ABSTRACT. Although public interest in sustainability increases and consumer attitudes are mainly positive, behavioral patterns are not univocally consistent with attitudes. This study investigates the presumed gap between favorable attitude towards sustainable behavior and behavioral intention to purchase sustainable food products. The impact of involvement, perceived availability, certainty, perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), values, and social norms on consumers’ attitudes and intentions towards sustainable food products is analyzed. The empirical research builds on a survey with a sample of 456 young consumers, using a questionnaire and an experimental design with manipulation of key constructs through showing advertisements for sustainable dairy. Involvement with sustainability, certainty, and PCE have a significant positive impact on attitude towards buying sustainable dairy products, which in turn correlates strongly with intention to buy. Low perceived availability of sustainable products explains why intentions to buy remain low, although attitudes might be positive. On the reverse side, experiencing social pressure from peers (social norm) explains intentions to buy, despite rather negative personal attitudes. This study shows that more sustainable and ethical food consumption can be stimulated through raising involvement, PCE, certainty, social norms, and perceived availability.

KEY WORDS: attitude, behavior, consumer, food, sustainable consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the series of crises within the European agro-food system, culminating in BSE, dioxin, and foot and mouth disease, the general public in Europe became increasingly critical about food quality and safety (Jensen and Sandoe, 2002; Grunert, 2005; Verbeke, 2005). Also, interest in sustainability, sustainable production, and sustainable consumption has increased at all levels of the agriculture and food chain. Achieving sustainable development includes strategies to achieve economic (profit), social (people), and environmental (planet) goals (World Bank, 2003). Sustainable products are products that contribute – through their attributes and consequences – to one or a combination of these aspects (Reheul et al., 2001). The economic
aspect has first of all to do with a fair price for the agricultural producers and affordable consumer prices. The ecological component involves care for the natural environment and livestock production conditions, the living environment in general, and the quality of life for humans. The ecological component refers to sustainability in the strict sense of preserving the environment and sustainable use and management of natural resources. The social component finally concerns an integration of agriculture in the priorities and needs of the society/citizens and an appreciation and support for the agro-food sector from the society as well as from government (a sustainability-supporting policy).

Sustainable consumption is based on a decision-making process that takes the consumer’s social responsibility into account in addition to individual needs and wants (Meulenberg, 2003). Everyday consumption practices are still heavily driven by convenience, habit, value for money, personal health concerns, hedonism, and individual responses to social and institutional norms (FSA, 2000; IGD, 2002a, 2002b; SDC, 2003), and, most importantly, they are likely to be resistant to change. Yet, the diversity and complexity of the motivations involved means that in reality there is a considerable scope for change. An important driver for change, particularly with respect to sustainability concerns, is the tendency towards reflexivity within a post-modern society, whereby society and its individuals actively reflect upon existing cultural norms. The reflexive consumer (Giddens, 1991) makes his own individualized risk assessment (Dupuis, 2000), but is not necessarily a social activist. Dupuis (2000) argues that food is a particularly important focus for reflexive consumers, since food consumption is a negotiation about what a person will, and will not, let into his or her body. Furthermore, in the past 10 years, the ethical consumer emerged who perceives a more direct link between what is consumed and the social issue itself. This kind of consumerism mainly incorporates environmental issues but also extends to animal welfare, human rights, and labor working conditions in the third world (Tallontire et al., 2001). In general, the ethical consumer feels responsible towards society and expresses these feelings by means of his purchase behavior (De Pelsmacker et al., 2003). Note that the reflexive consumer is not per definition an ethical consumer. The ethical consumer reflects specifically upon ethical consequences of his or her behavior, while the reflexive consumer is involved with more general cultural norms.

Practice, however, shows that initiatives like sustainable organic food, products free from child labor, legally logged wood, and fair-trade products often have market shares of less than 1% (MacGillivray, 2000). This is at least partly due to the attitude-behavior gap: attitudes alone are often a poor predictor of behavioral intention or marketplace behavior (Kraus, 1995;