

# The Role of Food Marketing in Increasing Awareness of Food Security and Sustainability: Food Sustainability Branding

Silvio Franco<sup>a</sup> and Clara Cicatiello<sup>b</sup>, <sup>a</sup> Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Viterbo, Italy; and <sup>b</sup> Department for Innovation in Biological Systems, Food and Forestry, Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Viterbo, Italy

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## Abstract

Sustainable food production is crucial to achieve food security, and the demand for sustainable food is rapidly growing. Sustainability-related brands are a marketing instrument to convey to consumers the credence attributes of a food product, i.e. organic production, ethical features and so on. Effects of sustainability branding may include an increase of consumers' attitude to purchase the product and a higher willingness to pay for it, the raise of consumers' satisfaction upon purchase and the loyalty of consumers towards sustainability labelled products. To achieve these effects, promoting sustainability brands' awareness and image is crucial, together with the spread of consumers' knowledge about the impact of food production of sustainability issues, and the creation of a social environment where the culture of food sustainability is valued, thus pushing consumers to make sustainable food choices.

## Introduction

The global demand for food is growing and it is believed to continue its growth in the next decades, as a consequence of the 2.3 billion person increase in global population and greater per capita incomes expected by 2050 (Godfray et al., 2010). Agriculture and food production processes already have major global environmental impacts on biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution due to fertilizers and other agricultural inputs (Tilman et al., 2011).

The link between food security and sustainable food production is then evident, and has been the focus of the discussion about the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG2) stated during the 2012 Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). SDG2 - "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" - reaffirms the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, and recognizes the linkages of this challenge with the need to make agriculture more sustainable both in environmental terms (tackling climate change and pollution due to agricultural processes) and in social terms (empowering small farmers, fighting rural poverty) (United Nations, 2015).

In this context, the demand for food produced with limited impact on the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability is rapidly growing, as well as the spread of sustainability-related information about food. Consumers are increasingly exposed to multiple messages related to the environmental, social and ethical value of food products. Such messages are in most cases conveyed by labels and logos, such as - just to mention the most common examples - those related to the Organic Farming, the Fair Trade and the Rainforest Alliance standards, and the several carbon index schemes and animal welfare-related logos which can be found on a growing number of food products. These schemes are intended to promote sustainable choices among consumers, by providing transparent information on the processes occurred all along the food production chain.

According to a survey developed by Nielsen ([www.nielsen.com](http://www.nielsen.com)) in 2015, involving 30,000 respondents in 60 countries, consumers' food choices are highly affected by sustainability-related issues: factors related to the environmental and social behavior of the company are rated very high by respondents, just after brand trust, which is by far the main driver of their choice. This explains the constant and rapid diffusion of products marketed with sustainability-related labels. In the EU, the market of certified organic products was worth 27.1 billion euros in 2015, with a positively growing trend of +12.6% with respect to 2014 ([www.ifoam-eu.org](http://www.ifoam-eu.org)). Global Fairtrade sales totaled 7.88 billion euros in 2016, with growth rates from 3% to 34% among the key products ([www.fairtrade.net](http://www.fairtrade.net)).

However, it should be considered that, while sustainability is a concept of general interest, in the context of food choice it competes with other issues like sensory quality and healthfulness (Grunert et al., 2014). Therefore, in the food purchase decision, consumers' awareness towards sustainability issues may not necessarily translate into the choice of products with sustainability-related labels (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

## Sustainability as a Food Brand

Analyzing the role of food marketing in promoting sustainable food production and consumption requires to understand how consumers perceive sustainability-related attributes of food products.

From a marketing perspective, sustainability can be conceived as a form of branding, which is linked to a product having a (or a set of) credence attribute(s). Credence attributes are qualities of a product that, by definition, cannot be inspected nor verified by the consumer prior or after purchasing (Ford et al., 1988). In this sense, they differ from “search” and “experience” attributes (such as the colour of an apple and its sweet taste), which can instead be, respectively, inspected before purchasing and verified upon consumption. Credence attributes can be referred either to the achievement of public goods (e.g. environmentally sustainable fishing and forestry, organic production, low carbon footprint, locally grown, fair trade, cruelty free etc.) or to benefits attained by consumers (e.g. healthy claims, antibiotic free, no chemicals etc.).

Promoting such credence attributes through sustainability claims, like logos or labels, means attempting to add a “sustainability brand” to the product.

Following Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993), consumers feel brands as something that gives an additional value to the product. The way consumers perceive brand value is particularly interesting for marketers, because it can shape the whole relation between the company and its customers. This is particularly true for consumers searching for sustainability attributes on food products, who experience a high involvement in food choices (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002), together with a generalized lack of information about these attributes. Sustainability-related brands aim to fill this information gap, by providing consumers assurance on the real features of the food products they are about to purchase. Indeed, when a product carries a sustainability idea, consumers assign a credence attribute to the product, according to the extent they understand and share such idea. So, similarly to what happens with other types of brands, a “sustainability-related” brand takes shape and its incorporated value influences consumers’ perception of quality and choices.

Fig. 1 synthesizes the main components and dimensions that contribute to generate a sustainability-related brand value and its effects on consumers’ purchase decision.

By applying such scheme, it follows that the main components able to generate a customers’ value for the food sustainability may be listed as:

- sustainability recognition, determined by the number of consumers on the market who recognize the presence of this attribute on a food product;
- sustainability recall, that concerns the number of consumers who are able to recall this claim, even when they do not see it on a food product;
- the type and extent of credence attributes linked to sustainability (e.g. organic, fair trade, local, farm-to-fork, km0, cruelty free, community supported agriculture, vegan etc.);

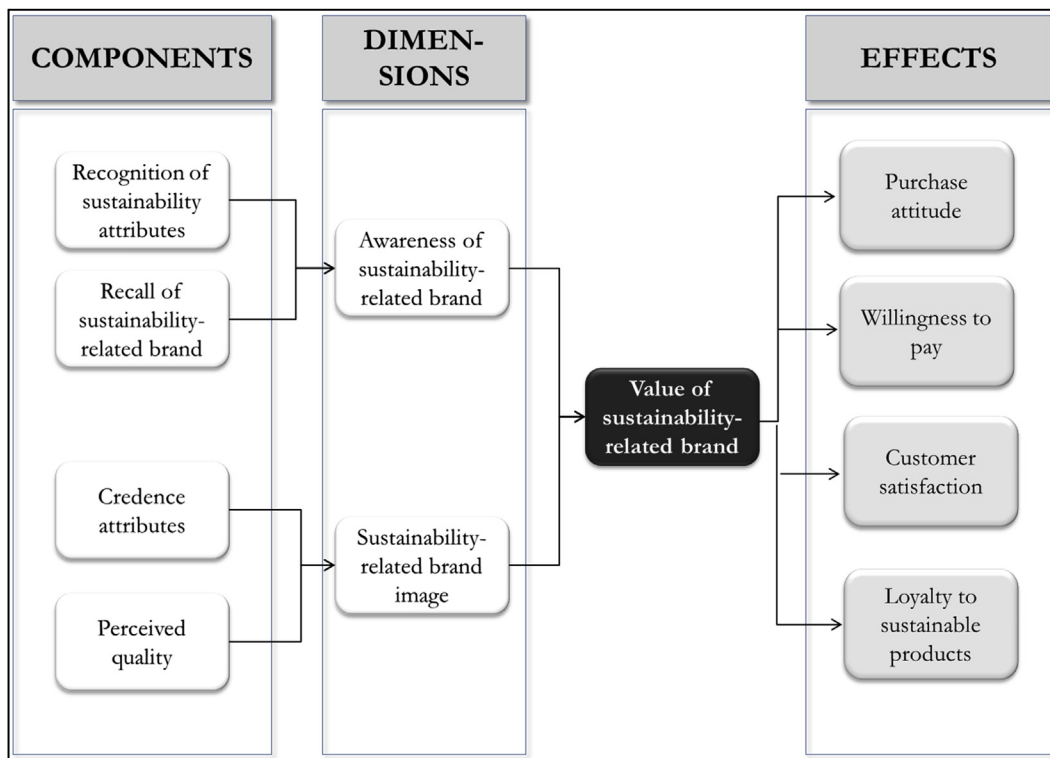


Figure 1 Dimensions and effects of brand value applying to the case of sustainability branding. Adapted from Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993).

- the product quality as perceived by consumers, deriving from the combination of its credence attributes with the other - tangible - attributes of the product (namely, search and experience attributes).

Such components build the core dimensions of sustainability-related brands perception by consumers: the degree of awareness and the perceived image of the food sustainability attribute. Awareness is the main outcome of consumers' general attention to sustainability and their ability to recognize it in relation to a food product. The sustainability image it is the consequence of how and how much consumers believe that having this attribute influences the intangible content of the product.

The combination of these two dimensions determines the value of a brand - the so called "brand equity" (Keller, 1993) - and so it is in the case of sustainability-related branding. Indeed, the value of sustainability branding is due, on the one hand, to the extent to which consumers are aware and conscious of the logo/label put on the product and, on the other hand, to the image that such logo/label has in their mind.

### The Value of Food Sustainability and Its Effects

A key issue for food marketing should be focused on the effects of sustainability branding on consumers' attitudes and intention to buy the product. These effects are reported in the right part of Fig. 1, and may be synthesized as follows:

- to promote consumers' attitude to purchase the product;
- to increase consumers' willingness to pay for the product;
- to raise consumers' satisfaction with the purchase and consumption;
- to establish a long-term relationship with the consumers, resulting in customer loyalty to the sustainability brand.

Among these effects, one issue which is particularly important in the food sector, to define the extent to which adding a sustainable claim to a product actually results in higher sales - and, therefore, in higher positive effects on the environmental/social domains of sustainability - is the attitude-behavior intention gap.

The attitude-behavior intention gap is the presumed gap that exists between a favorable attitude towards sustainable behavior and the actual behavioral intention to purchase sustainable products (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006), included food products.

Indeed, although the general interest in sustainability increases, and consumer attitude towards sustainable behavior can be considered positive, the actual purchase behavior is not univocally consistent with such attitude. Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) authored the first study specifically addressing this issue. They demonstrated that individual involvement with sustainability and the degree of certainty with respect to sustainability claims positively affect the attitude towards buying sustainability branded products; instead, the perception of a low availability of sustainable products negatively affects the purchase intention, even when attitudes are positive; consumers with a negative attitude towards sustainability products may be convinced to buy sustainable products when they experience social pressure by peers. Indeed, social norms have proved to explain considerable shares of variances in food purchase intentions (Robinson et al., 2014), therefore suggesting that food purchase may be guided by the individuals' desire to gain social approval, e.g. by choosing healthy foods, or by adjusting personal preferences along the choices made by others.

The article by Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) reached over 400 citations in Scopus 10 years after publication. Among the journal articles citing this paper, 225 include the term "food" in the title, in the abstract or among the keywords. Analyzing the content of these articles allows to understand what are, according to the literature, the main effects reported about sustainability branding.

These articles were listed and categorized according to the main topic analyzed in relation to consumers' attitude and intention towards sustainability claims. The following categories were used to classify the papers:

- consumption styles description;
- labels/claims and their impact on purchase;
- food waste;
- other topics not related to consumer behavior (mostly, food markets' analysis and supply chain-related issues).

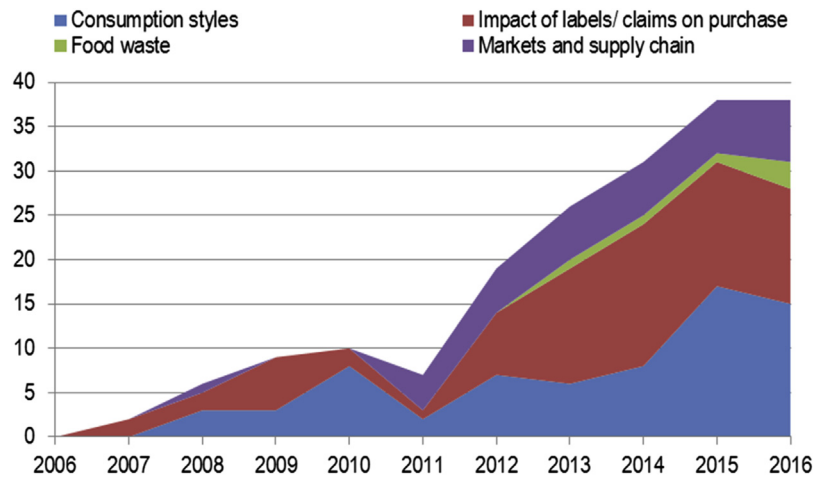
Fig. 2 reports the main topics covered by the 225 articles analyzed and the trend over the past 10 years. The study of the impact of labels and claims on consumers' choices has been the main topic of research among these articles.

However, in the last 5 years other relevant streams of research have flourished: on the one hand, the study of new consumption styles, their antecedents and consequences on consumers' preferences; on the other hand, the analysis of markets and supply chains related to sustainability-related products.

Moreover, the topic of food waste is also emerging - although more recently - in the debate related to sustainable food products, as one of the huge challenges of food systems in the next decades.

### Implications and Future Perspectives

Moving from the considerations about the effects of sustainability brands raised in the previous section, we can state that when sustainable food products are conveyed to consumers through effective marketing actions, the consumption of such products is likely to increase, thus improving at the same time food security.



**Figure 2** Yearly trend of topics related to sustainable food behaviour (N = 225).

To promote sustainability branding on food products may therefore be seen as a key issue for marketing managers. It is also evident that such “sustainability turn” of consumers’ preferences for food products may also lead to incorrect behaviours by producers, e.g. by labelling food products with false or vague sustainability declaration. This can have significant consequences on consumers’ trust in sustainability labels, potentially affecting the image of products and producers that, instead, really care about sustainability.

However, leaving aside from our discussion such extreme cases of “fake sustainability branding”, it is important to analyze the perspective that food companies can adopt in characterizing their products through sustainability attributes.

Indeed, food companies can see sustainability either as a tactical or as a strategic action. In the first case, the choice of sustainability is essentially driven by the market and it represents a reaction to the actions of competitors who propose food products able to respond to a (latent or explicit) demand of sustainability by target consumers. Differently, when efforts to produce sustainable food are embedded in the strategic approach of the company, the marketing aspects of innovation are affected, together with products, processes and organizational innovation. In the latter case, food companies can strengthen a sustainability brand and make its value growing, by increasing the market share of really sustainable products.

To promote the value of a sustainability brand and take advantage of its positive effects, as the model proposed in Fig. 1 suggests, it is necessary to go through its components so that brand awareness grows among consumers and its image can be associated with positive impacts on environment and society.

The first step in this process is to create the motivation towards more sustainable consumption choices by means of a wide and deep knowledge of what sustainability is and how it can characterize and differentiate food products. The levers to be used for this purpose are education, awareness-raising and, at the same time, the creation of a social environment where the culture of food sustainability is valued, thus pushing consumers to make sustainable food choices.

In doing so, it should be considered that sustainability has a temporal (environmental) dimension, which is related to trade-offs between present and future, and a social (ethic) dimension, which is related to trade-offs between consumers and others. These two dimensions should be properly communicated to create a correct understanding among consumers. The main tools available to this purpose are sustainability labels on food products, which allow consumers to consider the environmental and ethical impact of a product while making food choices. However, giving consumers this opportunity does not imply that they will actually use it; it depends on their motivation about sustainability and on whether they understand the meaning of the labels themselves, recognising the presence of sustainability the care about (Grunert et al., 2014). It follows that the presence of sustainability labels on food products expands the attributes considered by consumers in food choices, but motivation and understanding are key factors to incorporate this information in their purchases. The presence of both motivation and understanding in consumers’ mind determines their awareness of a sustainability brand, which is the necessary premise for sustainability to be integrated into the food purchase choices.

This suggests that important research paths to be deepened in this domain include consumers’ familiarity with the concept of sustainability in general and their understanding of sustainability in the context of food marketing. At the same time, the value of sustainability, viewed as a food brand, depends on the image that sustainability has within the context of food. Such an image is the result of two factors: how sustainability is considered as a (credence) attribute able to influence the food choice; how and how much the presence of sustainability in a food product changes the quality perceived by the consumer.

In considering these issues, we should keep in mind that in the context of food choice sustainability competes with many other attributes (Grunert et al., 2014), either tangible or intangible. The former are mainly related to sensory characteristics and nutritional properties, while the latter, among which sustainability is included, are related to many different aspects such as company brand, traditionality, social implications, certification (origin, organic, etc.). In this situation, a general interest in sustainability

may not necessarily translate into something able to modify the attitude in choosing food products. Even if this is a key point to investigate, little research has assessed how consumers weight sustainability-related attributes, and which importance is assigned to environmental and ethical issues with respect to other attributes.

Moreover, it is worth asking what the role of food marketing can be in promoting the sustainability of the food system and, consequently, the improvement of food security. To address this question, it seems appropriate to distinguish the challenges linked to strategic marketing from the actions to be taken in a more operative marketing perspective.

Companies, in defining their marketing strategies, have to consider the growing attention to sustainability as an opportunity that can be exploited only if they see the sustainability of their products as a real strength. Following this approach, they have to position their products by making the sustainability attributes explicit among the positioning variables, distinguishing between the environmental and ethical ones, also in relation to the characteristics of the reference targets.

In the operational phase, marketing managers should focus on some key issues: to produce genuinely and recognisably sustainable food (including packaging); to pay great attention to food labels to convey the right messages; to distribute products through platforms and retailers that adopt attitudes consistent with their characteristics of sustainability; to communicate correctly responding to the sustainability instances of their targets.

In considering the points raised in this discussion, it cannot be ignored the role played by information reaching the consumers from the different sources. The pressure generated by traditional media and, to an even greater extent, by internet and social networks can either strengthen or weaken the corporates' communication regarding the sustainability of their products. Consider, just as an example, the case of palm oil that has been accused by many parties to be an ingredient that can have consequences on health and whose production has negative social and environmental impacts. This media campaign has generated different reactions among companies operating in the food sector. Some of them have followed this campaign emphasizing the "palm oil free" characteristic of their products. Some others, conversely, have claimed the use of this ingredient by focusing their communication on responding to criticism and ensuring, even in the use of this ingredient, its commitment to sustainability; consumers have had different reactions to these companies, rewarding or punishing them for this attitude towards the idea of sustainability (Cova and D'Antone, 2016).

Undoubtedly, it is a complex subject that, as we have underlined, requires a specific effort in the research. What is certain is that much of the possibility of improving food sustainability and, consequently, food security is in the hands of consumers.

For this reason it is our opinion that the question raised by [The Economist \(2006\)](#) about ten years ago "Can you really change the world just by buying certain foods?" has a clear answer: "yes, you can!".

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