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Consumer Perceptions of Food Packaging: Contributing to or Counteracting Environmentally Sustainable Development?

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Packaging has a fundamental role in ensuring safe delivery of goods throughout supply chains to the end consumer in good condition. It also has great potential to contribute to sustainable development. This paper explores and provides insights on Swedish consumer perceptions and knowledge of environmental aspects of food packaging and elaborates on how these can contribute to or counteract environmentally sustainable development.

A study based on a consumer survey carried out in Sweden is presented. A review of recent packaging research emphasizes the protective function of packaging as its most important contribution to the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Contrary to this, consumers almost exclusively refer to the packaging material when it comes to their perceptions of the environmental impact of packaging. Paper-based packaging is strongly understood by the surveyed consumers to be environmentally advantageous, whereas plastic and metal are not. This study further indicates that a majority of the Swedish consumers surveyed are aware of their shortcomings in judging the environmental status of food packaging, indicating a need for guidance; otherwise, consumer choices can unintendedly counteract environmentally sustainable intentions.

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INTRODUCTION

Food retail has experienced an increase in organic food sales. This is possibly driven by the increased general awareness and interest in sustainable development among consumers. Environmental and ethical concerns are also becoming increasingly important in consumers' product choices. Health, environmental and ethical concerns have proven to be strong motives for Swedish consumers to purchase organic food products. The increasing environmental concern among consumers in their selection of food products also seems to include the packaging. As Rokka and Uusitalo reported in a study of consumer choices on functional drink products, environmentally friendly packaging is strongly preferred. However, their study did not explain what 'environmentally friendly packaging' really is or means to consumers and is thus a topic worth further investigation.

Several aspects can influence consumer selections of food products. These include product characteristics such as taste, quality, origin, brand, price but also labelling and packaging. A range of previous studies has examined how different sets of these aspects can influence consumers' choices, but studies including consumer perceptions of packaging are limited. Of the ones found, some examine consumer perceptions in relation to a limited set of pre-defined packaging-related aspects; Lund, Sweden. E-mail: helena.lindh@plog.lth.se

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