

Chocolate ethics: Millennials say one thing but do another when choosing chocolate, study finds

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A Kansas State University study found that while millennials may voice support for ethical chocolate, it's not what they choose. Credit: Kansas State University

The majority of millennials may not be putting their money where their mouths are when selecting chocolate, according to a Kansas State

University expert in psychological sciences.

Despite strong preferences for ethical chocolate in focus groups, only 14 percent of millennials in individual choice studies selected candy with ethical or social factors labeling—such as organic, Rainforest Alliance Certified, non-GMO and Fair Trade—according to a study by Michael Young, professor and head of the university's [psychological sciences](#) department.

"For most participants, their choice behavior reflected minimal concern for ethical factors, whereas their public declarations in a focus group suggested otherwise," Young said. "Participants who modestly preferred a candy with certain labels in our focus group may be unwilling to pay much more to obtain it."

The study "Millennials and chocolate product ethics: Saying one thing and doing another" will be published in an upcoming issue of *Food Quality and Preference*. Young and his research assistant Anthony McCoy, doctoral student in psychological sciences, Albion, Michigan, evaluated answers from 80 participants in focus groups and 214 participants for the choice studies. Participants were assigned to focus groups based on ages in the millennial range—younger millennials were participants 18-25 years old and older millennials were participants 26-35 years old.

"We got the impression in the [focus groups](#) that millennials were learning in college what attitudes were popular to express regarding their food," Young said. "But many of the older millennials confessed that they often were not making purchases consistent with those expressed attitudes due to limited financial resources."

Discussions among younger millennials commonly mentioned words like food, favorite, company, snack, fat, calories and words related to brand

names and ingredients. The common words for the older millennials included company, ingredients, organic, bar, food, fair trade, vegan, price and words related to purchasing locations and packaging.

Young and McCoy separated choice study participants into six clusters based on trends with their preferences: lower fat and pro-taste cluster, 31 percent; low fat, some sugar cluster, 19 percent; calorie and health conscious cluster, 14 percent; socially conscientious cluster, 14 percent; sweet and tasty cluster, 11 percent; and pro-taste and anti-organic cluster, 11 percent.

Five of the six clusters, or 89 percent of the participants, favored clean labels, which Young defines as a smaller number of ingredients with pronounceable names. According to Young, two large chocolate companies announced changes to their labels in February 2015 in support of this preference. The one cluster that did not show preference for clean labels was the pro-taste and anti-organic cluster, which also preferred higher fat and had a distinctive dislike for organic and non-GMO products.

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what is really going on in the heads of the individuals in the pro-taste and anti-organic cluster," Young said. "They were mostly men with high self-control—individuals who don't impulse buy—and all they really cared about was the taste."

Participants in the choice study also filled out a survey about buying history of average food items, which Young and McCoy used to establish buying demographics and confirm the clusters. For example, they found that participants in the calorie and health conscious cluster reported that they did not typically buy things like chocolate milk or cake mixes.

"The buying demographics validated the emerging picture of the

clusters," Young said. "What they were doing in the context of the experiment really did correlate with what they were self-reporting as products that they were buying in the real world."

The majority of the [participants](#) were from the Midwest, which Young said may influence the choices.

"Although older millennials voice their interest in certified ethical chocolate, it is too early to tell if this is a fad or a shift in consumer preferences," Young said. "However, ethical sourcing is a laudable goal and companies should lay the groundwork for possible change in consumer preference."

Provided by Kansas State University

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