

The Role of the Risk Society in Eco-Labeled Food Purchases



What is the Risk Society?

The theory of risk society posits that postindustrial societies organize themselves to address risks that stem from the modernization process, rather than external sources. As risks become apparent, society can reflect upon and alter their production.

Conclusions & Takeaways

- ✦ Risk is a motivator for consumers who purchase eco-labeled food.
- ✦ In purchasing decisions, consumers focus on the body and the environment, sites where individual consumption is thought to create change.
- ✦ Voluntary eco-labels are an imperfect mechanism for addressing the most salient risks in the food system, since they assuage pre-existing consumer worries rather than providing complete information.
- ✦ Because consumers do not have perfect information, eco-labeled food producers can charge higher prices for the eco-label alone.

Food System Context

The use of Green Revolution agricultural technologies has led to manufactured risk, particularly for agricultural workers and ecosystems. Industrialization distances consumers from food production, but in recent decades sales of organic and non-GMO labeled foods have increased as more consumers want information about how their food is produced. I question the extent to which demand for eco-labeled food stems from consumers' desire to avoid risk.



Natural
Cage Free
Grain Fed

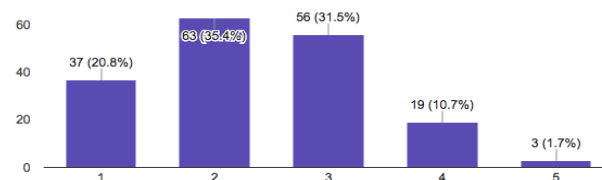
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Methodology

- ✦ **SURVEYS** looking at consumers' purchasing decisions and opinions on production inputs
- ✦ **PACKAGING ANALYSIS** focusing on the narratives used to sell food to consumers at the point of decision-making.

Producing food with pesticides is safe for agricultural and food-processing workers.

(178 responses)



Graph of responses on a Likert scale, where 1 means 'strongly disagree' and 5 means 'strongly agree.'

Packaging Narratives

- ✦ **HEALTH**, advertising specific nutritional and ingredient information
- ✦ **SOCIAL BENEFIT**, indicating some kind of benefit to producers (e.g. farmer ownership) or the environment (e.g. recycled packaging)
- ✦ **AUTHENTICITY**, vague narratives claiming that the food is simple or natural. Authenticity narratives rely on a natural/unnatural binary and assumptions that "unnatural" foods are risky. Producers using authenticity narratives have an incentive to maintain the existence of risky foods.

Survey Results

- ✦ Taste, concern for the environment, personal health, and animal well-being were cited as reasons to buy eco-labeled food, but higher prices were a deterrent.
- ✦ 69.6% considered GMOS safe to eat, and several respondents referred to restrictions on GMOS as "anti-science."
- ✦ 63% considered pesticides unsafe for the environment and 56.2% considered them unsafe for workers, but no one cited concern for workers as a reason to buy eco-labels.
- ✦ Overall focus on the body and the environment indicates that consumption is viewed as a way to address risks that are close in proximity and linked to individual choice.

1. Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Theory, Culture & Society (Unnumbered). London; Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1992.
2. Horne, Ralph E. "Limits to Labels: The Role of Eco-Labels in the Assessment of Product Sustainability and Routes to Sustainable Consumption." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 33 (2009): 175-182.
3. Jaenicke, Edward C., and Andrea C. Carlson. "Estimating and Investigating Organic Premiums for Retail-Level Food Products." *Agribusiness* 31, no. 4 (October 1, 2015): 453-71. doi:10.1002/agr.21413.