

The Impact of Labels and Preconceptions on Ohio State Students' Food Buying Habits

Marlee Stollar, Annie Specht, PhD., and Amanda Bowling, Ph.D., The Ohio State University

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to discover why students at The Ohio State University, aged 18-23, choose certain food products. Specifically, the study aimed to determine if underlying preconceptions about agriculture or food labels influence student consumer habits. Learning about students' opinions about food can allow agricultural companies to better market their products and create more relevant products for this demographic.

According to Lundy, Rumble, and Telg's study (2018), which examined college millennials' beef labeling views, millennials worried about beef production's environmental impact. Regarding thoughts on marketing and labeling, participants wanted more "transparency" from the industry. In another recent study, Ruth and Rumble (2019) also found more information about consumer preferences. The study discovered Florida residents of all ages wanted to know more about genetically modified (GM) products or had some doubts about GM food. This research demonstrated that there are some prominent preconceptions about food labels that consumers consider before buying their food.

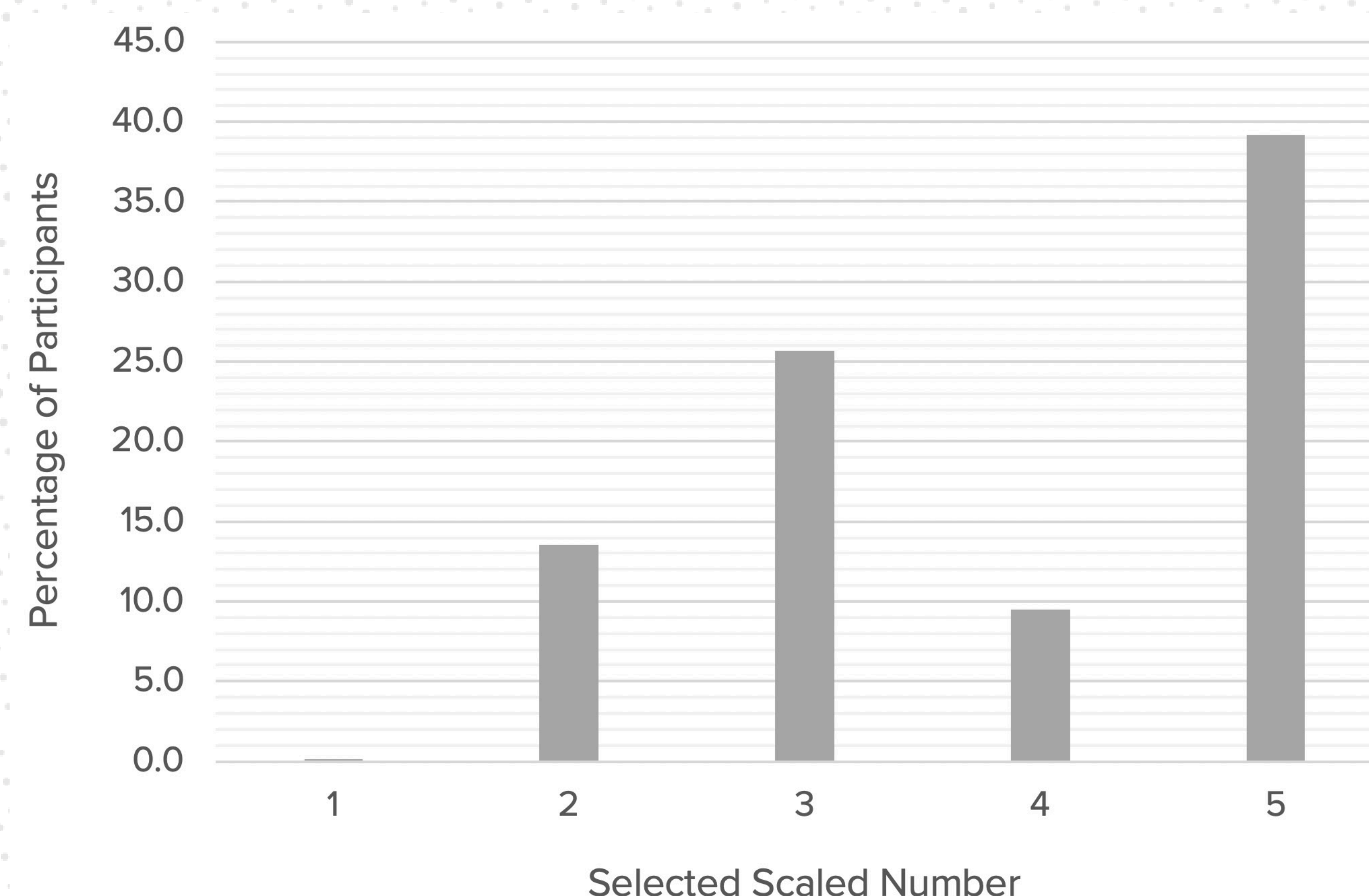
Although this undergraduate study was focused more broadly than these studies, it similarly served to gauge consumer's views on food products. This research project aimed to confirm and explore the previous findings.



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GRAPH OF DESCRIPTIVE FREQUENCIES FOR QUESTION 11

For the question, "On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very important and 5 being least important), how important is buying an organic food label for you?"



METHODS

The researchers adhered to the following procedures:

- Created the survey by referring to the two referenced articles, as well as input from the undergraduate researcher, primary investigator, and the sponsor.
- Distributed an online Qualtrics survey, which included 28 questions, to assess participants' underlying perceptions and opinions of agriculture. The question types were Likert scale (seven-point), open response, and multiple choice.
- Presented the survey to four undergraduate classes in the autumn and two in the spring at Ohio State.
- Posted flyers describing the study in the 18th Avenue Library and the Ohio Union, which are public gathering spaces for students.
- Used SPSS software to analyze the quantitative data using descriptive frequencies tests, one-way ANOVA statistical tests, and one non-parametric statistical test.
- Analyzed the four qualitative responses by categorizing common answers into themes.
- Gathered the results and drew conclusions.

RESULTS

- The Likert questions showed a variety of food thoughts. While the majority (82.4%) agreed (somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree) with "Farmers are trustworthy," the majority (52.8%) disagreed (somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) with the statement "Pesticides are safe."
- Regarding eating regimens, only 4.1% followed dairy-free, 4.1% followed vegetarian, and 4.1% followed the Whole 30.
- More than half (52.7%) of participants indicated they would be willing to pay 5% more for organic foods.
- The three one-way ANOVA tests and one non-parametric test were used to determine if differences exist among grade levels for three Likert constructs: farm feelings, farm sustainability, and food safety. No significance was detected in any of these tests.
- Open response qualitative questions about food labels showed a variety of themes in responses. Some terms participants were not aware of, while others defined terms as a "marketing ploy." Regarding the organic term, several respondents indicated it meant "no pesticides."

Of the students surveyed...

52.8%
disagreed with the statement, "Pesticides are safe."

82.4%
agreed with the statement, "Farmers are trustworthy."

70.3%
agreed with the statement, "Farming is sustainable."

CONCLUSION

The results suggest students are somewhat hesitant about agricultural practices, as well as choosing some food labels or products. Qualitative responses also suggest unclear understanding of some agricultural practices and food labels. With this information, agricultural communicators should continue to focus on using the farmer to address consumer concerns—since consumers indicated they trust farmers.

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