

Engaging with Public Opinions on Purchasing Power

Can Consumers Shape the Food System?

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Background & Scholarship

- Feeding the world, and doing so sustainably, is a wicked environmental problem (Rayner, 2014).
- In recent years, various “food trends” which reflect a concern for the environment have emerged.
- We wonder, can consumers alter the food system by “voting with their forks”? If not, why do we continue to do so?

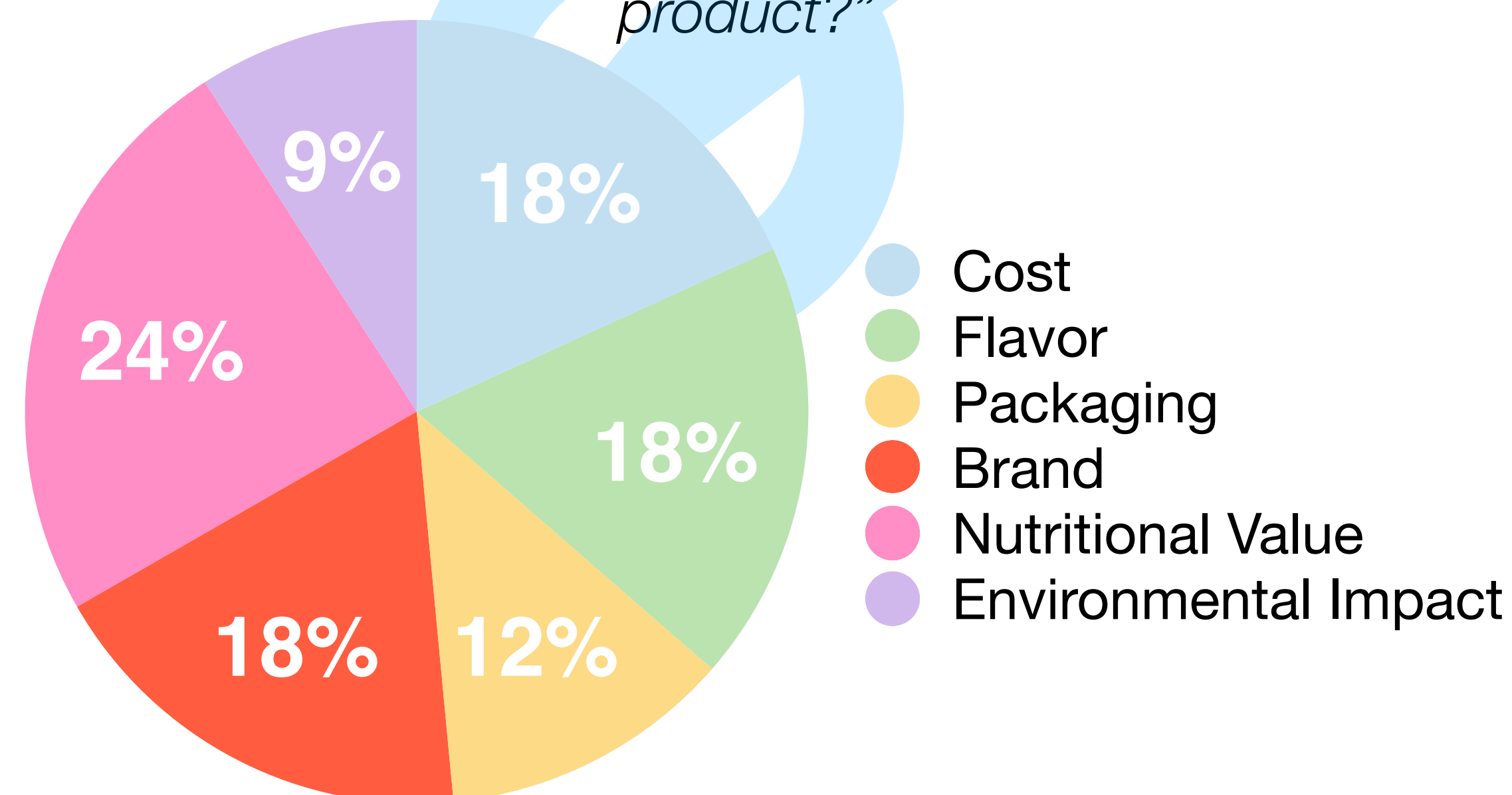
Motivation

- To *question* the **individualization of responsibility**, which calls for individuals to act as consumers first and citizens second. According to Maniates, to effectively confront issues within the food system, we must invert this idea, (Maniates, 2001).
- To *question* the pervasive subconscious belief that environmental degradation is the product of individual shortcomings, (Maniates, 2001).
- To *investigate* the shrinking of our “**environmental imagination**,” or the distancing of environmental actions from the political and collective, shifting instead toward individual and consumption-based actions, (Maniates, 2001).

Who We Engaged With

- A variety of consumers with varying demographics through an online survey. We collected data from **45 consumers**, **ages 18-60**, from **16 different states** and **4 different countries**.
- Lewis & Clark professors, Bob Goldman and Jay Odenbaugh.
- Robin Teater, Executive Director at Healthy Democracy and expert dialogue facilitator.

“What is most important to you when shopping for a food product?”



Project Goals

- To understand how people perceive their role as consumers, and to explore opinions on the power of consumers to make change within the food system.
- Explore the applicability of “the shrinking environmental imagination” to the food system.

Action & Engagement

- Our **consumer survey** asked participants to...
 1. Rank and assess various grocery stores, and explain their reasoning.
 2. Articulate the factors, such as cost, selection, accessibility, perceived environmental impact, nutritional value, etc, that influence their consumption decisions.
 3. Share their opinions on the efficacy of both individual and collective action.
- We engaged in **discussions** with Jay, Bob, and Robin on issues such as **food systems**, **scales of action**, **identity protective cognition**, and other related issues.
- We engaged in **dialogue** with Lewis & Clark students about consumption and agricultural practices, transparency, and responsibility.

Findings

- Participant responses indicated a belief that collective/ institutional action is more effective than individual action in making lasting environmental change.
- Creating environmental change through consumption is possible and necessary, but it isn't sufficient.
- Participant responses indicated that consumption decisions are motivated by factors such as price, nutritional value, and convenience.
- Consequences are not the biggest motivator behind consumption choices. Instead, “tribalism,” brand identity, and ideological concerns are most salient.

Assessment

- We successfully engaged with numerous consumers of varying backgrounds.
- We created opportunities for individuals to reflect on their consumption decisions.
- The evolution of our project and the evolution of our thinking about individual action in the food system evidences the “shrinking environmental imagination.”

Next Steps

- Engage more with industry professionals and a more diverse consumer base,
- Conduct a follow-up survey with same participant group,
- Share findings with participants and other potential stakeholders,
- Create comfortable spaces that allow people to uncover the underlying motivations that shape their decision making.

“You’re just paying for the label.”

—Julia, LC student and California fruit and nut farmer on the true meaning of “organic”

“We eat what we eat not because of the consequences, but because of solidarity or how we identify.”

—Jay, professor of Philosophy at LC

“That’s the name of the game these days, brand identity, even if it’s not a clear brand...I’m committed to co-ops, but I don’t always bring a bag.”

—Bob, professor of Sociology at LC

“All choices consider consistency with in-group ideals.”

—Robin Teater, Executive Director at Healthy Democracy

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