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Consumers' attitudes toward labelling of ethical products:

The case of organic and Fair Trade products

Azzurra Annunziata, Sara Ianuario, Paola Pascale ***

University of Naples "Parthenope"

Department of Economics

Via Medina, 40 – 80133 Naples (Italy)

azzurra.annunziata@uniparthenope.it

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Summary

Increasing interest from consumers in ethical characteristics of processes and products is leading to an increase of demand for organic and FT (fair trade) products and at the same time the need for more information. Indeed, the ethical attributes are credence goods and therefore cannot be checked by consumers. Labelling plays an increasing role as an instrument of direct shopping aid allowing the consumer to evaluate that he would not otherwise be able to know. In the case of ethical food products the purpose of labelling is to help consumers make a distinction between competing product alternatives and choose the most ethical acceptable option. The object of this paper is to investigate the factors which influence consumer attitudes to use labelling information in purchasing organic and FT products and to verify if labelling is a valid tool of direct shopping aid to consumers, with a view to derive inferences that may contribute to better strategic and tactical marketing decisions. A quantitative survey with 300 consumers, living in the south of Italy, was conducted in order to explore consumers' knowledge and attitudes toward labelling of organic and FT products. The data were submitted to exploratory and segmentation analysis. The results indicate significant differences in consumer attitudes and behaviour for ethical products and show the importance of new variables, other than demographic characteristics, that can influence the purchasing behaviour and label information use.

Keywords: ethical consumer, labelling information, organic and fair trade products

Jel Classification: D8, D12

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1. The role of labelling for the assessment of ethical attributes

In the last few years, labelling has been playing an increasing role as an instrument of direct aid in purchase decisions. Economic theory suggests that labelling reduces the information asymmetry between seller and consumer, allowing the latter to make purchase choices that are more consistent with his/her own needs and favouring the correct functioning of the market¹.

The central function of labelling is to provide consumers with information so they can better choose products that match their individual preferences, thus labelling can improve the functioning of markets for quality. This is particularly useful for credence and experience² attributes, because labelling can transform these attributes into search attributes. In this sense, labelling is a tool of *direct shopping aid* to consumers, because it intends to improve the quantity and often the nature of information available to consumers in their decision making, and becomes an instrument of consumers sovereignty.

Ethical attributes are *credence goods* and cannot be checked by the consumer so labelling is especially qualified to raise standards of ethical values and to allow consumers to match their individual preferences, but its potential is not always well exploited. In comparison to product brands, labels are accessible for almost all businesses which fulfil the labelling criteria, are third party certified and transmit specific product standards information. In the case of organic and fair trade food products the purpose of labelling is to help the consumers make a distinction between competing product alternatives and choose the most environmentally, socially acceptable option.

However, in practice, the use of labelling to influence the operation of market for food quality is limited by several possible factors. In particular, consumers' use of label elements depends on how important they deem the labelled information to be, this is crucial to the impact of labels as a direct shopping aid. Using information imposes costs upon consumers, those who attach little value to particular quality attributes may choose to ignore information about them. The relationship between the acquired information and the actual consumption behaviour is very complex, and further research is needed (Caswell J., Mojduszka 1996).

A marketing theory, the *information-processing model*, hypothesizes a series of steps that consumers would take before actually purchasing a product: exposure, reception, persuasion, retention, and behaviour. Consumers may ignore the messages on the label at any step by not seeing the message, by

¹This informational problem in the market was studied as early as 1970, when Akerlof showed that in the presence of information asymmetry markets fail.

²Experience goods are those for which consumers evaluate/assess attributes after purchasing the product (Nelson, 1970). Credence goods have attributes that consumers cannot evaluate/assess in use (Darby and Karni, 1973).

not processing the message, by rejecting the message rather than being persuaded by it, by forgetting it, and by not changing their behaviour. Each decision may be affected by other aspects of the message: the source, the substance and style, the channel, and the nature of the target audience.

In addition, there are several limits to the effectiveness of labelling. These limits stem from several related sources. First, space on the label itself is limited and is in high demand for use by food companies; this involves a choice of attributes to emphasise and the form and length of messages. Second, consumers are often harried and hurried, and grocery shopping logistics limit the potential for significant use of label information in making purchase decision. Both economic theory and observations of consumers' shopping behaviour indicate that saving time becomes more important to consumers as incomes rise.

Other empirical studies, on successful (Ippolito & Mathios, 1990) and unsuccessful labels (Moorman, 1996) in educating consumers and changing consumer behaviour, highlight the observation that consumers often make hasty food choices in grocery stores and usually do not scrutinize food labels. Consumers are more likely to read and understand labels that are clear and concise. Many warnings or a long list of detailed product information may cause many consumers to disregard the label completely. Providing information that leaves consumers confused is unlikely to lead to improvements in market efficiency. Moreover, food labels' impact on purchase decisions is also circumscribed because labels are only one, and not the most prominent or easy to use, of a range of information sources used by consumers, as prior use, brand names, advertising, friends' opinions; etc.

In literature several studies have tried to analyse the reaction of consumers to the information on the label, through a great variety of methodological approaches, including *focus group*, *deep interview*, hedonistic and experimental approaches. In particular, J. Crespi and S. Marette (2003), in a critical review on the labelling themes, underline the valence of empirical surveys of consumers in the evaluation of labelling policies. It is possible, in fact, through such methodology, to provide fundamental information from which to draw particularly useful and interesting conclusions both for the public operator, in order to implement labelling programs that meet the needs of consumers, and the private companies, in order to help them address their marketing strategies.

2. Consumers attitudes towards ethical products: the case of organic and FT products

Ethical consumption is a growing phenomenon and there are many approaches to ethical trade that perceive instances of social justice, environment and animal welfare. Who the ethical consumer is and what ethical consumption means are topics of concern for companies that seek to develop the ethical

dimension in their business. The current knowledge on ethical trade is derived from opinion polls that show an increase in consumer awareness on issues of trade and ethical consumption, but the empirical evidence shows that ethical consumption is more "celebrated" than practised. A growing number of people base their purchasing decisions and consumption on ethical values (such as the products and production methods) of working conditions and human rights. Consumers beginning to discriminate against the products in relation to changing tastes, expectations, concerns for their health and globalization have contributed to these changes. There is a tendency to assign consumers to groups, according to their ethical attitude. Roberts (1996) comes up with segmentation for SR (socially responsible) consumers in general, while Cowe and Williams (2000) identify five groups of ethical consumers according to their attitude. For marketing purposes, several studies have tried to identify the SR consumer in terms of demographic features. Generally, the profile of the ethical consumer is a person with a higher income, with higher level of education, a prestigious occupation and better informed than average. Roberts (1996), stresses the importance of variables such as relevant attitudes and behaviour, personality characteristics and so on, which can identify the possible ethical consumer. Vitell (2001) studied the possibility of separating out ethical consumers based on their philosophical evaluations of ethical situations. Shaw and Clarke (1999) highlighted, through qualitative research, that normative and environmental factors are decisive for ethical beliefs and for ethical decisions. Because of the rather blurred identity of the ethical consumer based on demographics, one has to look beyond these kinds of variables. In this study, ethical behaviour is also linked to personal values.

In Italy, a survey has identified the determinants of expenditure in FT products and the relationship of the latter with traditional (income, distance) and intrinsic motivation related factors (Becchetti, Rosati, 2004). The study measures directly the willingness to pay for the SR features, thereby extracting social preferences of the sample consumers. The ethical economics is a reality that lies in its propulsive, responsible consumption, a factor which, although still in its infancy, is in the long term, a tool that can alter the same approach to welfare.

In relation to organic consumption, there are a wide availability of scientific works about organic consumption that try to determine consumer perceptions, expectations and attitudes about organic foods (Torjusen H, at all. 2004). In order to identify consumer concerns with respect to of organic foods recent literature suggests many different aspects need to be considered.

On the one hand, it is important to consider the *subjective factors*, the attitudes towards the organic product determined by consumers' perception of the product and its properties, as well as from previous experiences of consumption. Moreover, a wide range of studies consider the "*structural factors*",

which can vary in different countries and can be summarized as: agricultural tradition, organic product availability in the various distribution channels, price and product labelling.

Consumers choose to buy organic for a wide variety of reasons. Among the most commonly cited of these reasons are related to health, environment, ethics, authenticity and quality. Some specific concerns, which arise repeatedly in the literature, include worries as to the use of pesticides, food additives and the use of genetic manipulation in food production, which are often related to the main differences between conventional and organic practices.

The relationship between “food scares” and the buying of organic foods for health reasons is frequently referred to in the literature. Choosing organic food might be seen as a way of providing for personal health, the health of future generations, or for what has been called “agro-ecosystem health”, which in turn provides for human health. Ethical considerations related to a wide range of issues, are often reported to be important to consumers who choose organic food. Ethics cover a wide variety of issues: environmental considerations, as regards the preservation of natural resources for future generations; on animal welfare; on the prosperity of peoples.

Regulation and labelling are considered as *structural factors* towards the organic product. Indeed, several studies have found a positive relationship between consumer purchase decisions and organic product labelling. Consumers generally perceive an organic label as assurance that the product is organic. More accurately, organic food labels help transform the credence characteristics of such products into search attributes, thereby allowing the consumer to better evaluate quality before deciding to buy the product (Caswell, 2000).

3. Consumers’ attitudes toward labelling of ethical products: an empirical analysis

3.1 – Methodology

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors which influence consumer behaviour towards ethical products and to verify if labelling is a valid tool of direct shopping aid to consumers with a view to deriving inferences that may contribute to better strategic and tactical marketing decisions. Based on these considerations a quantitative survey was conducted to explore Italian consumers' knowledge and attitudes toward labelling of ethical and ecological food, in order to analyse their general attitudes about organic and FT products and their motivation to buy this kind of food; awareness and interest in labelling of these products; confidence as in different sources of information as in the certification, inspection and control system; concern about the clarity and trustworthiness of label information and whether and how consumers use, or would intend to use such information.

To collect data a questionnaire was developed and administered, with face to face interview, to a randomly selected sample of 300 consumers of FT and organic products, living in Campania region in the south of Italy³, responsible for family shopping.

The questionnaire used is structured in five distinct parts. In the first part the criteria influencing the interviewees' purchase and consumption decisions were analysed (with particular attention to ethical and environmental aspects) in order to individuate the relationship between the latter and the greater or lesser attention towards the information on the label. In the second part consumers' general attitudes about organic and FT products and their motivation to buy this kind of food were analysed, in order to determine the important attributes in the choice of these products. Consumer's confidence as in different sources of information as in the certification, inspection and control system is tested in the third part of the questionnaire, while the fourth gives specific attention to consumers' general attitude towards food labelling, highlighting the reading frequency and the generic opinions in terms of sufficiency, clarity and reliability of the information on the label. Finally, in the fifth part the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample and the interviewees' life style were surveyed in order to frame the socio-cultural and socio-economic level of the consumer of ethical products.

The data were collected through personal interviews in the five provinces of Campania. To include in the sample people who purchase and consume both organic and FT products, the interviews were carried out at four World Shops present in Campania region and five specialised retail outlets that sell organic products and at two GDO outlets that belong to the COOP⁴.

Data generated in this way were analysed twice. First, data were submitted to a descriptive analysis. The second stage were multivariate analysis, conducted in order to group individuals into segments with similar qualities. The statistical approaches used to perform this analysis are factor analysis and cluster analysis. All analyses were conducted in the SPSS 15.0 statistical analysis program.

The explorative analysis shows that the survey sample consists mostly of married women (58.3%), of a fairly low age group, between 25 and 35 (63.3%), that lives in families of no more than three people (60%). Furthermore, 54% have no children, followed, at long distance, by a 12% with children over 10. As for the level of education variable, the sample is distributed in a nearly homogeneous way between diploma and degree, 47.3% of the interviewees are graduates. In relation to profession, 32.7% of the interviewees are office workers, followed by 15% self-employed. Regarding income, a large

³ Campania is one of the most densely populated regions of southern Italy, with five provinces and 5,813,542 residents that placed it as the first region in Italy for the density.

⁴ Coop is the first group of GDO in Italy.

concentration in the classes between 15,000 and 30,000 € a year is registered, while 23.6% declares an income above 55,000 €.

3.2 – Consumers' general attitudes about organic and FT products

The first phase of analysis examined the *purchasing habits and consumption* of respondents in order to find out the impact of ethical aspects in the choice of foods. In relation to buying habits, we tried to understand first what products attributes, extrinsic and intrinsic to exercise greater influence on purchase decisions of food products, offering the 10 options of answered. The data showed that the three attributes perceived by consumers as being more important in the choice of food is the brand (59.4%), followed by nutritional properties (23.4%) and freshness (25.2%), while little importance, at all, given the price and packaging.

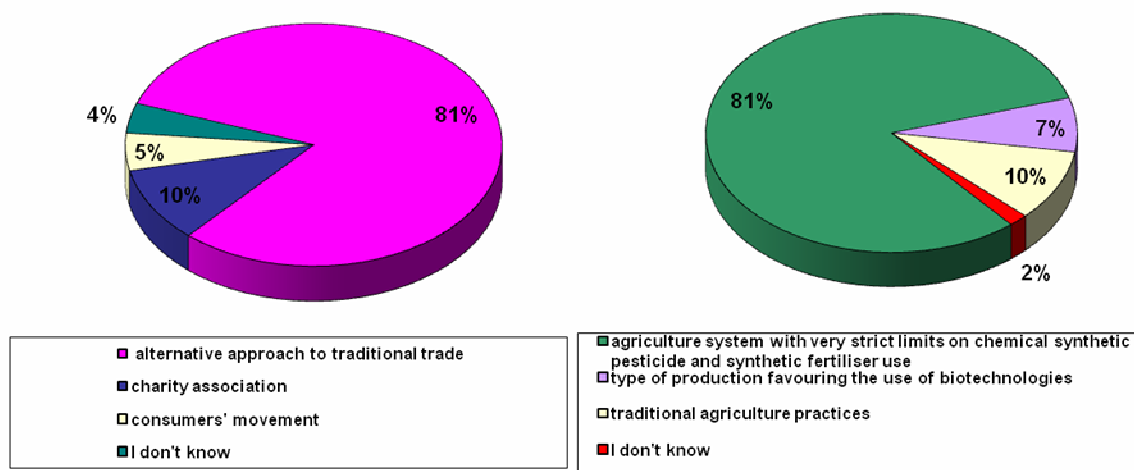
The analysis then had tested the sensitivity of respondents to some different forms of quality assurance of both product and process. Most of these consumers show particular sensitivity⁵ to the presence of organic certification and the certification indicating the absence of GM components, considered very important by respectively 51.3% and 41.8% of respondents. Less attention is reserved for PDO and PGI products and environmental certification (ISO 1400, EMAS), as indicated by no significant respectively by 11.5% and 15.2% while greater attention is reserved to the ethical certification (SA 8000), considered quite important in 40% of the cases.

Consumers' *general attitudes about organic and FT products* and their motivation to buy this kind of food are tested in the second phase of the analysis. Respondents demonstrate a proper understanding of FT and organic (graph. n.1), in fact the majority of the sample (81%) provided a correct definition of both the FT, alternative approach to traditional trade, both the organic method, agricultural system with very strict limits on chemical synthetic pesticide and synthetic fertiliser use. In relation to the FT, only a small minority in identifying a charity association (10%), consumers' movement (5%) or don't know (4%), whereas the organic method, 17% give an incorrect definition, since 10% of consumers associated with traditional agriculture practices, and 7% suggest that this is a type of production favouring the use of biotechnologies. The distribution of the interviewees, in respect to the frequency of consumption indicates that almost 50% claims to consume organic products from once a week to

⁵ The answers are represented by a Likert metric scale of 5 levels with the modality from very important to not at all important.

every day. Only 13% consumes organic very rarely, less than once per month, 7% at least once a month and 25% several times a month.

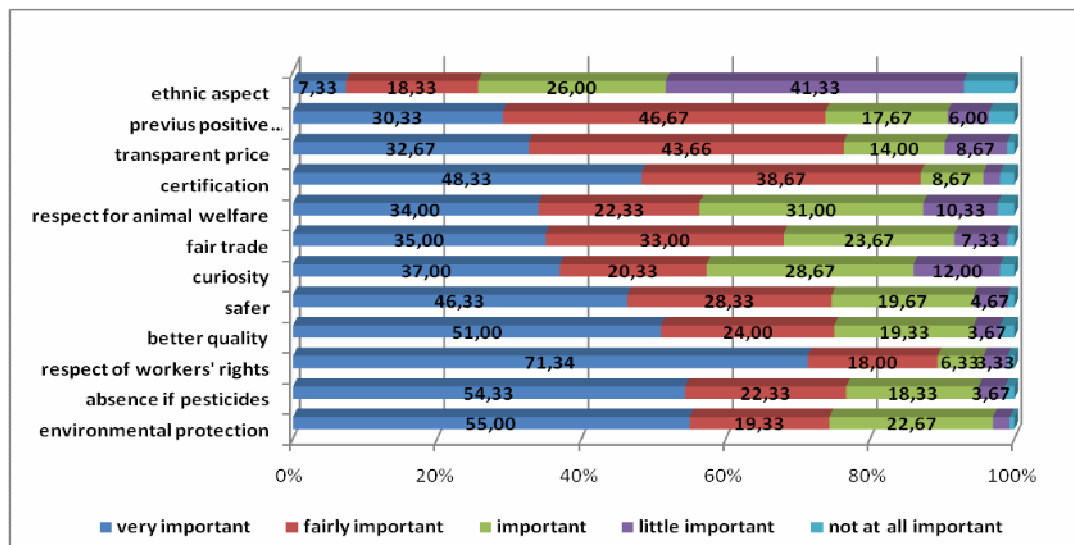
Graph n. 1 – Knowledge of fair trade and organic method



With reference to the consumption frequency of FT products, the majority said once a month (28%); other frequencies are: less than once a month (24%), once a week (26%), more than once a month (3%), more than once a week (14%) and everyday (5%).

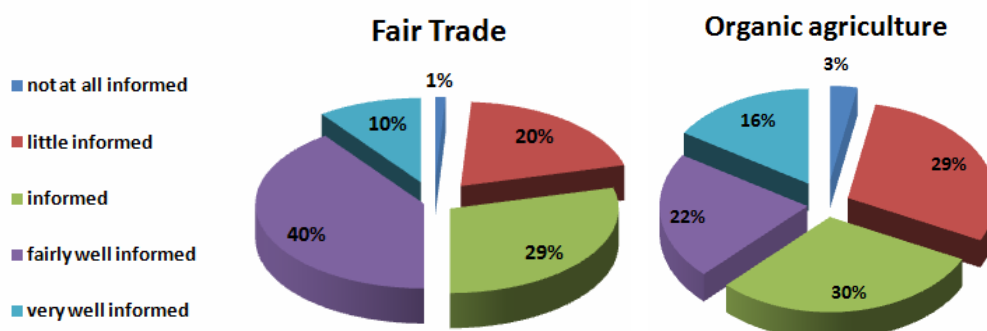
In order to identify the main motivations that drive consumers in their choice of purchase to the consumption of products from fair trade and organic farming were asked to indicate their level of importance attributed to a set of characteristics of these products. A set of attributes characterising FT and organic products was suggested to the interviewees. The aspects that consumers give more importance are: guarantee of work conditions (71, 34%), the preservation of the environment (55%), the absence of pesticide residues in products (54,33%), higher product quality (51%) and the presence of a certification (48,33%), safer (46,33%), respect for animal welfare (34%). The extrinsic quality attributes of ethical products are, on average, less important. The sample turned out to be very much in agreement in considering ethical products to aim at more fairness in trade exchanges (35%) and as for the motivation to the purchase a certain curiosity for these products also emerges (37%). Previous positive experience of purchase (46,67%) and price transparency (43,66%) are considered fairly important, on the contrary ethnic aspect are considered little important (41,33%).

Graph n. 2 motivations in purchasing ethical products



The survey, moreover, tried to understand the level of consumers' information towards these products and their confidence in the different sources of information. On average, the information stated by consumers is more than fairly good. As regards fair trade in general, consumers consider themselves very informed (10%), fairly well informed (40%) and sufficiently informed (29%); only those who consider themselves little informed (20%). As regards organic method, the sample considers itself to be very well informed (16%), fairly well informed (22%) and sufficiently informed (30%); against 32% of the cases consider themselves little informed (29%).

Graph. n. 3 Information about fair trade and organic agriculture



Then they were asked to indicate the degree of confidence attributed to the different sources of information. Positive⁶ opinions registered regard, in order: information collected in the specialized retail outlets (84%), public information campaigns (83%), information supplied by the certification bodies (83%), information generated by consumers associations (82%), by distribution channels (66%), information given by relatives and friends (61%), and by producers (55%). On the contrary, the most negative opinions regard television (73%) and internet (47%).

Table n. 1 - Confidence in the different sources of information (in %)

	I trust well	I trust enough	I trust	I trust a little	I don't trust
certification body	24	25	34	15	2
consumers association	22	28	33	15	2
farmers	21	31	34	13	1
GDO	7	27	32	26	8
internet	8	15	30	35	12
public information campaigns	21	28	33	13	5
relatives/friends	11	19	31	34	5
specialized shops	21	36	27	14	2
TV	1	6	19	12	32

3.3 - Consumers' attitudes toward organic and FT labelling

The fourth part of the questionnaire is aimed at analysing the *propensity of consumers to use labels* such as direct sources of information when buying ethical products, with particular reference to FT products and organic products in order to verify the potential of this instrument support sustainable consumption. To this purpose it was verified, first of all, the degree of attention given by respondents to the labels of these products, considering the frequency of reading them. The majority of respondents, (43%) say they always read the labels on these products, a significant proportion (33%) is represented by occasional readers while 17% of respondents say they use the labels only the first purchase, and only 7% of cases labels are never consulted.

In order to understand the possible limitations of labelling as a means of support in the choice of ethical products has been applied to this segment of consumers to identify the motives that determine their low interest in the label. The difficulty in interpreting the information given is the main limitation of this

⁶Positive opinions are I trust well, I trust enough and I trust, and negative opinions are I trust a little and I don't trust.

tool (33%) and the second reason is confidence in the brands they buy (22%), as well as highlighting the brand of the producer is considered a guarantee. Moreover, consistent with the evidence from other studies in literature (Ippolito & Mathios, 1990; Moorman, 1996) the lack of time is the third cause that limits the effectiveness of the labels.

The survey continued by asking consumers to indicate the degree of importance of labelling as a tool to support the choices of ethical products and how to use this instrument. The 41.33% of respondents considered the label as a very important attribute, 33% quite important, while only 17% unimportant. Respondents also say they use labels primarily for information that might otherwise not know, 36.7% of cases, but also to compare similar products while shopping, 33.8%.

In order to understand how consumers generally perceived the labels of ethical food products was asked to express their opinion about the sufficiency, usefulness, and trust the information on the label. The analysis of the results shows that in most cases, 40% of respondents are not satisfied with the current level of information given on labels, and 46% of cases do not feel that it is easy to interpret. The analysis also shows that respondents consider only some of the information contained in the label really useful, complaining in the most of the cases an excess of advertising information. The consumers, in fact, disapprove of an excess of promotional messages on the product's packaging, which relegates important information to a space that is so limited that is often impossible to read. In addition consumers show some scepticism towards labels, in fact, in 41% of the cases, they do not consider them always truthful.

Table n. 2 - Consumers' opinions towards food products labels.

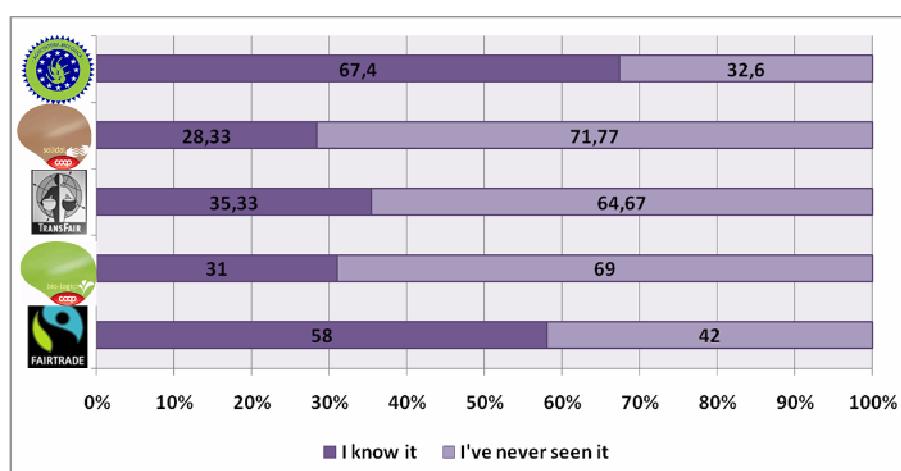
	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly Disagree
I've always been able to find any information I need on a food label.	5,40%	15,90%	32,00%	40,80%	5,90%
It's easy to understand and use labelling information.	2,80%	13,30%	25,40%	46%	12,40%
I think that labelling information are always true	5,10%	8,40%	32,30%	41,20%	13%
I find that only some information in labels really useful or important.	16,70%	30,20%	27,40%	21,50%	4,20%
I think that most of labelling information are advertising	18,10%	24,10%	37,60%	10,00%	10,20%

In relation to the degree of importance to a range of information typically found in food labels, some specific of the ethical products other usually present on all food products, the results show that the

information deemed most important include the symbols and logos that attest the ethics certification, considered very important by about 70% of respondents and the list of ingredients, which is considered very important by 56%. Considerable importance is also given the indication of the absence or presence of GMOs and the brand of the producer mentioned as very important by respectively 46.6% and 34.5% of respondents, while the nutritional claims and nutritional table stand on a medium level of importance, since this is considered as quite important in respectively 43% and 46% of cases. Also an indication of the origin of the goods and / or raw materials used to obtain information is considered a rather important, given that the respondents consider it very important and 28% quite important in 51%. The information which is given less importance is the indication of Authority responsible for certification, the latter indicated by about 20% of respondents as not at all important.

The survey proceeded by establishing the familiarity of respondents with some of the logos/brand names, usually present on the labels of the products of FT and Organic products. In particular, it tested the degree of visual knowledge of those marks, by showing the simulated consumer labels. In the choice of logos to be shown to the interviewees, we tried to use the most commonly used as the logo introduced by the EU (for products with at least 95% of organic and in conversion, Reg. 331/2000); logos of organizations that manage ethical brands Transfair and Fair trade and two logos using from a more widespread distribution chains in Italy - Coop, who has launched solidarity and organics product lines in trademark. The graph below highlights how absolutely the logo is more visible than Bio introduced by the EU, recognized by 67,4% of cases, the Fair trade logo is well recognized, given that 58% of respondents said to know it, while less known are the bio logo and the logo of Solidale GDO, for which respondents say they have not ever seen respectively in 69% and 71% of cases.

Graph n. 4 - Visual knowledge of logos



3.4- Segmentation analysis

The second part of analysis regards multivariate analysis, conducted in order to group individuals into segments with like qualities. Through the Principal Components Analysis, we tried to verify the existence of latent factors that summarize the motivations driving the consumer to use labelling information in their purchase choice of organic and fair trade products⁷.

Specifically, we found 3 key factors that play a determinant role in influencing consumers attitudes toward labelling of ethical products: ethical motivations; perception of the information on the label; confidence in the sources of information.

Table n. 3 – Regression factor scores

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	communality
Importance attributed to the respect of animal welfare	,780	-,156	,206	,643
Importance attributed to fighting workers exploitation	,664	-,185	-,144	,581
Importance attributed to environment protection	,718	-,058	-,197	,530
Importance attributed to justice	,328	-,011	,051	,585
Importance attributed to the absence of pesticides	,214	-,078	,005	,601
Importance attributed to the ethical certifications	,170	-,153	-,021	,698
Importance attributed to environmental certifications	,057	-,264	,259	,640
Opinion on the sufficiency of information	,015	,726	,432	,754
Opinion on the ease of interpretation	-,008	,714	,112	,598
Degree of usefulness of the information on the label	-,031	,570	-,102	,570
Confidence in the information on the label	,055	,578	-,112	,578
Knowledge of the information present on the label	,019	,598	-,036	,598
Degree of knowledge of the ethical logos	-,052	,623	,023	,623
Level of information acquired	-,095	,124	,554	,591
Confidence towards consumers' associations	,059	,278	,587	,733
Confidence towards Certification Bodies	-,106	,049	,642	,681
Confidence towards public informative campaigns	,065	,103	,723	,630
% variance	26,9	22,7	17,2	
% cumulative variance				66,8%

These factors explain the 67% of cumulative variance. The first factor summarizes a set of variables referred to the degree of importance that consumers confer to different characteristics of product or process when buying ethical products. The second factor, instead, describes what the consumers

⁷ The PCA describes the variance of the multivariate set of data by means of non-correlated variables. The rotation method used is the Varimax that minimizes the number of explicative variables of a factor and improves its interpretation.

thought about the sufficiency, the usefulness, the ease of interpretation of the information, the degree of knowledge of ethical logos and their relative ability to interpret the different information on the label. The third factor can be interpreted as the degree of confidence in different sources of information, because it stands out thanks to the scores calculated for the variables: confidence towards consumers' associations, Certification Bodies, public informative campaigns.

The successive step of the multivariate analysis is to reach a classification of consumers on the basis of homogeneous behaviours, in order to verify the existence of different groups of consumers characterised by a different propensity towards ethical food products and their labels.

The cluster analysis was done on the previously individuated factors to segment the consumers. The method used is the k-means, suitable for a high number of cases, it was suggested that the division into 3 groups was the ideal solution; any more groups would have determined an excessive fragmentation of the sample. The groups distinguished in this way are differentiated mainly in relation to interest shown towards ethical food products and propensity towards food labels. Moreover to better understand which aspects characterize the different groups, cross analysis has been done between them and several different variables connected to the previously mentioned factors, as well as to socio-demographic aspects, although the latter are not very different among the groups, except for age and level of education.

Table n.4 - Centres of final clusters

Factors	informed consumers	curious consumers	new-ethical consumers	Sig.
Ethical motivation	,30723	,00416	,53171	,000
Confidence in a sources of information	,37826	-,42594	,42848	,000
Perception of labelling	,69687	-1,13454	,19355	,000

The first group consisting of 32% of the interviewees, is characterized by *informed consumers* that are particularly sensitive to ethical and environmental themes. These consumers show a good knowledge about both fair trade criteria and organic production method, attributing a lot of importance to the information in labelling. On purchasing a product they check that the product has some ethical characteristics, for example that it is environmentally friendly, but they are even more interested in the informative content of a product, in fact they state to check the labels regularly when buying ethical products, but at the same time they complain about the scarce clarity of the current level of information on the labels of these products. For them, in fact, the most important incentive to increase consumption

of ethical products is characterized by the information campaigns to drive consumers to read labels more frequently, providing them with the necessary tools for a better understanding. Consumers belonging to this group, 60% of whom is female, trust mainly information published by independent sources, e.g. environmental associations and consumers' associations and show a high degree of confidence in the activity carried out by the certification bodies.

In the second cluster, of about 29% of the interviewees, there are consumers not particularly attentive to either the ethical content or the informative content of a product. These consumers are not very interested in the information printed on the label of ethical products: the majority of them in fact claim to read them only when they first buy the product. This is the only cluster to have a male majority, i.e. 58% of the group. These consumers can be considered *curious consumers* because they are characterized by a low frequency in the consumption of organic products and FT products. This is the segment showing the least degree of knowledge of the information in label and the greatest difficulty of interpretation, which is confirmed at lower levels compared to the total mean of the sample. They also show difficulty in understanding the labels because they are not clearly written. Finally, they consider such products a passing fashion, hard to find and, even though they are fascinated by them, they are to a certain degree still mistrustful about products they think are less controlled than the conventional one. The third group, about 23% of the interviewees, includes *new-ethical consumers* that have been buying ethical products for less time compared to the other groups individuated. They are consumers interested in themes linked to the production of goods that respect the environment, animal welfare and human rights, but they are not sufficiently informed about ethical products and they are not fully aware of the specific characteristics of these products, especially with reference to FT products.

Furthermore they are consumers who show the least degree of knowledge of the information in labelling and the greatest difficulty of interpretation, which is confirmed at lower levels compared to the total mean of the sample, and also show low level of familiarity with the different logos.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In the last few years we have witnessed an increase in the food product attributes considered important by the consumer when making purchase decisions. Amongst these, the ethical attributes, part of which are environment protection, animal welfare and respect of human rights, have taken on a greater and greater importance. The existence on the market of products with ethical attributes, like organic and FT products, widening the consumer's possibilities of choice, determines an improvement of the individual

well-being on one hand and of the collective well-being on the other, through an upwards thrust towards the regulation of environmental and social standards.

From the point of view of the offer, for companies the new ethical preferences of the consumer are translated into an opportunity to differentiate production and to improve competitiveness. As a result, from the marketing point of view, the levers on which companies have to act are not the classical ones any more, but new tools are required such as the new marks of ethical certification.

In this way, classical marketing is transformed in social and ethical marketing (Kotler, 1991) and companies carry out policies of information and guarantee, aimed at winning the consumer's confidence/trust and at bridging the information gap on the product. The ethical attributes, in fact, are defined as *credence* type and they are not directly verifiable by the consumer, who turns to different sources of information, to which he attributes a different level of trust, to satisfy his/her needs for knowledge. Among these sources, labelling is increasingly being used or considered as a tool for more effectively communicating about ethical trade. More accurately, ethic labels help transform the credence characteristics of such products into search attributes, thereby allowing the consumer to better evaluate quality before deciding to buy the product.

The results of the survey show that the interviewees have a good attitude towards ethical products, which is expressed through a satisfactory knowledge of organic and fair trade products and a frequent consumption of the same. Nevertheless, in spite of the good level of information declared, consumers show the need to obtain more information in respect of fair trade and organic products. Moreover, the results show that the majority of interviewees (43%) consider the labelling of ethical products an important information tool; only in 7% of the cases they state they do not use labels at all. Despite this, those who use labels state also they are not satisfied with the current level of information on them, both because they consider it insufficient, and because they complain about an excess of information of advertising nature. Other interesting aspects concern the difficulty of a correct interpretation of the information on the label and the lack of confidence in the same.

The analysis carried out underlines how the attention and the use of the different information present on the label by the consumers depends mainly on how important they think it is. The use of information, in fact, imposes a cost on consumers, concerning its search, its decoding and assimilation, and when it is not perceived as important, consumers can decide to ignore it in their purchase choices. In particular this depends on the amount of elements present on the label, if such information comes from the certification bodies, the public authorities or the companies.

The main results emerged from the multivariate analysis confirm that the propensity to use labelling as an information tool depends not only on the socio-demographic variables, but also on variables linked to lifestyle, to involvement in particular social and environment themes and on the variables linked to the degree of confidence expressed towards the different sources of information.

Summarizing the results of the analysis it is possible to state that more and more ethical consumers use labelling as a source of information and wish, therefore, for more information and more clarity. Considering that the problem of information asymmetry, that discredits the market of ethical products, represents a strong deterrent to the consumption of such products (McCluskey, 2000), the use of new labelling forms could be an appropriate tool to promote ethical consumption.

To conclude, it is possible to state that the label, as an extrinsic quality indicator, contributes to make ethical products characteristics transparent, even though it is necessary to underline that its interpretation depends on the different contexts in which it operates. In Italy, for example, as confirmed also by the empirical survey, there is a great feeling of confusion on labelling, due to the scarce clarity with which information is displayed and this contributes to determine a generalised scepticism on the authenticity of FT and organic products. It becomes fundamental, therefore, to provide the consumer with clear and concise information, since to display not very clear information on the label does nothing but increase the research costs that consumers have to pay for the evaluation of the product quality. It is necessary, moreover, to improve the modalities with which the message is proposed to consumers, favouring a simpler and more immediate understanding of the same, through, for example, the introduction of quality standards, for the tests and certifications to support labelling in order to strengthen its validity.

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