

Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes on Palm Oil



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Abstract

Palm oil has become one of the leading causes of deforestation in countries that are developing their economic growth. Despite the vast research and knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of palm oil, little is known about how people perceive this information and where they would like to obtain information.

Our results indicate that there is a general lack of awareness and knowledge about palm oil and the issues surrounding it. Whilst education has played an important role in providing information, the most sought after channel is the internet and social media

Introduction

Palm oil is a vegetable oil that is delivered from the palm fruit. Oil palms are originally from Western Africa but can flourish in the right abundance of heat and rainfall. The demand for palm oil is increasing due to growth in human population throughout the world. Drastically, a third of all mammal species in Indonesia are considered to be critically endangered due to the unsustainable development that is rapidly encroaching on their habitat (Koh & Wilcove, 2008). Many communities have no choice but to choose to become plantations workers, with little pay to survive for their family and to sustain themselves (Sheil et al., 2009)

Forms of communication have changed within recent years; new media have changed the process in which people can access information for free and with ease, such as social networks, websites and blogging. This research is meant to explore how the general public perceive palm oil, their knowledge and understanding and how they would like to be able to observe and access the science behind palm oil production.

Method

Over 100 public members were asked five questions about palm oil. The survey also asked the participants where they learned about palm oil and/or what channels of scientific communication they would prefer. The survey was worded so that it did not come across as if the person answering was being questioned. The layout of this survey choose not to have open-ended questions, was low cost, and not being a long survey facilitated a quick turnaround of data.

Questions used in the survey (Q1 and Q2 referred to demographic data):

Q3 Do you know that palm oil is in such products such as; lipstick, detergent, shampoo and chocolate?

Q4 Do you know that palm oil provides developing nations government a profitable income?

Q5 Do you know that the palm oil industry destroys rainforests and causes deforestation and the loss of biodiversity?

For each of the questions above, those who responded YES were asked where they obtained this information and those who responded NO were asked where they would like to find this information

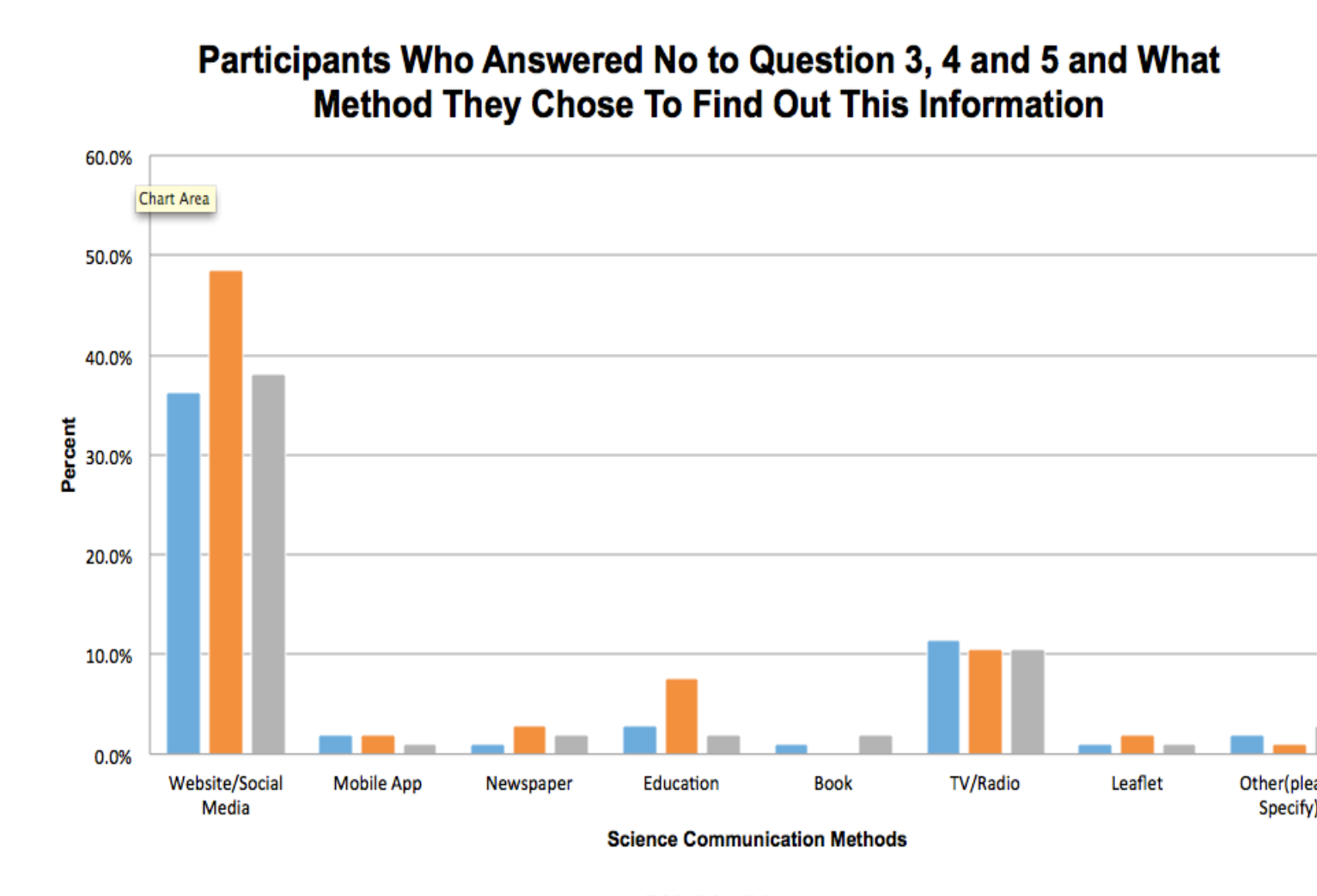
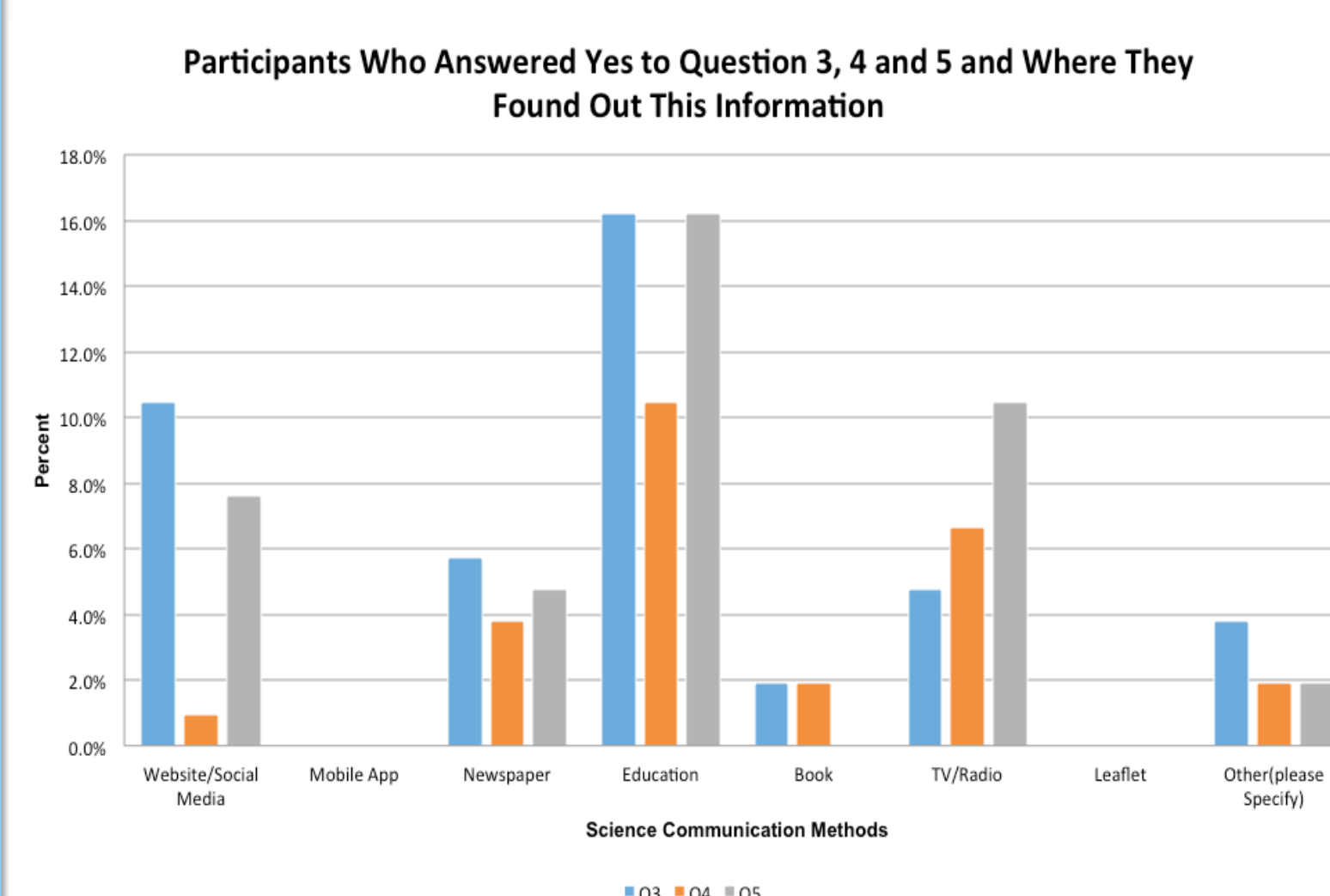
Q6 Do you know what sustainable certified products of palm oil are?

Q7 What is your overall perception of palm oil?

- A) I disagree with the use of palm oil completely []
- B) I only agree with sustainable palm oil []
- C) Neutral []
- D) I agree with the use of palm oil []
- E) I do not know what palm oil is []

Results

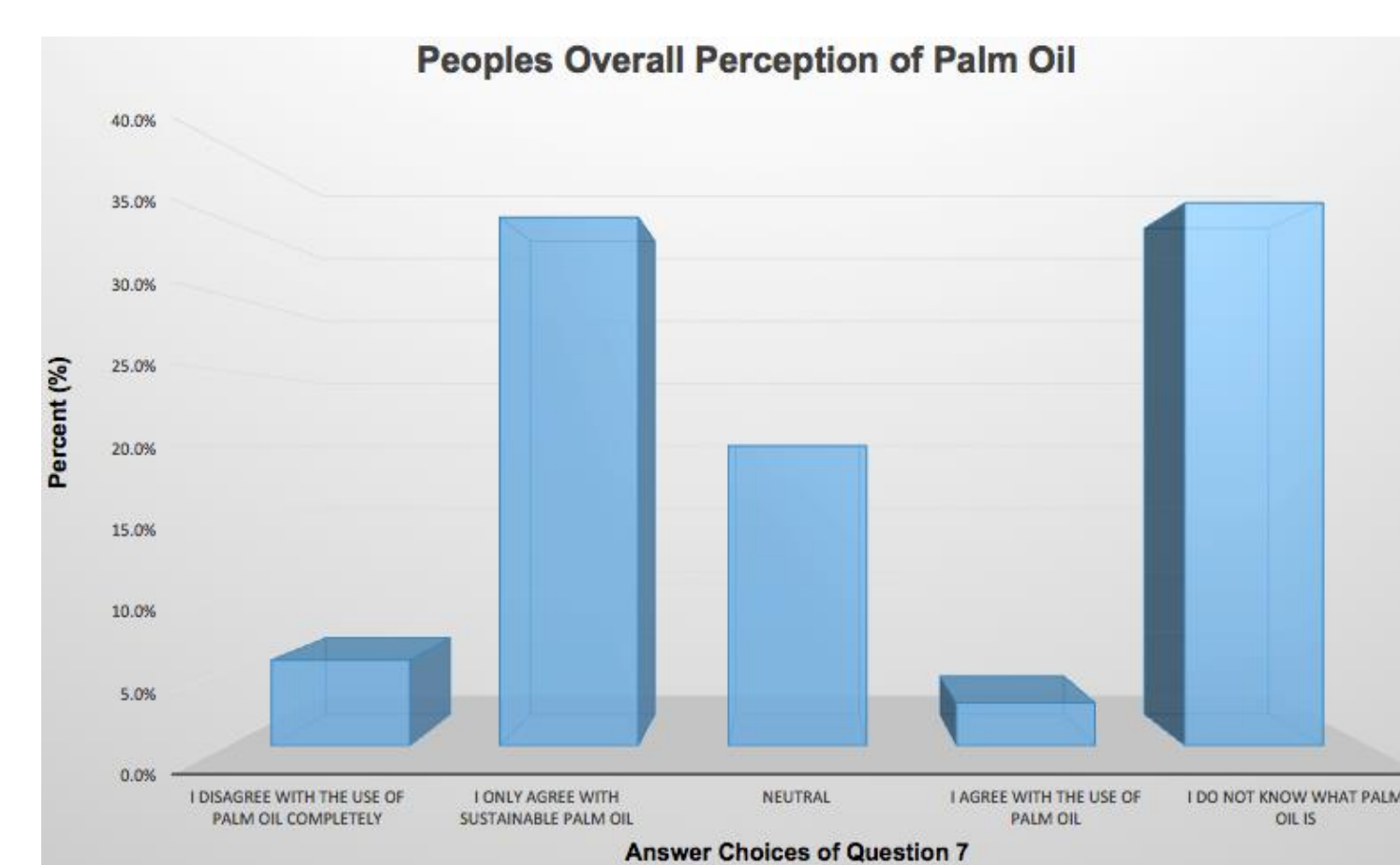
Question	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Average
Yes	42.9%	25.7%	41.0%	42.9%	38.1%
No	57.1%	74.3%	59.0%	57.1%	61.9%



Education was the highest-ranking answer where participants had learnt about palm oil with answer rates of 10 – 16%.

The participants wish to obtain information about palm oil through a Website or Social Media at 35 – 48%.

36.2% of the participants who carried out the survey selected “I do not know what palm oil is” on the final question.



A pattern was noticed in Questions 6 and 7: 23.8% of participants answered No to Questions 6 but chose the answer “I only agree with sustainable palm oil” in Question 7. This information could indicate that the public is more aware of sustainability in general than of the issues around palm oil.

Conclusions

From this exploratory study we can conclude that the focus of communication efforts about palm oil and the environmental issues that surround it need to focus on online information and social media without neglecting education as another important area to work on. Combining the two would maximize the effectiveness, e.g. by providing online resources that are accessible by the general public and useful also for teachers to apply in class.

There seems to be a fertile ground of awareness and favourable public attitudes towards sustainability on which in which to plant the seed of specific concern about palm oil.

References

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