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For Young Consumers Farm-to-Fork Is Not Organic

This study investigated the market segments of young consumers based on their valuation towards foods from organic, local, sustainable, and small-family systems.

Millennials and Gen Z are predicted to shape emerging food trends in America. Millennials – the largest living generation – are spending more food dollars in restaurants and convenient meal prepping than previous generations. Millennials are usually described as progressive, open to trying new foods, and willing to value sustainable food attributes. Gen Z – those born between 1997 and 2008 – are characterized by their health consciousness and social media connectivity. As the newest and most ethnically diverse generation, Gen Z consumers have been introduced to healthy lifestyle choices and sustainable living at an earlier age than previous generations. Together, these two generations comprise the most consumption-oriented consumers of all time with access to abundant information on foods.

Market segmentation can help industry marketers to generate appropriate targeting and communication messages to help consumers make sustainable purchases. By understanding how these young consumers value different environmental and social attributes, market segmentation can allow food marketers to make attributes claims more relevant. Supplying foods with attributes that align with values can help marketers develop trust relationships with these two generations, that can result in long-term loyalties for products and businesses. Developing correct messages that appeal to their clientele can assist growers and retailers on enhancing the positioning of their food products in a competitive environment.

The Importance of Consumers' Values and Attitudes Towards Foods

Researchers have reported the strong connection between messages that convey how foods are produced and marketed and consumers' values and attitudes. Values and attitudes are strongly correlated with buying behavior, suggesting that young consumers adopt sustainable consumption patterns as a way to impact food systems with their dollar spending.

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Main Characteristics of Young Consumers

Data for this study comes from a 2017 web-based survey of 1,351 Millennials and Gen Z consumers. They were asked about the importance they place on fresh produce attributes such as organic (*ORGANIC*), local (*LOCAL*), sustainable (*SUSTAINABLE*), and small-family farms (*SMALL*).

Most young consumers value foods coming from sustainable agriculture (79%), followed by local (73%), and small-family farms (71%). Interestingly, organic agriculture was the least important for young consumers, as they placed an average importance of 56%.

Most young consumers (97%) in the sample buy fruits and vegetables from grocery stores, 44% buy from farmers markets, and only 2% of young consumers are involved with growing some produce.

What Are the Market Segments of Young Consumers?

Young consumers can be clustered in 4 distinct market segments:

The first market segment, the largest segment, represents 33% of the sample (426 consumers). Cluster 1 (labeled *committed*) strongly valued all four attributes as important, as evidenced by the highest average values across all attributes (within column). The *committed* segment was comprised by a higher share of Millennials and Gen Z consumers purchasing in farmers markets (53%), being female (69%), seeking opportunities for campus/community involvement (59%), being out-of-state or international students, and living in on-campus housing.

The second market segment consisted of 27% of consumers. Consumers in the second cluster, labeled *farm-to-fork*, had high preference for attributes commonly related with local food systems, such as local, sustainable, and small-family farming, but not with organic farming. The *farm-to-fork* is comprised of individuals with an agricultural background (47%), coming from Midwestern states (74%), and enrolled in an agricultural major (28%). While the *committed* and *farm-to-fork* segments are different, Millennials and Gen Z consumers in the *farm-to-fork* cluster shared some demographic similarities with consumers in cluster 1. For example, they reported a similar shopping behavior, as well as their proportion of female, involvement in campus/community events, and in-campus housing.

The third market segment consists of 26% of the sample (333 consumers). Consumers in the third cluster (labeled *unattached*) had moderate expectations for all features and did not show high preferences for any of the attributes. This group had mean score intermediate between cluster 2 and cluster 4 for most variables. For example, 39% of consumers in this group purchased at farmers markets, 53% were female, and 56% were from the Midwest. These unattached consumers were characterized by actively seeking campus/community involvement activities, being international, and living in on-campus housing.

The fourth market segment, labeled *skeptic*, consists of 14% of the sample (178 consumers). The *skeptic* segment was the smallest group and was comprised by consumers who did not express high expectations in general. Consumers in this group scored the lowest on purchasing in farmers markets, lacked an agricultural background and reported being international or from out of the Midwest.



- **Take Home Message**

- The findings suggest a lack of trust of the organic label by an important segment of young consumers. Food safety recalls, along with distrust of big corporations entering the organic industry, are likely to lead young consumers to prefer food products that convey sustainability, localness, and small farming.
- For food retailers to build long-term trusting relationships with young consumers, they should use figures and messages that convey transparency about how the product was produced.
- Other labels can communicate the impact of the product in local and farming communities.
 - One option may be to propose the coexistence of organic labels with labels that convey localness, sustainability, and impact on small-family farming systems.
 - Another option may be for labels and logos convey potential benefits to the environment and local communities, such as information on carbon footprint, use of pesticides, or protection to pollinators.

- **Literature cited**

- Torres, A., 2020. For young consumers farm-to-fork is not organic: A cluster analysis of university students. *HortScience*, 55(9), pp.1475-1481.



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