The Influence of Social and Environmental Labels on Purchasing: An Information and Systematic-heuristic Processing Approach

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The Influence of Social and Environmental Labels on Purchasing: An Information and Systematic-Heuristic Processing Approach

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at exploring how social and environmental (SE) labels influence purchasing. By drawing on the information processing and the systematic-heuristic models, this study tests the following process followed by consumers when selecting SE-labeled products. Information was gathered through a structured questionnaire in personal interviews with 400 consumers responsible for household shopping of Fast-moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), who were randomly approached at shopping malls in four areas of Madrid, Spain. They were asked about recognition, knowledge, credibility, perceived utility and purchases on 12 different labels; the influence of these variables on purchase is modeled and tested by path analysis. This study suggests that a systematic-heuristic information processing occurs when consumers buy SE-labeled FMCG products, as the purchase of this type of goods depends on the recognition of a label, knowledge of the issue/issuer, as well as the credibility and the perceived utility of SE labels. Motivation for being informed influences the process, being an antecedent of awareness, comprehension and perceived utility. This model shows a dual processing mode: systematic and heuristic, where the lack of cognitive capacity could explain why these two processing modes co-occur. This paper adds value to existing literature on SE labels and consumption by applying the information processing model, which has not been used before in the field of responsible consumption, in addition to open a promising avenue for research, by offering complementary theories to the existing ones, based on attitudes.

KEYWORDS: Responsible consumption, SE labels, dual processing, information processing model, systematic processing, heuristic processing.

La influencia de las etiquetas sociales y ecológicas (SE) en la decisión de compra. Análisis de un-enfoque sistemático-heurístico para el procesamiento de información

RESUMEN: En este documento se busca objetivar analizar la influencia de las etiquetas sociales y ecológicas (SE) en la decisión de compra de productos que portan esta marca distinta. Con base en la literatura propuesta por el enfoque sistemático-heurístico, este estudio analiza el proceso de compra de productos con etiquetas SE. Para la realización de éste se empleó un cuestionario estructurado en entrevistas individuales que fue aplicado a 400 consumidores responsables de la compra de productos de consumo masivo en sus hogares, los cuales fueron seleccionados aleatoriamente mientras se encontraban en cuatro puntos de la ciudad de Madrid, España. El instrumento propuesto a los consumidores se centró en el reconocimiento del producto, conocimiento del contenido, la credibilidad y la utilidad percibidas en 12 diferentes etiquetas; las influencias de estas variables sobre la decisión de comprar son modeladas y testadas por un modelo sistemático-heurístico, en el que una limitada capacidad cognitiva podría explicar la coexistencia de estos dos modos de procesamiento de información. En conclusión, este documento añade valor a la literatura sobre etiquetas sociales y ecológicas y el consumo de los productos etiquetados, en cuanto aplica el modelo de procesamiento de información, el cual no ha sido empleado en el análisis del consumidor responsable. Adicionalmente, este trabajo abre las puertas a la investigación en el área estableciendo una teorización complementaria a las ya existentes, que se basan respectivamente en las actitudes del consumidor y no en el procesamiento de la información percibida.
Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR hereafter) is globally considered a source of competitive advantages as in the case of a higher customer loyalty or company reputation (Calabrese et al., 2013; European Commission, 2002; Webb et al., 2008). Putting into practice their CSR commitment, in the last few years, there are more firms offering responsible products and/or brands, including social and environmental (SE) attributes such as respect for workers' rights or the environment.

On the demand side, western consumers have gradually been including these SE attributes in their definition of ideal products (Cetelem, 2010; Forética, 2008; Manget et al., 2009; National Geographic & Globescan, 2009). Following Roberts (1995) we define this type of consumers, also known as responsible or ethical consumers, as those “who purchase products and services which he/she perceives to have a positive (or less negative) impact on the environment or uses his/her purchasing power to express current social concerns”.

Several authors have pointed out that given that social and environmental attributes are credence attributes that cannot be assessed before, during or after the purchase/use of the product (Lupton, 2009), consumers need some aid to identify the responsible brands lying on the shelves. Social and environmental labels (hereafter SE labels), also called CSR labels, are considered the best way to signal that a product/brand matches the social and environmental expectations of consumers (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Fliess et al., 2007; Grail Research, 2009; Howard & Allen, 2006; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004). Labeled products/brands are also referred as ethical, responsible, social or environmental products/brands. To our knowledge, only two published papers have tried to build theories about this matter (De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007; McEachern & Warnaby, 2008). Both have applied the Theory of Planned Behavior in order to explain the influence of labels on purchasing behavior. In these models, attitudes are at the core being the key variables to explain behavior; however, research suggests that the impact of labels depends mostly on comprehension and trust (De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007). Therefore, it seems that other theories, where information processing is at the core could well explain this issue.

In this paper, we apply the information processing and the systematic-heuristic processing models to explain how SE labels influence purchasing. We draw on the theoretical models developed to explain the efficacy of warning labels (in particular on the studies by Conzola & Wogalter, 2001; Wogalter & Laughery, 1996; Wogalter & Young, 1998) and on the Heuristic Systematic Modes (HSM) of information processing theory (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). The HSM theory is applied here rather than the alternative, being very similar to the likelihood model elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), for two reasons: first, because only the HSM theory accepts that the two modes for information processing can coexist; and second, because this theory has been adapted to explain the influence on warning labels on consumers (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). We posit that consumers must go through different stages, from awareness to understanding and acceptance, considering that if the process is interrupted at any of these stages, that is, if gaps occur, labels will not be effective as an information aid.

Previous research focused heavily on organic and fair trade labels, however, there is still a need for evaluating different types of SE labels (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Accordingly, this paper contributes to this research agenda by examining 12 SE labels found on FMCGs, which are among the products whose responsible purchasing is more likely to happen (Grail Research, 2009).

Background

The Information Processing Model

The information processing models, developed in the consumer psychology area and developed by advertising practitioners (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010), predict that a message has an impact on receivers’ behavior if the information goes through different and sequential stages in the receivers’ mind: attention or awareness, comprehension, acceptance, retention and behavior. Only if the information is correctly processed at each phase, will the message result in a behavioral change.

Theories on the influence of warning labels on consumers have suggested a systematic processing mode, based on a five-step model with three different stages: the cognitive stage, the affective stage and the behavioral stage. The cognitive stage comprises two steps: attention and comprehension.

For labels to influence a purchasing decision, consumers must notice them; if the label does not capture the attention of consumers, the process will stop. Some authors have highlighted the difficulties that consumers have when noticing labels, given that the penetration of labels is limited. “Labeled-CSR products typically represent niche markets accounting often for no more than 2% of consumption of the relevant category of products” (Fliess et al., 2007). This study found that even though label penetration among
categories is increasing, their businesses’ adoption is slow, and that penetration of standards among European countries varies greatly; for instance, the Ecolabel has 359 holders in Italy and 34 in UK (Ciroth & Franze, 2011).

Meanwhile, comprehension means that the consumer is able to understand label meaning. In SE labels, comprehension implies knowledge of issue and issuer, that is, knowledge of the issue or attribute protected by the label (e.g., animal welfare) and knowledge of the issuer of the label. Unless a search is run before purchasing, for a regular consumer it is difficult to know information such as the label-awarding body, the demands required to obtain them, or the differences among similar schemes.

Empirical research has shown that consumers are unsure as to what labels mean (Aspers, 2008; D’Souza et al., 2007; Iwanow et al., 2005; Ste & Strandbakken, 2005; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004), and despite the differences found across segments and types of labels, the high number of labels is seen as the main reason for consumer confusion (Langer et al., 2008), with more than one label for the same issue. Additionally, there are not any good label inventories (Fliess et al., 2007), but it is estimated that there are more than 200 only in Europe (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005).

Label design may also help increase (or decrease) the awareness and understanding on the product. No previous study has analyzed what kind of cues consumers use in order to build their knowledge, or what kind of label features could help increase their attention and comprehension. In relation to awareness, noticeable designs or large labels may attract consumer attention more than small or inconspicuous labels. Regarding comprehension, those labels whose design provide information about the awarding body or the issue covered will help consumers to understand its meaning and go on to the next phase of the information processing model.

As for the affective stage, it comprises two steps: trust and perceived utility. Receivers evaluate the credibility of the label and assess whether or not this information is useful for them (Wogalter & Young, 1998). This stage is affected by the consumers’ beliefs and attitudes: labels must be coherent with consumers’ attitudes; on this matter, surveys on Spanish consumers have found they demonstrate good attitudes toward responsible buying (CECU, 2008; Ce- telem, 2010; Forética, 2008; Gallup Organization, 2009).
In the case of SE labels, believability depends on trust, that is, the credibility of the label for the consumer, which, in turn, is influenced by the credibility of the awarding body: when a label is backed up by an independent party (e.g., NGO or government), the credibility increases (Bonroy & Lemarie, 2008; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; D’Souza et al., 2007; Langer et al., 2008).

It is worth mentioning that no published paper has identified the cues that consumers use to make a judgment about the credibility and the perceive utility of the label. Cliath (2007) analyzed the visual cues (of labels, among others) used by coffee brands to convey social and environmental information and compared them with the credibility of the standard used by the brand. She concluded that items other than the label were indicative of the manufacturer’s honesty: the inclusion of realistic images of the production process, detailed contact information, country of origin, name of parent company or producer, panels with educational content, the inclusion of farmers’ voices, among others. However, she did not test whether these are actually the cues employed by consumers to infer the quality of a label scheme.

Finally, even if consumers understand and trust labels, the purchase of SE labeled-products depends on perceived utility. If consumers find labels useful, it is more likely that they will buy this type of products.

Then, if consumers are aware of SE labels, understand their meaning, trust them, and are useful for them, they will purchase the labeled product. Therefore, we theorized that systematic information processing occurs when purchasing SE labeled products, reflecting this situation in the following hypotheses related to the information processing model:

**H1a:** There is a positive and direct relationship between awareness and label comprehension.

**H1b:** There is a positive and direct relationship between comprehension and trust.

**H1c:** There is a positive and direct relationship between trust and label utility.

**H1d:** There is a positive and direct relationship between utility and purchase.

However, there is a well-documented gap between the previous steps and actual behavior, a gap referred to in the literature as the attitude-behavior gap: consumers appreciate social and environmental labels but do not choose labeled products at the selling point. Different reasons have been provided for explaining why this gap occurs: higher prices, quality levels, social pressures, availability issues or just a desire for variety. All these factors explain why even highly ethical motivated consumers do not always buy brands with superior SE performance (Bennett & Williams, 2011; Carrigan et al., 2004; De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007; Iwanow et al., 2005; Mobley et al., 2010; Nicholls & Lee, 2006; Sampedro, 2003; Szmigin et al., 2009; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004).

**The Systematic-heuristic Processing Model**

The systematic information processing model needs to be complemented with the heuristic processing model, as suggested by Zuckerman and Chaiken (1998). The systematic-heuristic processing model establishes that there are two modes of information processing: systematic, linked to the information processing model explained above, where consumers seek, access, evaluate and integrate all available information before making a judgment; and heuristic, where consumers use simple decision rules to make such a judgment.

**The Systematic Process and the Motivation**

Only when consumers recognize, understand and trust labels, they can produce simpler purchase decision rules. Then, the systematic processing mode applies to consumers that have the motivation and the cognitive ability to locate, process and integrate the information. Therefore, motivation becomes a key variable to explain the occurring of a systematic processing mode of purchasing. In the case of SE labels we posit that those consumers, for whom social and environmental attributes of a product/brand are key when making a purchase decision, will be more prone to doing the systematic processing mode.

Motivated consumers will be more aware of SE labels, as the selective attention theory suggests, their attention is guided by their concerns. If they are interested in SE attributes, they will notice them more than non-motivated consumers. Besides, it is plausible that they will have a deeper knowledge about SE labels: their motivation leads them to seek information about labels, read it, understand it and store it for later use. In addition, motivated consumers will find SE labels more useful: if they want to buy responsibly, SE labels will possibly be the only means to differentiate the brands on store shelves.

Therefore, we make the following hypotheses:

**H2a:** There is a positive and direct relationship between motivation and label awareness.

**H2b:** There is a positive and direct relationship between motivation and label comprehension.

**H2c:** There is a positive and direct relationship between motivation and label utility.
The Systematic Process and the Cognitive Ability

Consumers, even those strongly motivated, may lack the necessary cognitive ability for purchasing decisions. This lack of cognitive ability is the main reason why one resorts to the heuristic processing mode. Two conditions may diminish this ability: lack of time and confusion. When consumers have limited time to do their shopping (Spanish consumers devote 3.3 hours per week to their grocery shopping) (MARM, 2010), their ability to process information, among other aspects, is curtailed. Confusion also reduces the cognitive ability to process information. As we explained before, confusion is prevalent in SE labels, due to the high number of labels, the difficulties in differentiating them and the obscure criteria and conditions to obtain each label. Involvement or motivation to buy responsibly does not reduce confusion (Langer et al., 2008). Moreover, consumers acknowledge being confused about other types of labels.

When consumers lack the cognitive ability, they will use heuristics, which involves simple cognitive decision rules to make judgments. In the case of SE labels, heuristics could be “if I see the logo of this NGO, I will buy it” or “if the label is green, it must be environmentally friendly”. Then, an individual using heuristics will not sequentially go through every stage predicted in the information processing model; rather, once they understand an SE label, they will go directly/not to purchase the SE-labeled product, that is, they will directly link the cognitive and the behavioral stages, skipping the affective one.

Therefore, we posit that the heuristic processing model occurs and is reflected in the following hypothesis (Figure 1):

H3: There is a positive and direct relationship between comprehension and purchase.

Methodology

Study Design, Universe and Sample

Information was gathered from a sample of main household buyers of FMCGs over 18 years old through structured personal interviews. Consumers were randomly approached at shopping malls in four areas of Madrid; these areas represent different economic strata. Out of the total, 400 valid interviews were obtained (sample error of 5.5% for p = q = 50%). A description of respondents is presented in Table 1.

Variables Used

One of the main problems in studies of responsible consumption is the bias in self-reported attitudes (Marchand & Walker, 2008; Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Van Doorn et al., 2007), which tend to be overrated. In this study, we tried to minimize the social desirability bias by formulating questions about past behavior (last month) and using projected questions, while avoiding questions about attitudes.

Attention/Awareness. Consumers were given a card with 12 SE graphic labels found in mainstream retailers in Madrid. Then, they were asked whether they remembered seeing any of them.

Comprehension. For each label consumers recognized, they were asked if they knew the meaning of the label (or issue, for short) and the awarding body (or issuer). Interviewers were briefed about these labels and instructed to note down whether the consumer correctly guessed or not each of the answers, therefore differentiating between claimed knowledge and actual knowledge (following McEachern & Warnaby, 2008), which will allow us to infer confusion.

Trust. They were also asked to evaluate their trust in the recognized labels, by using a 10-point Likert scale.

Perceived utility. Consumers were asked to rate the influence of SE labels on purchasing decisions. In order to minimize the social desirability bias, respondents were asked first about the influence of these labels on an average consumer (projected question) and then about the perceived influence on their own purchasing decisions. We used the projected question in subsequent analyses, given that previous studies have highlighted the limited validity of self-reported behavior (Chao & Lam, 2011).

Purchase. Respondents were finally asked whether they had bought a product with such a label in the last month.
Motivation for being informed. First, we assessed the motivation to obtain information from labels creating an ordinal scale ranging from "I never read labels" to "I always read all the information and my queries are resolved by store staff". Second, we assessed the motivation to take into account social and environmental attributes when purchasing. Consumers were asked to rank the three most important attributes when buying products. Then, they were given a list of SE and non-SE attributes, following the suggestions by De Pelsmacker et al. (2005) to avoid the desirability bias. The order of attributes was rotated to avoid biases.

The summarized version of the questionnaire is shown in Table 2.

Analysis

Path analysis was used to test the model. Initially, we tried model A for each of the specific labels. However, the reduced acknowledgement levels for certain labels (see Table 4) did not allow to estimate the model. Therefore, we calculated new variables aggregating the results for all labels, in order to obtain a parsimonious model (Batista-Foget & Coenders, 2000), as follows:

Awareness. Number of labels recognized (ranging from 0 to 12).

Comprehension. Mean of the variables Knowledge of Issue (number of labels whose issue is known - ranging from 0 to 12) and Knowledge of Issuer (number of labels whose issuer is known - ranging from 0 to 12).

Trust. Mean of credibility for the labels that each individual recognizes (ranging from 0 to 10).

Perceived utility of SE labels. Mean of the perceived utility of SE labels (ranging from 0 to 10).

Purchase. Number of labeled-products bought in the last month.

Motivation for being informed. T-tests and chi-square analyses showed that there is a relationship between motivation to read the labels, motivation to include social and environmental attributes in purchase decision, and NGO membership. NGO members tend to consult labels to a larger extent compared to non-NGO members (p-value < 0.05). For food/beverages and cosmetics/household cleaning products, members of NGOs include to a greater extent the three ethical attributes among their priorities (p-value < 0.05). Considering these results, we used NGO membership as a proxy for Motivation. Supporting this decision, other studies of Spanish consumers have also found that being an NGO member was a significant predictor of responsible consumption, more than gender, age or income (CECU, 2008).
The model was tested using the Generalized Least Squares (GLS) algorithm, which is considered more appropriate when variables are non-normal (Table 3) and when samples are small (Boomsma & Hoogland, 2001).

Given that is the first time that the information processing theory has been applied for explaining the purchase of SE labels, we have used path analysis with an exploratory and confirmatory purposes, by following the model development strategy (Hair et al., 1999; Kline, 1998). This strategy involves making adjustments on a baseline model, depending on the goodness-of-fit statistics. It entails a combination of inductive and deductive stages (Bollen, 1989).

We tested a first model (model A), analyzed the model fit measures, and used modification indexes and residual covariances to find modifications that could improve the model fit. This strategy, that was followed by other researchers in the field (e.g., McEachern & Warnaby, 2008), is valid as long as researchers provide the modification history and include changes supported by the theory (Hair et al., 1999).

**TABLE 2. Questionnaire Structure**

| Awareness | Questions referred to 12 labels (European organic, Spanish organic, Andalusian organic, WWF-ADENA, FLO Fair Trade, Ecolabel, Sustainable Cleaning, Rainforest Alliance, FSC, Marine Stewardship Council Leaping Bunny and Eccocert). Do you recognize any of these labels? If so, which ones? |
| Comprehension | Do you know what the label means, i.e., what attribute it protects? Yes (correct guess); Yes (incorrect guess); No. Do you know who awards the label? Yes (correct guess); Yes (incorrect guess); No. |
| Trust | Could you assess your trust in this label on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (completely trustworthy)? |
| Perceived utility | How important are SE labels when purchasing food and beverages, and when buying cosmetics/toiletries/household cleaning products? |
| Purchase | Have you bought a product with such a SE label in the last month? |
| Motivation for being informed [general] | Which of the following statements better captures your behavior regarding labels? I never read labels – I only check the expiry date – I check the expiry date and the nutritional information – I check all the information on the label – I check all the information on the label and my queries are resolved by store staff. |
| Motivation for being informed [specific] | Of these attributes, could you please rank the three most important for you when purchasing food or beverages? 1 is the most important and 3 is the least important: Brand – price – flavor – nutritional properties – environmental impact – animal welfare – social conditions. Of these attributes, could you please rank the three most important for you when purchasing cosmetics, household cleaning products and toiletries? 1 is the most important and 3 is the least important: Brand – price – ingredients – environmental impact – animal welfare – social conditions. |

Source: Own elaboration.

**TABLE 3. Normality Tests and Description of Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Utility</th>
<th>Purchase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.022</td>
<td>1.684</td>
<td>4.082</td>
<td>3.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.358</td>
<td>1.738</td>
<td>2.491</td>
<td>3.632</td>
<td>2.451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skew</td>
<td>1.959</td>
<td>1.161</td>
<td>2.868</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td>1.836</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>12.737</td>
<td>-1.619</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

K-S: Kolmogorov-Smirnov’s Z
Source: Own elaboration.

**Results**

In model A, all estimates were significant (Figure 2), though this model fit was acceptable, but not good. Absolute fit (GFI) was 0.958 higher than the cut-off point of 0.9 (Hair et al., 1999; Levy & Varela; 2006) but RMSEA (0.121) was higher than 0.05-0.06 (Hair et al., 1999; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The indicators of incremental fit and parsimonious fit were lower than 0.9 (AGFI = 0.874, CFI = 0.842, NNFI = 0.662, and IFI = 0.848). However, R² was relatively good (0.609), lower than the one obtained by McEachern and Warnaby (2008) in their study of responsible meat labels, but higher than other models developed to explain responsible behavior consumption (Shaw & Shiu, 2003; Kim & Damhorst, 1998).

**FIGURE 2. Model A Standardized Estimates (R² in brackets)**

Source: Own elaboration.

In order to improve the model fit, modification indices and standardized residual covariances were analyzed. They suggested the inclusion of a direct causal link from Awareness to Utility. This path is consistent with the theory, since it should be understood as a manifestation of the heuristic processing mode: noticing a label increases the perceived...
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utility for the consumer, which will in turn influence purchase. Consequently, the new model (model B) was estimated (Figure 3).

The chi-square value for 6 degrees of freedom (13.352) and its significance (0.038) reveal that the data fit the model, and discrepancies are not significant at the 1% level. However, it is important to realize that this indicator demands normality, whereas the variables used are not normal.

Absolute fit, incremental fit and parsimonious fit index values have notably improved. Absolute fit (GFI) is now 0.986 and RMSEA (0.063) close to the good fit interval 0.05-0.06. However, some authors (e.g., Hu & Bentler, 1999) have found that RMSEA tend to over-reject true-population models with small sample sizes, so that this threshold must be understood as indicative (Batista & Cendes, 2000). The incremental fit and parsimonious fit indices (AGFI = 0.950, CFI = 0.964, NNFI = 0.910, and IFI = 0.966) reveal very good fit, all of which are higher than 0.9. Additionally, R² is higher than in model A (0.630).

All the estimates in the model are statistically significant at the 99% cut-off value and the model is statistically acceptable as well. The estimates support the theoretical model proposed and hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d: purchase of SE-labeled FMCG goods depends on Awareness, Comprehension, Trust and Perceived utility. The strong and positive estimate linking Awareness and Comprehension (0.645) shows that Awareness is the antecedent of Comprehension (H1a). In addition, there is a positive and strong relationship between Comprehension and Trust (0.526) (H1b), between Trust and Utility (0.349) (H1c), and between Utility and Purchase (0.153) (H1d). However, the estimate linking Utility with Purchase, though significant, is yet weak. The reason for this low correlation will be explained in the Discussion section below.

FIGURE 3. Model B Standardized Estimates (R² in brackets)

A moderate and positive relationship was found between Motivation and Awareness (0.314): motivation positively influences Awareness (H2a). The direct effect of Motivation on Comprehension (H2b) and Perceived utility (H2c) is also significant (0.295 and 0.219, respectively). Motivation is, thus, an antecedent of the cognitive and the affective stage in the systematic process.

### Table 4. Awareness, Knowledge, Credibility and Purchases of SE Labels (% of Mentions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>European organic</th>
<th>Spanish organic</th>
<th>Andalusian organic</th>
<th>WWF-Adena</th>
<th>Fair Trade</th>
<th>Ecolabel</th>
<th>Sustainable Cleaning</th>
<th>Rainforest Alliance</th>
<th>FSC</th>
<th>Leaping Bunny</th>
<th>Marine Stewardship</th>
<th>Ecocert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Issue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong guess</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right guess</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Awarding body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong guess</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right guess</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility (10-point scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

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3 See footnote number 2.
In addition, there is a direct and strong relationship between Comprehension and Purchase (0.712) and a direct link between Awareness and Utility (0.269), which supports H3 and suggests that both processing modes co-occur. Actually, the first relation has the strongest estimate in the path, and the second one, although it has a moderate regression weight, is critical for the model as it establishes the only difference with model A. This suggests that the heuristic processing mode is important in order to explain a purchase decision.

Additionally, the model’s explanation for variances (Table 5) is acceptable (R² is especially high for Comprehension and Utility).

**TABLE 5. Percentage of Explained Variance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Utility</th>
<th>Purchase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.623</td>
<td>0.277</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

**Discussion**

Findings presented in this research show that the information processing and the systematic-heuristic processing models could well explain the influence of SE labels on purchase. When processing information about SE labels, consumers follow a dual mode: a systematic mode (captured here in the information processing model) and a heuristic mode.

Consumers need to recognize, understand, trust and consider useful SE labels. This path is strongly influenced by motivation, that is, concern about the social and environmental attributes of a brand that triggers a systematic processing mode. Taking into account the limited information provided by the label, obtaining this knowledge probably entails seeking information outside the selling point (e.g., running online searches, asking friends, reading shopping guides, etc.). This information guides consumers’ decisions about purchasing SE labeled products.

Nevertheless, a heuristic processing mode emerges whereby the mere recognition of a symbol leads to include the information conveyed in the label in the purchase decision, via a heightened perceived utility. Therefore, we presume that this path (awareness leads to purchase via perceived utility) would better fit those with incomplete knowledge, who would have not engaged in prior systematic information processing for decision-making.

This paper was not intended to find out why this dual processing occurs; yet, based on the systematic-heuristic processing theory, we posit that confusion about labels diminishes the cognitive ability of consumers and leads them to use heuristics.

Several signs of confusion can be identified in the data obtained. First, the percentage of consumers that correctly identified the meaning of the label (issue) and the awarding body (issuer) was significantly lower than those who recognized the logo; second, the relatively high percentages of claimed knowledge compared to actual knowledge. Consumers think they know, but they actually do not know the meaning or the awarding body, being this confusion more prevalent in certain labels (e.g., WWF, Fair Trade, and Sustainable Cleaning); third, although credibility is higher in labeling schemes backed up by government (e.g., Organic or Ecolabel) or social organizations (e.g., FSC or Leaping Bunny), the highest trust is placed on labels that are not issued by these institutions, but widespread in an industry (e.g., Sustainable Cleaning). There is no relationship between credibility and quality of the label.

Another key finding of this research, in line with theories of information processing, is the influence of motivation on the cognitive and affective stages, and consequently, on behavior; motivation is measured here with a proxy (membership of social organizations). Other studies have found that members of NGOs are cognitively empowered to a larger extent than non-members (Valer, 2008), and may provide consumers with information about labels. Besides, they exhibit a greater concern for buying ethical brands; yet, they will also use heuristics, as they also exhibit confusion.

In conclusion, this paper has found a gap between the cognitive and affective stages and behavior, that other previous studies have identified (Bennett & Williams, 2011; Carrigan et al., 2004; De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007; Iwanow et al., 2005; Mobley et al., 2010; Nicholls & Lee, 2006; Sampredo, 2003; Szmigin et al., 2009; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004). The sequence proposed by the information processing model is interrupted at the last step: the influence of perceived utility on purchase is limited. This leads us to think that other factors may influence purchase.

**Conclusions**

This study has found that information processing theories and, more specifically, the systematic-heuristic processing theory could explain the purchase of SE labels. The model proposed here is parsimonious: it explains a large percentage of variance with a reduced number of variables. Likewise, the resulting model is very useful for practitioners: it shows the gaps, that is, on which variables to act upon in order to increase the effectiveness of labels.
In addition, this paper has found that a dual processing mode occurs, influencing the purchase of SE labeled-goods. Consumers engage in some systematic processing, whereby they seek, integrate and store information about labels. This process results in the recognition and comprehension of labels. However, for purchase to occur, consumers must also trust labels and regard them as useful for making purchase decisions. It is important to add that not all consumers will engage in the systematic processing mode, as motivation is a necessary condition. Heuristics, however, are based on the mere recognition of the label, as the recognition of a label leads to purchase indirectly via its positive influence on the perceived utility.

Moreover, this paper paves the way for a promising area of research in the field and builds up a research agenda to further examine this phenomenon. Future contributions should focus on three main issues: clarifying the processing modes, identifying the determinants of the variables used in the model, and merging them with other theories to include new variables in the model in order to better explain the phenomenon.

First, further studies should clarify the processing modes. It should be examined whether there are differences in the information processing label-wise and/or individual-wise. This should be oriented toward clarifying whether the same individual engages in different processing modes, and therefore, both modes coexist, and/or whether the same individual conducts different processing modes for different labels, or even for different product categories, issues of concern, or purchasing context. This would be useful as a basis for clustering consumers and labels. Second, future research should aim to unveil the determinants of the key steps in the information processing model. In particular, questions such as what builds awareness, what improves comprehension, how consumers infer the credibility of a label, and what creates and reduces confusion, should be directly addressed. Third, the information processing theories could be merged with other responsible consumer theories to better explain the phenomenon.

In particular, the model used here could be improved by taking variables from the Theory of Planned Behavior, outlined by Ajzen (1985, 1991), which is the dominant theoretical framework to explain responsible consumption.

References


