

Coffee greenwashing works

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Consumers pay a premium for “eco-friendly” coffee largely thanks to labelling.
Credit: Angelica Lasala/Flickr

Coffee labelled as "eco-friendly" can attract a premium, with consumers led to believe it tastes better, according to new research from Sweden.

The researchers, from the University of Gavle and the University of Chicago, asked [study participants](#) to taste and rate two types of [coffee](#), after telling them that one was "eco-friendly". In reality, both coffees were the same.

The study, published today in *PLOS One*, found participants preferred the taste of, and were willing to pay more for the "eco-friendly" coffee.

In a second experiment, participants were asked to taste coffee from two different cups, but this time they were not told which of the two cups contained eco-friendly coffee until after they made the preference decision.

Those consumers who identified as "high sustainability" felt the strongest about the label, even when they were told, after their decision, that they preferred the non-labeled alternative.

Low sustainability consumers appeared to be willing to pay more for the eco-friendly alternative as long as they preferred the taste of the product.

The study highlights the importance of perceptions on consumer behaviour, said Joanna Henryks, assistant professor of advertising and marketing communication at University of Canberra.

"Labels and honest labelling are critical because consumers use it to guide them in their purchase behaviour."

Dr Henryks said consumers looking for eco-friendly or organic products would more than likely trust the label, and unless they were extremely motivated would be unable to check the claims of all of the labels on offer.

"Unfortunately within Australia and worldwide there are literally hundreds of labels claiming various issues," she said.

The study authors argue further research could look at how to use the study findings to promote sustainable [consumer behaviour](#).

But Robin Canniford, researcher in Melbourne University's department of marketing, said these types of experiments don't tell us enough about consumers' eco-friendly intentions because people perform differently in lab settings to how they do in their daily lives.

"When you figure in patterns of consumption outside the coffee arena the findings of these sorts of studies just can't be generalised, because in daily life there are competing demands and people often don't do what they say they're going to do."

Dr Canniford is currently trying to map the various, sometimes contradictory reasons that motivate eco-friendly consumption.

He said in some cases, ethical or eco-friendly intentions were a drop in a more problematic ocean of household consumption.

"An attitude towards one kind of product such as coffee might lead [consumers](#) to say it tastes better but when it comes down to it that doesn't make them an eco-friendly consumer," he said.

"For example, some people are consuming eco-friendly products to almost greenwash their household or themselves, but the amount of carbon emissions or sweat shop labour they save by consuming say, eco-friendly coffee, is smashed by the mobile phones they continue to update every year, or the clothes they buy and wear out in a few months.

"So whilst this study is interesting, we have a very long way to go to understand these problems."

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