

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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Introduction

In the globalized food market, consumers are faced with increasing choices between imported and locally produced food products. This situation is clearly reflected in the Sri Lankan sugar market, where imported refined white sugar competes with locally produced sugarcane brown sugar. Most white sugar available in Sri Lanka is imported from countries such as India, Thailand, and Brazil. However, consumer choice is influenced not only by price but also by perceptions, cultural values, and economic considerations.

Local brown sugar producers face several challenges, including strong competition from cheaper imported white sugar, inconsistent supply, and limitations in modern packaging. Understanding consumer preferences and perceptions is therefore essential for strengthening the local sugar industry and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. The Matara District provides a suitable context for this study due to its mix of urban and rural consumers who have access to both sugar types.

Although imported white sugar is often preferred due to lower prices and wider availability, increasing global interest in natural and less processed foods has raised potential demand for local brown sugar. Despite this, adoption remains limited. Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory offers an important framework to explain how national identity and moral responsibility influence purchasing decisions. While local brown sugar offers potential health benefits and supports the domestic economy, it struggles to compete with the strong market presence and perceived modernity of imported sugar.

This study addresses a gap in existing literature by applying Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory to sugar consumption within a Sri Lankan regional context. The findings aim to provide practical insights for local producers and policymakers to improve product positioning, enhance marketing strategies, and overcome adoption barriers in the local sugar market

Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine consumer preferences and perceptions toward imported white sugar and locally produced brown sugar in the Matara District, Sri Lanka. The research was guided by Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory, which explains how national loyalty and moral responsibility influence consumer purchasing behavior toward domestic products. The target population of the study consisted of household sugar consumers residing in the Matara District who regularly purchase sugar for personal or household consumption.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure adequate representation of key demographic categories such as age, gender, income level, education, and residential area. A total of 250 respondents were selected for the study. Primary data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, which was developed based on relevant literature and previous consumer behavior studies. Prior to data collection, respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire consisted of five main sections. The first section gathered basic demographic information. The second section measured consumer ethnocentrism and national preference toward local sugar. The third section focused on perceptions of product attributes such as quality, health benefits, authenticity, and naturalness. The fourth section examined adoption barriers, including price sensitivity and availability, while the final section assessed trust and marketing-related factors. All attitudinal statements were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with the support of SPSS software. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize consumer responses. Inferential analyses, including correlation analysis, one-sample t-tests, and multiple regression analysis, were employed to examine relationships between consumer ethnocentrism, product perception, adoption barriers, and preference for local brown sugar.

Results, Discussion, and Conclusion

The results of this study are based on data collected from 250 household sugar consumers in the Matara District, Sri Lanka, using a structured questionnaire. The respondents represent active consumers who regularly purchase sugar for household consumption

The study provides important insights into how consumers in the Matara District evaluate imported white sugar and locally produced brown sugar when making purchasing decisions. Overall, the findings indicate that consumer preferences are shaped by a combination of perceived product attributes, economic considerations, and ethnocentric attitudes toward locally produced goods.

Prior to examining relationships among the study variables, the measurement constructs were assessed and found to be suitable for analysis. Mean values for all consumer ethnocentrism

statements were above the neutral midpoint of the Likert scale, indicating a generally positive orientation toward local sugar products. The belief that Sri Lankan products should be promoted over imported alternatives recorded the highest agreement (M = 4.14), reflecting strong economic patriotism. Similarly, trust in local brown sugar over imported white sugar showed a high mean value (M = 4.06), suggesting confidence in domestically produced sugar

Measurement Item	M	SD	Variance
It is important to promote Sri Lankan products over imported	4.14	.620	.384
I trust Sri Lankan brown sugar more than imported white sugar	4.06	.716	.512
Buying local sugar supports community farmers while choosing	4.06	.643	.413
I prefer to buy local brown sugar in Matara rather than imported	4.00	.660	.436
Purchasing imported white sugar negatively impacts the local economy	3.57	.995	.990
Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Data derived from SPSS descriptive analysis.			

Perceptions related to product authenticity and health attributes also recorded strong agreement. Respondents perceived local brown sugar as more authentic and natural than imported white sugar (M = 4.10), while the perception that local brown sugar is healthier recorded a mean value of 4.08. These results suggest that perceived naturalness and lower processing significantly enhance consumer preference toward local sugar products. The belief that local brown sugar contains fewer chemicals further supports the association between health consciousness and local product preference. Despite strong positive attitudes toward local brown sugar, price sensitivity remained an important concern. The importance of price in sugar purchasing recorded a high mean value (M = 4.00), highlighting a clear price–quality paradox. While consumers express moral responsibility and health awareness when evaluating sugar, economic pressure continues to influence final purchasing decisions, often favoring cheaper imported alternatives

Descriptive Statistics for Ethnocentrism and Product Attributes

Measurement Item	N	Mean	SD
It is important to promote Sri Lankan products over imported	251	4.14	.620
Local sugar is more authentic and natural than imported	251	4.10	.628
Local brown sugar is healthier than imported white sugar	251	4.08	.688
I trust local brown sugar more than imported white sugar	251	4.06	.716
Buying local sugar supports community farmers	251	4.06	.643
I prefer to buy local brown sugar in Matara	251	4.00	.660
Price is the most important factor in choosing sugar	251	4.00	.807

**Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree.*

To determine whether consumer preferences differed significantly from neutrality, a one-sample t-test was conducted using a test value of 3.00. The results indicated a statistically significant preference for local brown sugar ($M = 4.00$, $p < 0.001$). Although respondents moderately agreed that imported white sugar may offer better taste ($M = 3.43$, $p < 0.001$), this sensory perception did not translate into a stronger purchasing preference. This suggests that ethical and health-related considerations outweigh taste in influencing sugar purchasing decisions.

Table 6 One-Sample T-Test of Consumer Preferences

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (SD)	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Prefer Local Brown Sugar	4.00	.659	96.07	250	< .001
Imported White Taste Better	3.43	1.04	51.91	250	< .001
Quality of Imported Higher	3.36	1.15	45.92	250	< .001

The relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and preference for local sugar was examined using correlation analysis. A strong positive correlation was observed ($r = 0.622$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that consumers with stronger ethnocentric tendencies are more likely to prefer locally produced brown sugar. This finding provides empirical support for the applicability of Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory in explaining sugar consumption behavior in the Sri Lankan context.

Table 7 Correlation Between Ethnocentrism and Local Preferences

		Ethnocentrism Mean	Local_preferences mean
Ethnocentrism Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.622**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	251	251
Local_preferences_mean	Pearson Correlation	.622**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	251	251

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Multiple regression analysis was used to identify the most influential predictors of preference for local brown sugar. The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 158.98$, $p < 0.001$) and demonstrated strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.721$). Product perception emerged as the most influential predictor ($\beta = 0.679$, $p < 0.001$), followed by consumer ethnocentrism ($\beta = 0.435$, $p < 0.001$). Adoption barriers, particularly price and availability, had a significant negative effect on preference ($\beta = -0.160$, $p < 0.001$). Trust did not show a significant independent effect ($p = 0.824$), indicating that its influence operates indirectly through perceived quality and authenticity.

Table 8 Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predicting Local Preference

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	.473	.157		3.004	.003
Ethnocentrism	.439	.036	.435	12.062	<.001
Product Perception	.582	.039	.679	14.925	<.001
Adoption Barriers	-.119	.032	-.160	-3.722	<.001
Trust	.007	.033	.009	.222	.824

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that consumer preferences in the Matara District are shaped by a complex interaction between economic considerations, product perceptions, and ethnocentric values. Consumer ethnocentrism plays a significant role in encouraging positive attitudes toward locally produced brown sugar, driven by moral obligation, national pride, and the desire to support community farmers. However, these ethnocentric tendencies are reinforced rather than replaced by perceptions of product authenticity, health benefits, and natural qualities.

While consumers show a clear preference for local brown sugar in principle, practical barriers such as higher prices, limited availability, and inadequate packaging reduce actual adoption. The dominance of traditional grocery stores highlights the importance of trusted local retail channels in influencing purchasing behavior. The strong explanatory power of the research model confirms that improving product perception and reducing adoption barriers are critical to strengthening the local sugar market.

Overall, the study concludes that local brown sugar has strong potential to compete with imported white sugar if stakeholders effectively leverage ethnocentric sentiments while simultaneously addressing economic and marketing challenges. Enhancing packaging quality, stabilizing prices, improving supply consistency, and clearly communicating health and cultural value can significantly increase consumer adoption. Policymakers and producers must therefore adopt a balanced strategy that aligns patriotic appeal with affordability and modern market expectations to ensure the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's local sugar industry.

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