

Consumer preferences and perceptions of imported white sugar vs local brown sugar in Matara District, Sri Lanka: Factors shaping purchasing decisions and adoption barriers

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Abstract

In the contemporary globalized food market, the choice between imported and local commodities is often influenced by a complex interplay of economic pressures and consumer perceptions. This study investigated the factors shaping consumer preferences and adoption barriers for local brown sugar versus imported white sugar in the Matara District, Sri Lanka, utilizing Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory. A quantitative research design was employed, collecting data via structured questionnaires from 251 respondents. The sample was predominantly female (76.9%), urban (63.3%), and highly educated (67.3%). Results from a one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant preference for local brown sugar ($M=4.00$, $p<0.001$). Regression analysis indicated that product perception ($\beta=0.679$) and consumer ethnocentrism ($\beta=0.435$) are the strongest positive predictors of local preference, explaining 72.1% of the total variance. Consumers perceive local brown sugar as more authentic, natural, and healthier than imported alternatives. However, adoption barriers such as price and inconsistent availability significantly hinder purchase intent ($\beta=-0.160$). Furthermore, traditional grocery stores were identified as the primary retail channel, accounting for 68.1% of sugar procurement. The findings suggest that while nationalistic sentiment and health consciousness drive the preference for local products, stakeholders must address price sensitivity and supply chain inconsistencies to revitalize the domestic sugar industry. Marketing strategies should focus on leveraging ethnocentric narratives and the "natural" benefits of brown sugar to maintain competitiveness against cheaper imports.

Keywords: Adoption barriers, Consumer ethnocentrism, Local brown sugar, Matara District, Product perception