e-GRO Edible Alert

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The US Market for Salad Mixes

This publication illustrates the findings from a study conducted by the author and collaborators titled "Characterizing the US Market for Salad Mixes Through the Lens of Environmental Preferences" (Ulloa et al., 2024), published in HortScience Journal in 2024.

Americans are eating more greens, and salad mixes (i.e., spring mix, salad kits, packaged salad) are among the top drivers of this increased consumption. Salad mixes include different varieties of lettuce, spinach, cabbage, arugula, and other leafy greens. Salad mixes have gained popularity as a modern alternative to traditional vegetables, primarily due to their nutritional value and freshness. The ease of consumption of salad mixes further contributes to their widespread appeal, as they are known for their grab-and-go convenience. Market reports convey the worldwide salad mixes market was valued at $10.78 billion in 2020, with an expected compound annual growth rate of 8.2% from 2021 to 2028.

Salad mixes consumers were segmented into 3 clusters: deep-rooted, indecisive, and skeptic.
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The environmental footprint of food production, distribution, and consumption has made consumers aware about the impact of their food choices. For example, the 2023 Food Marketing Institute report revealed that Gen Z and Millennials prioritize sustainable and environmentally friendly foods when making purchasing decisions.

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Compared to more conventionally grown foods, environmentally friendly products claim to have less impact on the environment and be less damaging to human health. Some of the more common terms on environmentally positive labels on foods include carbon footprint, organic production, pollinator-friendly, fair trade, chemical-free, etc.

The demand for pro-environmental labels has helped food retailers leveraging consumers' preferences for environmentally friendly foods. Many food companies are using pro-environmental labels to communicate the environmental benefits of their products through product labels, phrases, and logos. These pro-environmental labels are intended to influence consumer behavior and raise awareness about the relationship between consumption and the environmental impact of food choices. Previous research has discussed the efficiency and value of pro-environmental labels in the food industry.

This publication highlights the findings of a research article titled "Characterizing the US Market for Salad Mixes Through the Lens of Environmental Preferences" (Ulloa et al., 2024). The study characterized the US market for salad mixes by segmenting consumers based on their preferences for pro-environmental labels. Market segmentation is a widely used strategy that includes the segmentation of a marketplace into clusters of consumers with dissimilar requirements, features, or behaviors across clusters. Thus, segmenting the market can help businesses identify the preferences and needs of niche markets and tailor marketing strategies for targeting segments.

Younger consumers tend to prioritize sustainable and environmentally friendly foods when making purchasing decisions.
Photo Source: Stock Images Microsoft.

Labels conveying that products are pollinator friendly are among the most valued pro-environmental labels.
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The study highlights the significance of environmental sustainability in consumers' food choices, and the importance of promoting sustainable agricultural practices like pollinator-friendly and low fertilizer-use methods to meet the growing demand for environmentally conscious food products.
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Findings

The most valued pro-environmental labels were those conveying low fertilizer use, followed by pollinator-friendly practices and low greenhouse gas emissions. Other labels valued by consumers were low food miles, low carbon footprint, biodegradable packaging, low water use, and low energy use.

The study found 3 market segments of salad mixes consumers based on their preferences for production- (low energy use, low fertilizer use, low greenhouse gas emissions, low water use, and pollinator-friendly) and marketing-related (biodegradable packaging, low carbon footprint, and low food miles) pro-environmental labels:
- **Deep-rooted** consumers
- **Skeptic indecisive** consumers
- **Skeptic** consumers

Cluster 1, labeled **deep-rooted**, represented the second-largest group including 760 respondents or 36% of the market segment. They reported the highest valuation to all pro-environmental labels compared to other clusters, ranking the highest for labels such as low fertilizer use, low greenhouse gas emissions, and pollinator-friendly. When comparing the three clusters, the **deep-rooted** cluster showed the highest proportion of high-income households, those having more children in the household, consumers with higher educational attainment, those living in urban areas, and those with higher daily consumption of fresh vegetables. Deep-rooted consumers preferred to purchase salad mixes from DTC and online markets compared to the other clusters. The represented the largest percentage of respondents who considered all environmental perceptions extremely important.

Cluster 2, the largest market segment, is comprised 40% of the sample or 843 respondents. Cluster 2 was named **indecisive** given that consumers in this segment ranged halfway between the first cluster and the third cluster for all environmental labels. The most important labels for the **indecisive** were low fertilizer use, pollinator-friendly, and low greenhouse gas emissions. The least valued labels for cluster 2 were low energy consumption and low water use. The **indecisive** cluster had the highest proportion of low-income households and consumers living in rural areas. This group reported midpoint importance for market characteristics compared to the other clusters.

Cluster 3 was named **skeptic** due to the lowest importance placed for all pro-environmental labels on salad mixes compared to the other two groups. Representing 23% of the market or 497 consumers, this segment preferred labels related to low fertilizer use, pollinator-friendly, and low food miles. The **skeptic** cluster had the highest proportion of older consumers and female participation, as well as medium-income households. They were characterized by residing in the Midwest, living in suburban areas, and having the lowest daily consumption of vegetables. The **skeptic** cluster had the lowest valuation for market characteristics and represented the lowest percentage of respondents who considered all environmental perceptions extremely important relative to the other clusters.

Take-Home Message

The main contribution of this study is the categorization of the US salad mixes market into three market segments: deep-rooted, indecisive, and skeptic segments. The deep-rooted cluster highly valued all the pro-environmental labels, with a particular preference for labels such as low fertilizer use, pollinator-friendly methods, and low greenhouse gas emissions.

Compared with other clusters, the deep-rooted comprised consumers with high incomes, more children at home, high educational attainment, residing in urban areas, and preferring direct-to-consumer and online marketplaces to purchase salad mixes.

Our findings support other researchers' recommendations that highlight the significance of environmental sustainability in consumers' food choices, and the importance of promoting sustainable agricultural practices like pollinator-friendly and low fertilizer-use methods to meet the growing demand for environmentally conscious food products.

The fact that individuals with a preference for buying salad mixes through online markets were more likely to be part of the deep-rooted segment suggests companies showing environmental footprint labels through their websites.

The findings also suggest that emphasizing pro-environmental features, including factors like the carbon footprint, can attract deep-rooted consumers and potentially boost salad mixes sales by encouraging increased purchases and consumption.

Literature Cited

Ulloa, M. C., Marques, J. M., Velasco, J. E., Philocles, S., & Torres, A. P. (2024). Characterizing the US Market for Salad Mixes through the Lens of Environmental Preferences. HortScience, 59(4), 533-541.

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