A Policy Research Perspective on Mottainai Reduction

Two cases from Korea's consumer policy research

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This material was prepared using the Consumer Empowerment Index (CEI) produced by the Korea Consumer Agency (KCA).
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Policy Research as One of Three Institutional Functions

The Korea Consumer Agency (KCA) is a government-affiliated public institution established under the Framework Act on Consumers. In addition to policy research, its mandate includes consumer dispute resolution and the provision of consumer information, such as educational content and product comparisons.

This session brings together industry, academia, and policy research. The present contribution is offered from the standpoint of policy research — that is, as evidence generated to inform policymaking.

Consumer Life Indicators in Korea (CLIK)

Consumer behavior



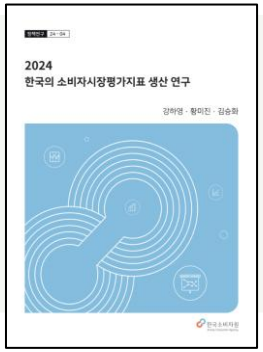
Consumer Empowerment Index (CEI)

Consumer capability



Consumer Market Evaluation Indicators in Korea(KCMEI)

Market environment



Collectively, these three indices provide an integrated, evidence-based foundation for consumer policy

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Redefinition of the Food Date Label: From Sell-by to Best-before

Korea's previous sell-by date labeling was widely misread by consumers as a food-safety cutoff, despite being a conservative, retail-oriented reference date.
As a result, consumers routinely discarded food that remained safe to consume.

The Korea Consumer Agency proposed to the responsible ministry, through policy research, a shift to a consumption-date ("best-before") system based on a more precisely defined reference point :
under the previous system, the labeled date was set at approximately 60–70% of a product's estimated quality-retention period; under the revised system, it is set at approximately 80–90% of that period, narrowing the gap between the labeled date and the point at which quality actually begins to change. The proposal was adopted and is now implemented nationwide.

Nationwide

implementation of the revised labeling system, following its adoption, informed by KCA policy research

Sell-by date

≈ 60–70% of quality-retention period



Best-before date

≈ 80–90% of quality-retention period

Systemic Design as a Structural Lever for Mottainai Reduction

“How we buy, how we sell, and how systems are designed” — this symposium's own framing

Expiration-label confusion is a well-documented driver of household food waste, both in Korea and globally. By repositioning the reference date closer to the actual point of quality change — from roughly 60–70% to roughly 80–90% of a product's quality-retention period — this reform directly targets the information consumers rely on at the moment of disposal, rather than relying solely on public education campaigns explaining the difference between sell-by and best-before dates.

An acknowledged limitation:
nationwide statistics quantifying the exact volume of food waste prevented by this reform are not yet available. Nonetheless, replacing a conservative, retail-oriented reference point with one that more closely tracks the actual point of quality change constitutes a structural, systems-level contribution to mottainai reduction — independent of whether an outcome measure has yet been attached to it.

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The Korean Consumer Empowerment Index (CEI)

The CEI comprises three main pillars — **Financial Competency, Transactional Competency, and Consumer Citizenship Competency** — together with **Digital Transactional Competency** as a supplementary indicator introduced in 2022.
Each pillar is measured across three composition factors**: knowledge, attitude, and behavior.**

4,000
face-to-face respondents

Every 4 years
Survey cycle

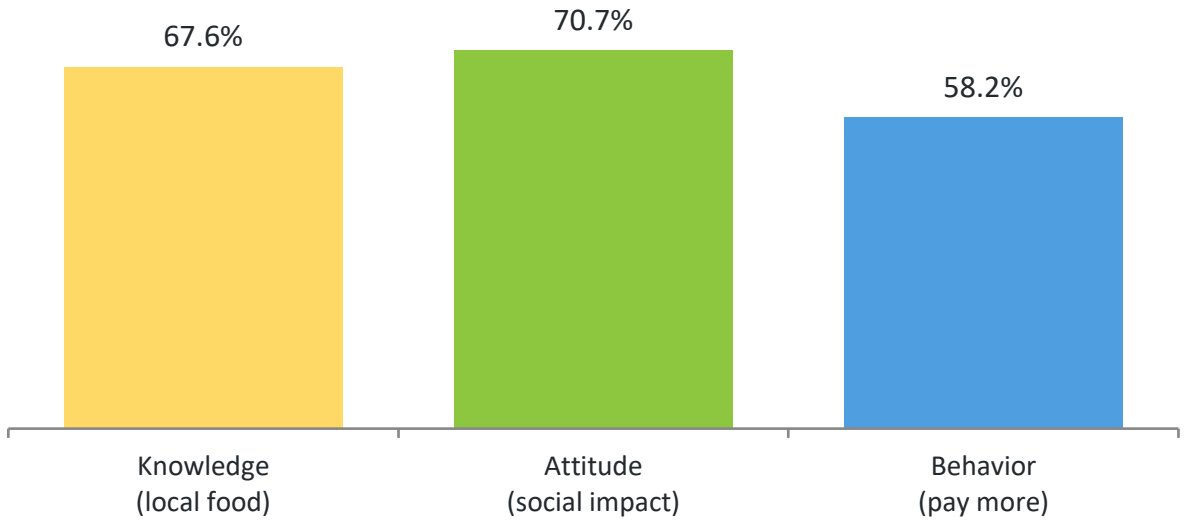
5th
wave completed in 2026

16+
years of longitudinal data

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The Value–Action Gap in Ethical Consumption

We understand that sustainable consumption is one of the main themes of today's symposium. Within Consumer Citizenship Competency, the CEI addresses this theme through two separately managed content areas, each with its own distinct set of items: the three-item Ethical Consumption area presented here (Part I), and the six-item Sustainable Consumption area that follows (Part II). Both were strengthened in 2022, and Sustainable Consumption in particular continues to be tracked across successive survey waves.



Knowledge and Attitude Outpacing Behavior

67.6% correctly identify that local food consumption reduces carbon emissions, and **70.7%** agree that social impact should be weighed in purchasing decisions —
Only 58.2% report actually paying a premium to act on this belief.

This gap represents an actionable target for intervention.
Since attitude is already strong, awareness campaigns alone are unlikely to close this gap — reshaping the purchase environment (e.g., default settings, price nudge at checkout) may work better.

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Strong Practice, Uneven Knowledge in Sustainable Consumption

70.0%

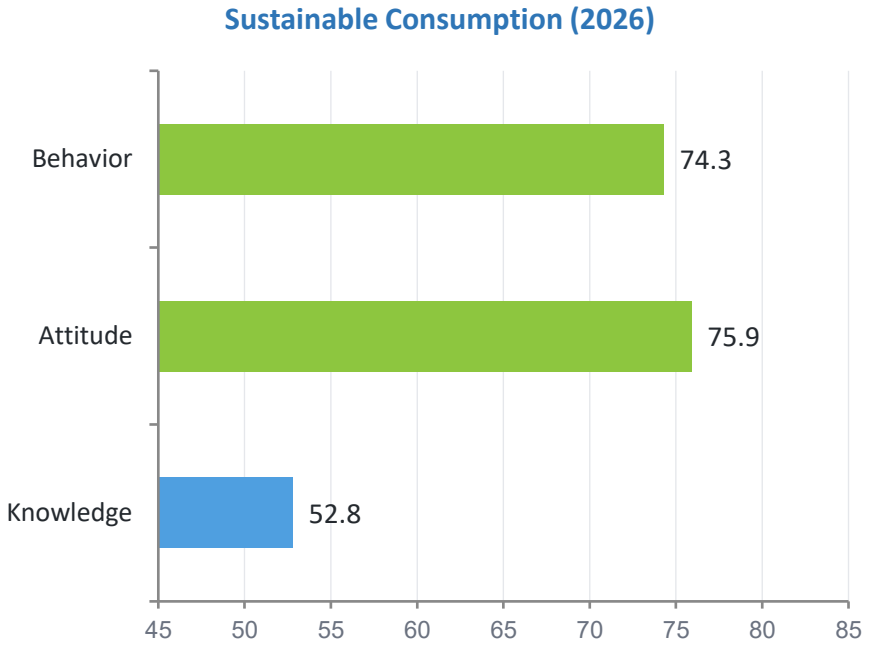
report repairing a broken product rather than replacing it

29.5%

correctly distinguish organic from pesticide-free labeling

Sustainable Consumption also includes a repair-use item that notably outperforms the Ethical Consumption practice item shown previously (58.2%) — suggesting that frugal-use habits are already relatively well established, even where willingness-to-pay behavior lags.

Within Sustainable Consumption, attitude and behavior are closely aligned (75.9 vs. 74.3) — unlike the value-action gap in Ethical Consumption. What lags is knowledge: only 29.5% can distinguish organic from pesticide-free labeling, the index's weakest item — calling for clearer certification and point-of-sale labeling rather than added incentives.

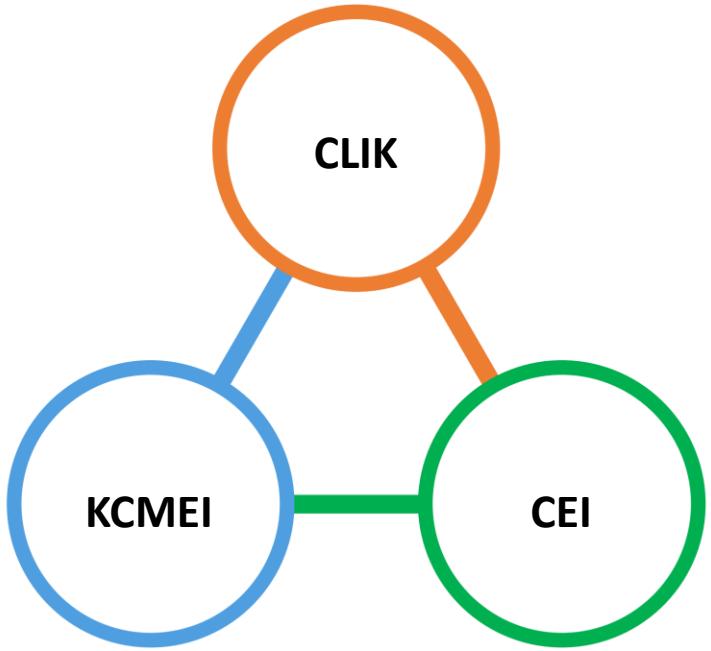


However, none of these items directly ask about food waste.
Korea already operates a volume-based food-waste fee system, yet food waste remains a significant social issue — reinforcing the case for food-waste-specific items in future survey waves.

Toward an Integrated View of Mottainai-Related Consumer Behavior

The Agency produces three nationwide consumer-policy indicators,
each currently on a different survey cycle:
the Consumer Empowerment Index every four years,
and the two indicators below on a biennial cycle.
Linking them systematically is a stated future goal.

Together, behavior, capability, and environment data would allow us to examine mottainai-related consumer behavior far more fully than any single indicator can achieve on its own.



CLIK *(biennial)* · **KCMEI** *(biennial)* · **CEI** *(every 4 years)*

Three Roles, One Shared Objective

Industry

On-the-ground implementation

Academia

Theoretical analysis

Policy Research

Evidence and systems design

Reducing mottainai requires the coordinated contribution of all three roles; the findings presented here are intended as one step toward that end.

Thank you

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