

RTG Research Colloquium

Monday, March 24th, 2025

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Presents

“The use of eco-labels and price discounts to promote more sustainable online grocery purchases in the UK: a randomised controlled trial”

Abstract

The SALIENT consortium is a team of researchers working with the public, partners from local and national government, food charities, and the food industry to co-design and evaluate interventions that reduce the environmental impact of our food system and support healthier diets. While our suite of trials is running in various settings, I will focus on a trial I am co-leading with Prof Thijs van Rens in the online grocery shopping environment. Online grocery shops offer a way to study interventions on a large scale. Our study examines the impact of eco-labels and price discounts on the sustainability of grocery purchases in a real UK online supermarket using a customised browser extension.

Participants recruited from the UK Prolific panel were randomly assigned to one of six groups in a 2x3 factorial design. The interventions were (i) eco-labels, displaying the environmental impact of products on a scale of A (best) to G (worst), and (ii) price discounts (£1, £0.50, or no discount) offered on more sustainable alternative products for <3 items in participants' baskets. The alternative products offered were randomly selected from a list created by the research team; they were more sustainable than selected products, usually priced within £2 of the selected products, with an equal or better nutritional profile according to their traffic light labelling. The primary outcome was the average eco-score of purchased products, with lower scores indicating more sustainability. Data collection started in April 2024 and will be on-going until April 2025. Regression analysis was used to test the effectiveness of the interventions.

Preliminary findings suggest that eco-labels have a negligible effect on the sustainability of grocery purchases. Price discounts may improve the sustainability of purchases if sufficiently large. There may be an interaction between the interventions; there is a greater effect of price discounts in the group where eco-labels are visible. Further analysis will explore the mechanisms driving these effects, including consumer acceptance of alternatives and willingness to pay for more sustainable products. We will also examine the potential impact of the interventions on nutrition and health outcomes.