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Competing goals in food consumption choices: a comparative analysis of student's choices in Bologna and Belgrade

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Aims of the contribution

Aim of this study is to investigate the role of eight economic, cultural and behavioural macro-factors which drive the choices of millennial consumers in purchasing and managing food. To do so, an online survey has been conducted among the students of the Universities of Bologna (Italy) and Belgrade (Serbia), with the aim of understand how choices related to food are related to non-strictly economic aspects, such as nationality, gender and age

Description of the research

Introduction

Drivers and goals of food purchasing choices are widely debated in the scientific literature. Far from being influenced only by economic and efficiency related factors, actions related to food purchasing, management and disposal are driven by cultural, socio-economic and behavioural factors, and the consumers' final goals are diversified and often in mutual competition.

In addition, the focus of contemporary consumers in the act of purchasing food is no longer exclusively on meeting nutritional needs from a quantitative or qualitative perspective. Several studies found that people are looking for products that are able to meet new functions in terms of safety, economic and social needs- as well as environmental and ethical standards.

More specifically, literature identifies several goals underlying individuals' food purchase choices including: save money, save time, decrease the level of food waste, be a good provider, avoid health risks, care for the environment, care for social sustainability of purchasing choices, respect the religious precepts.

Considering these elements, this study aims to capture a broader perspective of the consumer behaviour at the time of purchase. A survey among Italian and Serbian "millennial" college students of the University of Bologna and of the University of Belgrade has been conducted, with the aim of understand what are the main objectives of consumers at the moment of purchasing food. Thus, an index to measure the differences among the answers provided by students of different genders will be calculated and a cluster analysis will be developed to understand the interrelations among the identified goals.

This work aligns with the sustainable development agenda 2030 of the United Nations, where the importance of a sustainable consumption is reflected in goals number 12 "Sustainable Consumption and Production" (specifically 12.3), number 2 "Zero Hunger", and number 11 "Sustainable cities and communities".

Materials and methods

The survey has been submitted to a sample of students of the Universities of Bologna and Belgrade between October 1st 2019 and December 31st 2019. Data have been collected through an online survey submitted by a convenience sample of students, who have been involved in the

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research during classes and through the diffusion of the survey through dedicated social media channels (e.g. Facebook pages and groups involving millennial students).

The questionnaire has been presented in three languages (Italian, Serbian and English), with in order to reach a broad variety of typologies of students.

At the end of data collection period, the final sample includes a total of 314 students (158 from the University of Bologna, 156 from University of Belgrade) and will reflect the gender composition of the student populations of the two Universities.

The questionnaire is made of 51 7-points likert-scale questions, divided in 6 sections, both inspired by literature and developed by the authors. The sections follow a standard sequence, instead of being organized by different competing goals, in order to reduce the potential biases of the respondents.

After a pre-test phase, which led to some reviews of the first version of the questionnaires, the survey has been submitted to the students.

Thus, a cluster analysis has been performed to identify different profiles of consumers, and a Gender Differentiation Index (GDI) has been elaborated to describe gendered differences among the answers.

Results

Results of the analysis describe the role of differences, especially national and by gender, in defining the food purchasing and management behaviour of Italian and Serbian “millennials”.

A gender-focused analysis of preliminary data shows that in the Italian case study women seems to be more interested in the thematic of food. Indeed, female students declare higher degrees of interests in social aspects of food purchasing (e.g. sustainability, and being a good provider), preparation and disposal, when compared to the male counterpart. On the other side, Italian male students seems to be more interested in economic aspects of household food management.

Concerning Serbian students, results of the survey show that “millennials” from Belgrade seems to present a lesser general concern about food purchasing and preparation instances with respect to the Italian sample. Moreover, results highlight the presence of gender-related differences in the importance given to different goals.

Conclusions

Results of the survey show that the impact of the 8 considered competing goals (save money, save time, decrease the level of food waste, be a good provider, avoid health risks, care for the environment, care for social sustainability of purchasing choices, respect the religious precepts) on the food purchasing decisions of “millennial” consumers depends on a variety of factors. More precisely, gender and nationality seems to have a significant role in shaping decisions related to food purchasing and management.

In conclusions, the results of the survey consolidate the idea that decisions related to food purchasing and management are of pure economic nature, but include cultural and behavioural aspects, which are strongly dependent by different factors, such as nationality and, consequently, gender.

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