption, a study of young adults is important for at least two reasons. First, this cohort represents the consumers of the coming decades (see also Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). Second, young adults are at the beginning of their lives independent of parental influence, and their patterns of autonomous food consumption are forming. Young adults in Finland leave the parental home relatively early, and university students usually live either alone or with a partner (Mandic, 2008).

To the best of our knowledge, consumers' perceptions of the barriers to climate-friendly food choices have not been examined in detail. Earlier studies have focused on pro-environmental eating in general (e.g., Lea & Worsley, 2008; Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011b; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006), as well as on consumer perceptions of barriers to climate-friendly behavior (e.g., Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Whitmarsh, 2007).

A number of scholars have argued that by reducing individual consumption of meat and dairy products as well as food waste, greenhouse gas emissions that accelerate climate change could be significantly reduced (Fiala, 2008; Popp, Lotze-Campen, & Bodirsky, 2010; Stehfest et al., 2009; York & Gossard, 2004). As an example, it has been calculated that only a global transition to a low-meat diet, such as is commonly recommended for health reasons, would significantly reduce mitigation costs (Stehfest et al., 2009). Although eating less meat is an easy, cheap, and effective

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way to be more climate-friendly, many people are unwilling to reduce their meat consumption. Obstacles to using meat substitutes, for instance, have been shown to be unfamiliarity, food neophobia, and sensory unattractiveness (Hoek et al., 2011), while following a plant-based diet is often considered difficult and undesirable (Lea, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006). In addition, many people do not even seem to realize that eating less meat is a climate-friendly food choice, even though it can be one of the most relevant actions possible from a climate-friendly point of view (de Boer, Schösler, & Boersema, 2013).

Since no theoretical model of climate-friendly food choice exists, it is proposed that two theoretical perspectives should be combined for a better understanding of climate-friendly food choices: on the one hand, conceptualizing climate-friendly food choice as a type of pro-environmental behavior, and on the other, conceptualizing it as a specific type of food choice. It is suggested that the integration of these two perspectives is necessary to obtain a full picture of climate-friendly food choices and the barriers to them. These theoretical perspectives are presented in more detail below.

Antecedents of pro-environmental behavior

Pro-environmental behavior depends on a broad range of factors. For instance, Stern (2000) separates attitudinal factors (e.g., norms, beliefs, and attitudes) from personal resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, and resources), contextual factors (e.g., social norms and expectations, laws/regulations), and habit and routine, all of which are causal factors in pro-environmental behavior. However, it is worth noting that, in some respects, climate change is different from other environmental problems. For instance, climate change is a complex phenomenon that is not easily recognized by laypeople (Semenza et al., 2009; Weber, 2010). This in turn may pose a particular barrier to taking action.

The antecedents of climate-friendly behavior have been found to correspond to Stern's categorization. First, people's belief in the acceleration of climate change as a man-made problem has been shown to be an important motivator for showing a willingness to engage in climate-friendly behavior (Vainio, Mäkinen, & Paloniemi, 2013; Vainio & Paloniemi, 2013). Second, although the vast majority of climate scientists accept the evidence for global warming as well as human activity as its principal cause (Oreskes, 2004), the public view is not so consensual (Nisbet & Myers, 2007), which is likely to diminish social pressure to engage in climate-friendly behavior. Third, lack of knowledge, money, time, trust, motivation, and skills has been shown to prevent people from engaging in climate-friendly behavior (e.g., Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Quimby & Angelique, 2011; Semenza, Ploubidis, & George 2011; Semenza et al., 2009). Further, it has been shown that people tend to misunderstand the various aspects of climate change; yet those with more knowledge of climate change are more concerned and have less of a sense of powerlessness than people who have less knowledge (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2012). Finally, habits and routines have been shown to inhibit climate-friendly action: people are content to live their daily lives as they always have and are not willing to change (Lorenzoni et al., 2007). We assume that these antecedents of pro-environmental and climate-friendly behavior are also relevant in the context of climate-friendly food choices.

Antecedents of food choices

It is well known that food choices are influenced by multiple factors, such as taste, healthiness, price, and convenience, which have been shown to be more relevant than environmental considerations (Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000; Renner, Sproesser, Stro-

bach, & Schupp, 2012; Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995; Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011a). For example, The Eating Motivation Survey (TEMS) is comprised of 15 motivations for food choices: liking the food, visual appeal, pleasure, affect regulation, need/hunger, sociability, social norms, social image, weight control, health, price, convenience, habits, traditional eating, and concern for nature/ethical aspects. Of these, liking the food, habits, need/hunger, and health were rated as motivating eating behavior fairly often (Renner et al., 2012).

We suggest that so-called non-environmental food choice motives can hinder the fulfillment of environmental motives. For example, if the taste of a climate-friendly option is disliked, or if the climate-friendly option is thought to be unhealthy or of low quality, that option is not likely to be chosen. Furthermore, food consumption is mostly a habitual and non-reflective activity. This can be a particularly influential barrier to climate-friendly eating, which often requires a dietary change (Köster, 2009; van't Riet, Sijtsma, Dagevos, & De Bruijn, 2011). Basic food choice motives can also prompt climate-friendly food choices indirectly. For instance, the reasons for adopting a meat-free or a vegetarian diet can vary from health concerns, a sense of disgust, food appearance, and animal welfare to weight control (Smith, Burke, & Wing, 2000), which indicates that health and animal welfare issues can also indirectly motivate climate-friendly food choices (cf. Tobler et al., 2011a).

Barriers to climate-friendly food choices: the research objectives and hypotheses

On the basis of previous studies on the predictors of pro-environmental and climate-friendly behavior as well as food choices, we suggest that the barriers to climate-friendly food choice mainly stem from five sources: (1) the abstract nature of climate change, (2) individuals' unconstructive modes of thinking (e.g., disbelief), (3) a low level of personal knowledge, resources and skills, (4) unsupportive contextual factors, and (5) fixed habits and routines.

Only a few studies have examined individuals' own perceptions of such barriers in the context of pro-environmental behavior and food choices. Because food choices are mostly habitual, people are not necessarily aware of the factors affecting their food choices (Köster, 2009; Wood, & Neal, 2009). Therefore, we suggest that it is important to compare young adults' own perceptions of the relevance of the barriers with the way in which these barriers are associated with food choices. Our research objective is to examine which barriers young adults in Finland consider the most relevant to climate-friendly food choices, and second, whether the barriers perceived as most relevant are different from those that have the greatest effect on self-reported climate-friendly food choices. We test the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Since women are more willing to engage in pro-environmental behavior than men (e.g., Arnocky & Stroink, 2011; Zelezny, Chua, & Aldrich, 2000), women are also likely to perceive barriers to climate-friendly food choices as less relevant than men.

Hypothesis 2. Because people who eat meat have to change their habits more fundamentally than vegetarians when adopting climate-friendly food consumption patterns, and habits are shown to be important barriers to adopting new foods as well as to engaging in climate-friendly behavior (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Renner et al., 2012), young adults following a vegetarian diet are more likely to perceive fewer barriers to climate-friendly food choices than others.

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