

CONSUMERS PERCEPTION OF LITHUANIAN ECO-LABEL

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Abstract

In the recent decade, individuals have become more environmentally concerned, while companies realized that consumers' needs and desires are changing. This, in turn, has created new environmentally oriented practices, like ecological labeling, to satisfy consumer demands. Though eco-labels were created with a purpose to ease consumers to make their buying choices, a certain degree of confusion has emerged among the customers concerning the precise meaning of eco-labels. In Lithuania "Ekologinis žemės ūkis" ("Ecological Farming") eco-label has been issued in 2009. However, it is still new to consumers in addition to generally low level of ecological labeling practice awareness. With regard to the issue of consumer confusion and the distrust of eco-certification, the purpose of the research was to investigate perceptions of Lithuanian consumers of eco-labels and in particular Lithuanian ecological label "Ekologinis žemės ūkis."

Although, the findings revealed that introduction of eco-label "Ekologinis žemės ūkis" was positively perceived, suggesting that it might make more people to consider their health and environment more seriously, the study participants recognized both positive and negative aspects of the label. However, consumers reported not feeling totally "safe" while choosing eco-labeled products and distrust producers and ecological labels because of their claims.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades environmental issues have received much attention on the international arena; scholars are putting more emphasis to the problem of consumerism and how it can be less harmful for the social and ecological environment. Though research shows that buyers are becoming more environmentally aware and showing a greater concern for natural preservation, when it comes to the act of purchasing and consumption, people's buying behavior is rarely consistent with their attitudes (Vantomme *et al.*, 2004). There are different explanations why the inconsistency between consumer environmental attitudes and their consumer preferences and behavior exists. The most significant factor in preventing consumers from altering their behavior to become more environmentally sustainable is the lack of trust in the companies and claims about their environmental impact. Other factor that contributes to the consumer unwillingness to make greener choices is the confusion by too much information. One of the options of providing comprehensible information on the product package is the use of labels (National Geographic & GlobeScan, 2010). Therefore, one of the environmentally oriented practices appeared to be ecological labeling.

Concept of Eco-label

Label is a powerful marketing tool that can communicate valuable information to consumers. Today, however, infinite number of labels exists which makes it harder for a consumer to orient himself in this "jungle of labels" (Courvoisier, 2005). Some labels can be self-awarded to products by companies, while others are issued by the third authoritative parties. Basically, the label creation suggests an establishment of a monitoring system to guarantee product quality and its consistency

with specified criteria (Jeddi & Zaiem, 2010). Such monitoring system is critical when consumers form their perception of labels and assign a credibility level to them.

Larceneux (2004) argue that labels help consumers to identify quality of products, create uniqueness for the product and make it distinguishable and assign qualities such as credibility, confidence, and respect to both the producer and the product it is labeled with. Producers label their products when they want to communicate a specific message to customers. Some labels provide a message about the place a product was produced in, other stress how it was made, and again other give information about the materials used in the production process. One type of labels is ecological label (eco-label). Eco-label provide information on the environmental aspects of products and services. Even after identifying how labels can influence consumers, the question remains how consumers perceive labels and what level of importance they assign to them. As quality is an important criterion that guides consumer's buying decisions, label is a helpful tool that consumers use to assign quality specification to products (Gruner, 1993). Another factor that influences how labeled products are perceived is emotional experience (Jeddi & Zaiem, 2010). Emotional component is powerful when consumers choose products as identifications of their social status through a self-positioning tool.

Eco-labels are the types of product labels companies identify their products and services with to communicate information of a product's environmental impact and thus help consumers make decisions about their consumption choices (Rex & Baumann, 2007). Basically, an eco-label identifies the environmental preference of a product based on its life cycle considerations (GEN, 2004). This label is issued by the third party to the products that meet established environmental standards, which provides a definite level of trust for consumers.

The literature also indicates that many consumers have a low level of trust of ecological schemes (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Andaleeb, 1995). The reasons for that include cynicism about the producers' motives, distrust of the independence of governmental agencies and the overall quality of eco-labeling standards (Aarset *et al.*, 2004).

Most of the early research on the issue of eco-labeling has been focusing on implementation of environmental policies, environmental technologies, and environmental accountability. However, the increasing number of research is focusing on the influence of eco-labels on consumer perceptions and their buying behavior (Byrd-Bredbenner & Coltee, 2000; Roozen, 1999; Grunert, 1993). For eco-labels to be successful environmental tools, certain standards should be met. First of all, the information communicated to consumers through the eco-label should be understood and accepted. In addition, the product itself should not be misleading (D'Souza, 2000).

Consumer Eco-label Confusion

Scholars suggest that the information available about products from advertising and information provided on a product label are important factors that help consumers collect information for their decision-making as well as form some perceptions about the product. Though eco-labels were created with a purpose to make it easier for consumers to make their buying choices, a certain degree of confusion has emerged among the customers concerning the precise meaning of eco-labels. Studies indicate that consumers perceive environmental labels as necessary; however, they are often confused by the terminology used on the eco-labels (Caswell & Mojduszka, 1996; D'Souza, 2004; D'Souza, Taghian & Lamb, 2006; Langer, Eisend & Kuß, 2008). Uncertainty prevails when discussing the influence eco-labels have on consumers and how well they understand the information that labels represent.

It is suggested that generally consumers interpret labeling information based on the following criteria: the accurate and clear meaning of these labels, the knowledge of labels, and the perception of businesses with respect to the environment (D'Souza, Taghian & Lamb, 2006). Other studies suggest the depth of consumer confusion while interpreting information on the labels. Teisl and others (1999), for example, suggest that eco-labels are often misleading and impossible to verify, that they do not provide objectivity of company's marketing claims and only decrease consumer confidence in environmental labeling. Byrd-Bredbenner and Coltee (2000) researching UK female

consumers, suggest that though consumers are able to identify and use information on a label, they have hard time evaluating label claims. So, the main weakness of the eco-labeling schemes remains the idea that buyers can make verifiably informed environmental choices. D'Souza (2004) claims that even a shallow evaluation of the green market reveals that “most consumers appear ignorant in identifying the difference between environmental labels” (p. 181). Often consumers are simply unaware of regulations that allow companies to certify their products with eco-labels (Plant & Plant, 1991; Iyer, 1999).

Another reason why consumers might be disoriented forming their perceptions of eco-labels is the variety of eco-labels and different criteria set up by the ecological labeling schemes (Nilsson, Tuncer & Thidell, 2003). Some labels measure the level of pesticides in the product, other concentrate on additives and preservatives, while other labels monitor different aspects of products content and production process to identify its ecological impact (Pretty, 1998). This variety of aspects reflected in ecological labeling did not contribute to a greater consumer acceptance of eco-labels, increased awareness, and control over their decision making, but on the contrary, raised consumer confusion and rejection of eco-labels as a meaningful and credible source of product information. Due to a great number of private and public organizations that provide third party labeling as well as absence of one global scheme of environmental labeling, consumers have hard time interpreting eco-labels (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Hutchins & Greenhalgh, 1997; Lilliston & Cummins, 1998; Zeng & Wei, 2005).

As identified by the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN) (2004), the key issue of eco-labeling is consumer recognition and demand. Some analysts have suggested that demand for eco-labeled products should be used as a measure of the impact of an eco-label on the environment, as there is no single measurement of the environmental quality and product impact on it (Grundey, 2009). So, in order to increase the demand for eco-labeled products, the key task is to ensure that consumers efficiently receive adequate information about eco-labels.

Eco-labeling in Lithuania

Eco-labeling is relatively new concept for Lithuanian consumers. The whole idea of environmental crises and consumer responsibility in relationship to it is on the introductory level of development. The national program of environmental consciousness and eco-labeling started in Lithuania in 1995. In 1996 the new regulation of product environmental labeling was launched and the national eco-label “Water Lily” was created (Grundey, 2009). Lithuania created its own national eco-labeling program on the basis of the European Union’s “European Flower” program. However, this eco-labeling scheme has not been used by Lithuanian producers and because of the limited market penetration and the possibility of acquiring the EU eco-label it is ineffective and has no future (Staniskis, Varzinskas & Arbaciauskas, 2008).

As demand for organic products has been increasing for the past decade, a certification system had to be put in place in order to differentiate and acknowledge organic farms and products. Since 2008 in Lithuania the public enterprise “Ekoagros” has a permission to certify agricultural and food products of exceptional quality and processes of organic production. It issues the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” (“Ecological Farming”) eco-label since 2009, and since 2012, it is issued along with the EU “Euro-leaf” organic logo (Ekoagros, n.d.). “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” (“Ecological Farming”) is the newest label that has been used by eco-farmers and processors for agricultural and food products (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Eco-label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” (“Ecological Farming”)

However, the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” ecological label is new both to the Lithuanian market as well as to consumers in addition to the generally low level of ecological labeling practice awareness. Not much research has been conducted in the area of consumer eco-labeling perception in Lithuania, and none on the topic of the newly introduced eco-label.

While the number of certified products with the aforementioned eco-labels on Lithuanian market is still low, the number of growers of organic products and food processing enterprises is constantly growing (Jurksaitiene & Markeviciene, 2011). According to the research conducted by Kaufmann *et al.* (2011), the main motivators for farmers to convert their farm to organic are related to economic and farm-management reasons. Results also indicate “farm-support deficits, with a low take-up of extension services in general and low availability of organic farm advice” (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011, p. 540). At the same time, authors notice that Lithuanian agricultural system is generally developing at a fast pace in order to adjust to the EU and the worldwide organic market conditions.

While looking from the consumer perspective, the level of eco-education in Lithuania is very low. According to the comparative study on the perceptions and knowledge of eco-labeling among Austrian and Lithuanian consumers conducted by Ruzevicius & Wageringer (2007), less than one third of Lithuanians said to pay attention to product eco-labeling and only two percent of consumers claimed to ever hear about the Lithuanian eco-label “Water Lily.” In addition, the National Survey was conducted in Lithuania in 2007 which also evaluated the degree of consumer awareness of ecological branding and ecological products (in Grundey, 2009, p.175). According to this research, seventy percent of respondents demonstrated knowledge about the category of products called ‘ecological’, while seventy four percent of those associated ecological products with fruits and ninety six percent with vegetables. Ecological labeling practice awareness was indicated by sixty seven percent of respondents, but only 6 percent of the surveyed people claimed to be constant eco-product buyers (Lithuanian National Survey (2007) in Grundey, 2009, p.175). Among the factors influencing the loyalty towards ecological products, concern about health status, price-competitiveness with foreign substitutes, and eco-marketing actions (advertising) were identified. However, low availability of eco-products and doubts about the authenticity of the eco-certification, were among the main de-motivators for Lithuanian consumers of the decision to buy ecological products (Grundey, 2009).

As the previous research results show, the level of sustainable consumption in Lithuania is still on the low level. People are not really aware of the issue and do not fully understand how their choices as consumers can contribute to environmental improvement.

2. Method

With regard to the issue of consumer confusion and the distrust of eco-certification (Grundey, 2009), the purpose of the research was to investigate perceptions of Lithuanian consumers of eco-labels, and in particular Lithuanian ecological label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis”. The research focused on the issues of consumer understanding of and attitudes toward the ecological label. The behavior of the consumers with the eco-labeled food products was also investigated. In addition to exploring consumer perceptions, the research aimed to understand the Lithuanian consumers’ awareness of ecological labeling practices as well as the ways they behave with the ecologically labeled goods and to suggest strategies for improvement of the currently low sustainable consumption situation in the country.

Due to the need to reveal consumer perception and understanding of eco-label qualitative research method was chosen. Qualitative research is used when a complex social phenomenon is studied. The researchers use qualitative research when a deeper exploration of specific situation is needed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Qualitative research enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior, attitudes, motivations and perceptions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Qualitative research tends to focus on the collection of detailed amounts of primary data from relatively small samples of subjects by asking questions or observing behavior (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2003). As a study proceeds, the researcher gains increasing understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and becomes increasingly able to generate more specific questions

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Unlike in the quantitative method, the aim is to generate insights from a range of individuals rather than to be thoroughly representative in order to derive percentages and statistics from measuring and tracking opinions or behaviors (Worcester & Dawkins, 2005). Researching consumer perceptions, it is the most appropriate for the researcher to use qualitative techniques, as the data that should be collected and analyzed are complex and may be ambiguous. With this purpose in mind, qualitative research approach has guided the further choice for the primary data collection throughout the research.

Focus groups represent the unstructured type of interview with a small group of people (Zikmund, 2000). This method of data collection is helpful when the number of participants is important, but the aim is to gather in-depth information. Additionally, researchers argue that the real strength of focus groups lies in their ability to “highlight a range of behaviors, attitudes and points of view in a relatively short period of time” (Clavin & Lewis, 2005, p. 179). Moreover, focus group data collection method enables the researcher to collect the data from the respondents in a non-biased way (Jarboe, 1999). As a data collection method, focus groups were chosen over individual interviewing due to the fact that although in-depth interviews are believed to provide more detailed information of the attitudes and behavior of a particular individual, focus group discussions are seen to provide more breadth in terms of the range of behaviors and attitudes among the group participants (Clavin & Lewis, 2005). Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups also facilitate the gradual building of a range of views from the participants, as they express similar or opposing attitudes and thoughts. Focus groups are also seen as creating a less intimidating setting and a more natural and conducive environment to express opinions (Clavin & Lewis, 2005, Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The qualitative study consisted of 4 focus groups (6-7 respondents in each). Researchers agree on the number of three to four focus groups in order to reach saturation, the point when the researcher has collected a range of ideas and isn't getting much of new information (Krueger & Casey, 2000, Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). One of the reasons behind it is because focus groups are analyzed across groups. According to researchers, the ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is six to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This size of the focus groups is the most suitable, because it is small enough to be comfortable for the participants to share their experiences, yet enough to provide diversity of perceptions, rather than a large group, which is difficult to control and where participants limit each other's opportunity to share their attitudes and insights. Qualitative researches are intentionally nonrandom in their selection of data sources (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Purposive sampling method, in which the researcher subjectively identifies participants of the sample based on particular characteristics, was used to pick participants for focus groups (Hair *et al.*, 2003).

The focus groups were conducted in Vilnius (Lithuania) with young consumers: 22 – 25 y.o. university students, men and women, Lithuanians. In order to understand the possible differences in ecological label perception 2 focus groups were done with students, who are not interested in eco-labels and ecology in general; and 2 focus groups with those, who are interested or at least aware of eco-labels, moreover, who have general interest in ecology and ecological issues. The reason of splitting the groups was avoiding mixing people with totally different levels of expertise or knowledge related to the topic or issue of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In addition, it allowed for the analysis between different groups while yielding more insights from participants.

The key objectives of the focus groups were to obtain answers to the following questions:

1. What do consumers understand by the term ‘ecological’?
2. What are consumers' perceptions of environmental labeling and certification?
3. What is the consumers' level of knowledge about and perceptions of Lithuanian eco-label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis”?

What are the respondents' consumption behaviors with the ecologically labeled food products?

The general guidelines for the discussion were developed and the interview questions were divided into sections. However, they were administered in a quite unstructured manner with the

possibility of moving sections if needed. The group discussions were audio-taped and later transcribed in order to interpret acquired data.

3. Results

Attitudes towards Environmental Problems

As it was expected before the data collection, the two groups were different in their attitudes towards current environmental issues. The first group was generally more ignorant of the environmental problems, mentioning only the most visible issues, such as air pollution from factories, water pollution, and trashes. Additionally, the participants didn't recognize his or her personal actions and consumer choices affecting the environment. Moreover, after elaborating on this topic, participants were skeptical that their choice may affect the environment in a positive way: *"One person cannot do anything alone" (Participant); "I don't have personal power to change anything" (Participant 8)*. Furthermore, while discussing personal everyday initiatives towards more pro-environmental behavior, participants were recognizing that recycling and sorting could be beneficial, but admitting that they do not engage in such activities personally.

On the other hand, the discussion on the environmental issues was more profound among the participants of the second group. In addition to the "big-scale" issues, such as water, air pollution, and global warming, other problems were identified and elaborated on. The most common themes were trashes, gasses from the cars, factories influences, cutting trees, energy mis-usage, and overconsumption. As one of the participants put it: *"Just imagine how our grandparents used to live; they didn't need stuff we use today. So, it means consuming less stuff, burning less electricity. Try to put yourself in a place of people that used to live hundred years ago; they could survive and they were happy. And look at us now, we're just spoiled: giving money, buying everything, although we know that all those things we buy hurt the environment" (Participant 15)*. Some other issues were discussed in relation to the behavior of the general public. The problem that people in Lithuania neither recycle, nor see it as a personal responsibility was noted a couple of times. Furthermore, the lack of education and understanding of the environmental issues among the population was emphasized: *"If you throw the garbage and you don't see it, so it means it's not there. It's not true. If we hide things, it doesn't mean they don't exist anymore. But people do not pay attention" (Participant 16)*.

In the second group, the participants did see their personal actions and consumer choices as having power to effect the environment. Mostly, it was agreed that it is impossible to fix all the big-scale problems, but people have to start with "small steps" from themselves. The most popular actions personally taken and mentioned were as following: recycling, sorting trashes, not polluting streets with garbage, saving water and energy, and consuming less in general. Some of the participants also mentioned the favorable attitude towards the "Darom" ecological initiative in Lithuania which involves people cleaning the surroundings. However, it was also noted that personal responsibility is no less important than the society initiatives which take place only once in a while.

Perception of the Term "Ecological"

Ecological is a word interpreted by individuals in a variety of ways and contexts. The term involves many different meanings and interpretations from different individuals and is often associated with terms such as "green", "organic", "environmental", "natural", and "sustainable" (Aarset *et al.*, 2004). What one might understand under the term ecological may have a different color in the eyes of other consumers. In the current research, the participants distinguished three main principles to characterize the term: quality of the ingredients, production process, and impact on organism.

The findings about the perceptions of the ecological products by Lithuanian consumers are in line with the research conducted in other countries (Aarset *et al.*, 2004; Wander & Bugge, 1997). In general terms, "ecological" is interchangeably used with the term "organic". It is used by the

consumers as a heuristic to identify products containing “less harmful ingredients”. The specific characteristics that were assigned to this word by the research participants as well as the number of people out of 27 mentioning each of them are presented in the Figure 2 below:

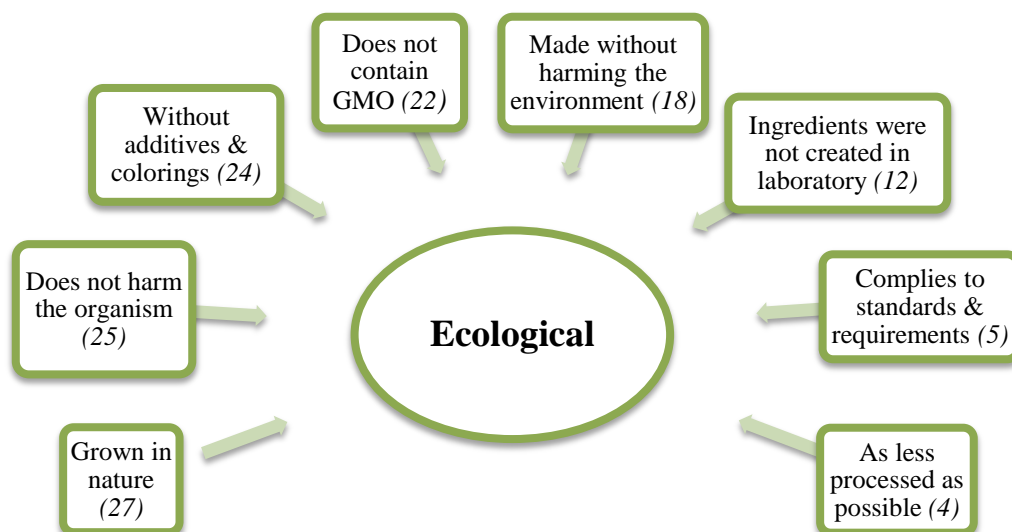


Figure 2. Perceptions of the term “Ecological”

General Knowledge about Eco-labels

The participants of the first group were unaware of the ecological labels and their meaning. When they were asked what they know about ecological labels, most of the participants replied that “*it should be something connected with nature*”. Additionally, some people also noted that eco-labels are “*showing that the product is healthier for you, not for the environment*”. It means that there was no clear connection made between eco-labels and the product creation process having less impact on the environment, not only on the human organism. Nonetheless, after the participants of the first group were explained the meaning of eco-labels, they agreed that the presence of an ecological label might be good and have a positive impact on the consumer choice, as well as the quality of the product. Generally, the quality was mentioned the most, meaning that it should be higher per se if the product has an eco-label on it.

In the second group, some participants commented that ecological labels give the consumers certainty that the product has gone through certification, and thus it is not harmful to the organism. It was noted that eco-labels provide knowledge about how the product affects not only human health but the environment as well:

“If the product is accepted and certified with the eco-label, it affects our organisms and our environment to the lesser extent” (Participant 22); “I would see it [label on the product] as important. Eco-labels prove that the company passed all the certifications and it is an original thing, so you wouldn’t even read the ingredients” (Participant 15).

All in all, participants of all four focus group ended with a favorable opinion about the existence of ecological labels and some even suggested that labels should be put on every product so that people know “what we consume”.

While asked to provide an opinion on why producers use ecological labels, the first group of participants seemed more skeptical, mentioning companies wanting to earn more money by fitting in “the trend” among consumers. They didn’t see it advantageous for the companies if they wouldn’t be primarily motivated by earning more profits. Although the second group of participants were mentioning earning higher profits by companies among the reasons why choosing to go “eco-labeled”, other points were highlighted as well. In the words of some participants: “*Besides making more money, if it’s for real, companies want to inform consumers and stand out with their products*” (Participant 26); “*I don’t know what the profit is, but companies are trying to make it*

for a better life and want to impact the environment and the world” (Participant 18). Generally, the purpose of informing customers on product ingredients and influence on human health and actually reducing the negative impact on the environment were seen as guidance among the companies that certify their products with eco-labels.

Consumer Behavior and Ecological Labels

When asked if ecological label influences their behavior, all of the participants of the first group said that they have never made their buying choice based on the presence of ecological labels on the products. On the other hand, participants of the second group were a bit more engaged in paying attention to the product labels. Some reported looking at the ecological signs before making a buying decision.

Generally, the most common criteria for choosing products suggested by the participants in both groups other than the most important one, the price, are the taste of the product/ products already tried before, ingredients, product brands, appearance of the product, other people’s opinions/ recommendations. Some of the participants in the second group also pointed out the importance of the country of origin of the product of choice. Nevertheless, habit was found to have the biggest influence on how interviewed consumers choose their food products. It was identified by the absolute majority of the research participants.

These findings provide the possibility to imply that the behavior of the interviewed Lithuanian consumers may be described and predicted by Triandis’ theory of interpersonal behavior. It states that the habitual component of performing a behavior is high and past experiences influence how we act to the same degree as the intentions. It is an important point and it may be of interest for the product manufacturers. It suggests that while buying food products, consumers are mainly governed by their past experiences and frequently skip the second and third stages of the consumer decision making process. During these stages producers can provide information to influence consumer choice. Thus, the companies should understand that eco-labeled products should be heavily marketed in order for the consumers to pay attention to them and start buying. When the purchase of eco-labeled products becomes a habit, it will be accepted by the wider population. Study participants confirm this suggestion: *“The only thing I can say is that people will start to understand what the label is when they will look not on the name of the product, but at the presence of the label first. And only after they see the label, they choose the brand. Then it will make a difference”* (Participant 24).

It is important to mention, that when asked if the participants were presented with the similar products at the same price, would they choose the eco-labeled product or the one without any labels, it was reported that after being informed about the label, they would choose the eco-product considering its benefits. Some individuals from both groups also said that if there are two identical products, they would choose the labeled one if they are sure that the label means what it states. Here should be noted the earlier identified distrust toward the labeling schemes. Participants mentioned their concern and suggested that if they have more information about the label and see higher social involvement with the eco-label project, they will be more eager to buy eco-labeled products. However, when asked if they are ready to pay more for the labeled products, all of the participants stated that they are not ready to spend more money on eco-labeled products, as the price is among the biggest concerns for them. Although, some participants from the second group theorized that if the quality of the product is much higher and the production process is transparent, then they might pay more. Yet, the researcher explains such response with the fact that research participants were university students that have more restricted budget and cannot afford expensive food purchases on a regular basis.

To conclude, as it was generally expected, young Lithuanian consumers from the sample do not pay much attention to the ecological labels. The reason for that might be little knowledge and unawareness of the existing labels. Nevertheless, as identified by the research, when presented two identical products with and without the ecological label, the presence of the label has a positive impact if it is trusted. Distrust towards ecological claims as well as unfamiliarity to the general

consumer may explain this type of buying behavior. Generally, the findings support the results of the study has been conducted by the National Geographic and GlobeScan identifying the factors discouraging environmentally friendly consumer behavior in seventeen different countries. Continuously consisting factors include mistrust of the companies providing false claims about the environmental impact of their products, not enough engagement from the side of the government and the “tragedy of the commons,” which reflects the notion that people are more willing to act when they see their peers are willing to as well.

Perception and Evaluation of Lithuanian Eco-Label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis”

Talking more specifically about the Lithuanian “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label, the absolute majority of the participants from the both groups were not aware of it. The results among the participants from all four focus groups are similar, as no one has claimed of being knowledgeable about the existence of this Lithuanian eco-label. The biggest concern expressed by the research participants, however, was again the distrust of the ecological claims in general. The expressed distrust common among young Lithuanians also confirms the findings that the distrust in certification schemes is present in other European societies as well (Harper & Henson, 2001; Harper & Makatouni, 2002; Jensen & Sandoe, 2002).

As identified by the research participants independently of the focus groups they were in, the ecological label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” is perceived to carry certain advantages and disadvantages. The existence of the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label was generally positively perceived. Some of the participants from the second group even discussed that this label, if properly advertised and popularized, may influence Lithuanian consumers in terms of health and environmental impact considerations. Moreover, it was noted that higher demand for and popularization of the eco-label may affect the quality of other products on the market since producers will have to improve the quality of non-labeled products to stay competitive. Ecological label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” is perceived as having these advantages:

1. **Eco-label was recognized to carry valuable information about the product and its components** as well as communicate how it affects consumers’ health and the environment. However, it was also noted that without background knowledge about the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label it is impossible to get this information just from looking at the label. The advantage was also seen in the possibility of the label to guide the consumers when they search for information about the products and make their purchase decision.

2. **It gives the easily accessible information on where the product was produced.** “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label is a sign that the product was produced in the organic farms in Lithuania. Since one of the mentioned criteria that have an influence on the buying choices of the research participants was the country of origin, the ecological sign “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” is helpful in providing the information from the first glance.

3. Both groups’ participants also recognize that **the products that carry the certified “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label should be of a higher quality.** However, there was also a visible concern among some of the first group’s participants. Some were very skeptical stating that the presence of the eco-label should not necessarily mean that the overall quality of the product is better. Although, the majority agreed that if one of the criteria for the eco-label certification is high quality, labeled products should meet the standards and therefore can be trusted. The presence of the strict criteria for the product to get the certification with the eco-label was also mentioned by a couple of participants as an advantage.

4. On the broader scale, **the participants also suggested that the presence of the ecological labels may increase the awareness of Lithuanian consumers of environmental issues and consumers’ impact.** Participants mainly agreed that the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label carries a positive value for the society. However, it was noted that these changes can be brought only if more people know about this ecological label and know exactly what it means: “*[The eco-label] will eventually influence our behavior. Maybe not on the biggest scale but for the beginning it will surely do that because the person has always been striving for something clean and the departure*

from the chemical production” (Participant 16).

Most of the participants of the study acknowledged that it was very hard to recognize advantages of the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label in particular as very little is known about it. It took time to elaborate on the possible advantages of the label. This unfamiliarity and unpopularity of the label among the young population should be identified as one of the disadvantages of the Lithuanian eco-label. Following disadvantages also could be mentioned:

1. The majority of the participants noticed that **the label is small and “does not stand out” or “strike one’s eye”**. Some recommended that more recognizable “green” words such as “ECO” or “BIO” should accompany every product along with the label.

2. The **low availability and narrow selection of the products** labeled with the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” label. It was reported that it makes it very hard not only to adequately evaluate the products with this label, but also to see possible advantages and disadvantages per se. Thereby, when young people make their purchase decision, only some respondents from the second group pay attention to any eco-signs, but not specifically to the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” label as it is not visible or not present on many products.

3. The **possible high price** appeared to be the factor that negatively affects the choice toward the labeled products. As one of the participants noted: *“I guess a lot of Lithuanians now, after the crisis, are paying attention to prices and as long as they have to think about money they will not be thinking of eco-products at the first plac”* (Participant 25). As it was mentioned previously, some participants from the second group, though, noted that if the price difference between ecological and non-ecological products is not too high and if they are sure that the level of quality is proportionally higher, they might consider paying a higher price for the eco-labeled products: *“If the price difference is not too big, I would consider paying more for the eco-labeled product. It will give me at least the confidence that the product I buy will do no harm to my health”* (Participant 18).

Furthermore, as noted earlier in the analysis of the research results, mistrust in the ecological labels and claims is apparent and can be identified as the biggest obstacle to the wider label recognition and acceptance. The main elements of the mistrust are the skepticism about the motives of the companies-producers (*“they want to make more money”*), lack of knowledge about the ecological labels, as well as the general distrust of the certification schemes. These findings confirm existing research on general consumer perceptions and attitudes toward ecological labeling (Aarset *et al.*, 2004) as well as the research on the ecological marketing by Grundey (2009) which studied customer loyalty and identified the following main de-motivators of buying eco-products in Lithuania: *“high prices, low availability, and doubts about the authenticity of eco-certification”* (p. 177). Apparently, young students, the participants of the current research, have also noted these factors, among the others, as disadvantages of the ecological labels and the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” label in particular.

Actions To Be Taken in order to Increase Recognition of Lithuanian Eco-Label “Ekologinis žemės ūkis”

After identifying that one of the major concerns of the participants was low knowledge about the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” ecological label and absence of its advertisement, young people were asked about the actions that should be taken in order to increase label recognition. The most common response among both groups was **to introduce advertisements of the label to the broader population**. Most of the participants agreed that advertisements are the most advantageous and effective means to increase population awareness of the label and about the ecological situation in a broader sense. Some suggestions for the advertisements to work better were to make it more “shocking”, “realistic”, “showing the horrible results”, and “effecting human emotions” otherwise they won’t be as effective as they might.

Nevertheless, some people in the second focus group expressed the concern that advertisements are not always true and that companies could advertise what is profitable for them, thus the suggestion was made that it is **the government and the companies that have ecological label on their products “collaborate” to inform consumers about the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis”**

label; therefore, more people would pay attention and trust the presented information. Overall, most of the participants agreed that they have more trust in government, since “*they [the government] execute control, since the companies might lie or even commit fraud if it is profitable for them*” (Participant 4).

Furthermore, participants insisted that in order for people to trust the label, **it should be proven that it actually has the meaning that is assigned**. It should be proven that “*this exact product with the label is ecologically pure*”. Participants also indicated that companies are the ones to be more transparent and open to demonstrating how their products are manufactured. While asked how this can be done, the ideas such as allowing excursions to the production facilities or appearances in the TV shows that talk about consumer issues were mentioned.

One of the other suggestions was to **increase overall product selection in order for people to buy more of ecol-labeled products**. Widening the product range was mentioned by several participants as they recognized that presently only few products have the label and some people might not generally buy products from this selection.

Other suggestions on how to make the ecological label recognizable **included providing samples and organizing tastings of eco-labeled food**, so people would be encouraged to try it out, as well as introducing in-store advertisements including flyer distribution and sales people engagement to explain to the buyers what “*Ekologinis žemės ūkis*” label means. The reason is the opportunity to get at-hand information about the label if the person becomes interested in the product and considers buying it.

When speaking on the broader topic of the actions to be made in order to promote more environmentally aware buying behavior of Lithuanian consumers, research **participants proposed organization of various seminars and conferences centered on these issues**. However, this type of communication was not viewed as very effective by some participants from the first group, justifying it with the overall lack of interest from the population. “*Those who don't care won't care*” was the common saying among some. The first group of participants was generally more skeptical on the success of promotional campaigns to change people's behavior. However, the second group was more suggestive and was pointing out the importance of formal institutions (kindergartens, schools, universities) in educating younger population on the environmental issues. Participants were mentioning introducing special classes in schools or dedicating time during class hours to the environmental topics. It was explained by the fact that it is more difficult to change stable attitudes of grown-ups, so it is essential to educate younger population, so they acquire more pro-environmental concerns and attitudes and act upon them in their everyday life.

To sum up, the most widely proposed method to make Lithuanian consumers aware of the ecological label “*Ekologinis žemės ūkis*” was to increase the level of knowledge and information supplied about the label through media coverage which includes not only advertisements, but also various TV programs featuring the label. Most of the participants in both groups recognized television as the most effective and beneficial tool that producers and the government can use to “spread the word” about the label. Acknowledging the existence of the ecological label on the TV and, more importantly, giving “valuable and true” information about it to the viewers is seen as the trigger that can increase consumer awareness about the “*Ekologinis žemės ūkis*” label. This finding confirms already existing research results on consumer perception of ecological labels (Aarset *et al.*, 2004). The reason why the participants mostly suggested TV programs as the most effective method, among the others, to provide information about eco-labels is because the majority of consumers views it as a credible source of information.

4. Discussion

Becoming aware of ecological problems and their impact on the society, nature, and economy is crucial in the modern world. Therefore, one of the research implications is the development of an organization or a collaborative project of various structures that would focus on the promotion of the environmentally-friendly behavior among the society in various life spheres.

The results of the research shed light on the topic of consumers' attitude towards ecological

labeling and the Lithuanian label and confirmed general expectations of the outcome. The biggest reason for the low “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label recognition was found to be the lack of information available to the general population. Young people simply do not know about it because they have never heard of it. Even though participants appeared to have a positive attitude toward the label, they expressed a high degree of distrust of the eco-labeling practices among the product available in the country. Advertisements, TV programs, and formal institutions were named as three main sources to increase consumer awareness of the ecological label and environmental problems on the broader scale, asserting that promotional campaigns should be executed by companies and the government in collaboration and general public should get more engaged in the educational efforts. Although, rather dubious about the “Ekologinis žemės ūkis” eco-label, the research participants recognized its potential and acknowledged multiple positive sides of the label introduction and usage in Lithuania.

One of the main findings in the area of consumer perceptions of ecological labels was an exhibited distrust towards companies and certification agencies. In order to increase the level of consumer confidence in the lawfulness of the producers, they should become more transparent.

Among the biggest concerns that the study participants had with eco-labeled products was the perceived increase of prices on them. Therefore, the price issue should be better addressed in advertisements of the eco-label in order for consumers to be aware that naturalness and authenticity of products does not necessarily imply much higher prices on the market.

Finally, participants emphasized that though less environmental impact of an eco-labeled organic product is a positive attribute, the main reason to buy organic products is that it will have less or no harm on one’s health. Knowing that the main motivation to buy ecologically labeled goods is their impact on one’s health, advertisements should incorporate it along with the notion of less environmental harm per se.

The main limitations of the study are due to the chosen research methodology: qualitative study, focus groups with University students. Therefore, the study can be described as having low generalizability, the research results cannot be generalized to the wider population of Lithuania. However, the primary aim of the qualitative research is not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups of interest perceive the current topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Moreover, this study is the first step toward understanding young Lithuanian consumers’ perceptions of the national eco-label and the topic of green consumerism as such.

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