

Values and Ethics in Organic Food Consumption*

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ABSTRACT

The role of ethical concerns in explaining the buying of organic food is investigated. Results from a study on organic food consumption are reported, in order to explore the role of values in motivating consumers attitudes and behaviour towards organic food. Using various statistical techniques, the explanatory power of values for organic food consumption is assessed, in order to determine which values are relevant for the organic vs. ordinary consumer behaviour.

The paper will then explore the possible relationships between involvement, ethical attitudes and organic consumption and discuss the differences between ethical concerned vs. unconcerned organic consumer behaviour.

Keywords: attitudes; consumer analysis; laddering; means-end chains; organic food; values.

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with consumers, that is on individuals who - in order to satisfy their need and desires - exchange specific goods or products according to their preferences. The focus is on the *exchange aspect* of human life, that is on *consumer behaviour*.

Behaviour is influenced by consumer affect and cognition regarding stimuli and events in their environment.

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Affect refers to consumer *feeling* responses, such as whether they like or dislike a product. While cognition consists of mental (thinking) responses, such as belief about a particular product (Peter et al., 1999).

Although the relationship between affect and cognition is not yet fully understood and remains an issue in psychology, it is quite clear that consumer cognitive interpretation influence and are influenced by affective reactions. For example, many people eat chocolate or sweets to get rid of a bad mood, that is they cognitively retrieve from memory a past heuristic that has shown to work well in changing their feelings.

Values here are defined as people's broad life goals or needs – such as success, security, happiness, etc. – or as “concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations, guide the selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by relative importance” (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987). Values are important for they provide the motivational input to consumer behaviour, and involve the affect associated to people's goals and needs. In fact, values can be viewed as representing motivations, because “they are criteria used by individuals to select and justify actions, and to evaluate people, the self and events” (Grunert and Juhl, 1995).

However, recognising when a value has been satisfied is an inner experience that is rather intangible and subjective (Peter et al., 1999). Therefore, often consumers are unaware of the fact that their daily behaviour is deeply affected by their values. For the same reasons, producers and marketers tend to focus on more tangible aspects of consumers' product knowledge – usually attributes (characteristics) of the products or positive consequences (benefits) of using a product. But leaving out the values gives an incomplete understanding of consumers' product knowledge and how this influences their behaviour.

In the following sections the role of values in explaining the buying of organic food is analysed, by reference to some recent European studies on this topic.

First, the results of an Italian study on consumer product knowledge of organic food are reported, and the role of different values in explaining organic food consumption is discussed.

Then, the results of this study are discussed with reference to the exiting literature on the topic, to verify if similar patterns of self-relevant values can be found. The paper will finally discuss the differences between the ethical concerned vs. unconcerned organic consumer behaviour.

METHODS

While many aspects of cognition are conscious thinking processes, other are essentially automatic. In other words, consumer behaviour does not imply only reasoned action but it is essentially a consequence of his/her consumption-relevant cognitive structure (Grunert and Grunert, 1995).

When a stimulus or event regarding a product, including new products information, come in relation with consumer self-knowledge and his memory, a link between him and the product is built. A network of links between product attributes, personal consequences and values can be revealed to give a deeper insight in consumer motivation. These links build up those elements of the cognitive network that the consumer rises from his mind when presented product information in the form of product attributes: when this network is structured in a hierarchical form is known as a “means-end chain” (Gutman, 1982).

A means-end chain (MEC) is a knowledge structure that links consumers’ knowledge about product attributes with their personal knowledge about consequences and values.

The means-end approach suggests that consumers think about product characteristics or attributes in terms of personal consequences. These may be perceived as positive (benefits) or negative (risks). In other words, the means-end chain model gives the possibility to explicitly link consumers needs and products characteristics, and reveals his goals/motivations in purchasing a product.

The actual motivations of product consumption can hardly be found by just asking straightforwardly to the consumer “why”, since in most cases he is not aware of his decision-making process, neither he is able to directly reveal his personal reasons to purchase. However, means-end chain analysis is a useful tool to successfully reach this purpose.

Measuring means-end chain is a sequential stage process that consist of 3 steps (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988): elicitation of product attributes that are most relevant to the consumer; an in-depth interview process called *laddering*, intended to reveal how the consumer links product attributes to consequences and values; and, finally, the derivation of Hierarchical Value Maps (HVMs), depicting the aggregate consumer means en-chains as expressed in the ladders, i.e. the association networks of attributes, consequences and values.

In the means-end chain model, links and connections are more important than single elements – attributes, benefits and values – of the chains. Relations between specific levels of abstraction – from the most concrete (attributes) to the most intangible (values) – can explain the strength/intensity of motivations.

By looking at HVM it is possible to discover what motivate consumers to choose a product rather than something else. The model gives a more deep view into consumer perception, revealing characteristics consumer judges more important in their choice and linking them into a model of sequential motivations. In this model, product's attributes are means on which consumer can take advantage in order to obtain his own aims/ends; in other words, consumers catch up their own objectives, through those product's characteristics they perceive being important and producing suitable consequences to satisfy their own personal values.

RESULTS

Laddering interviews were conducted on 60 Italian consumers in May 2000; all of them were responsible for their household food purchases. Half of them were chosen among the customers of an organic specialised shop, and the screening procedure was targeted to assure the presence of 15 occasional and 15 regular customers of the shop. The other 30 consumers were screened as a control group of generic consumers, and each respondent was paired and matched with each consumer in the first group according to socio-demographics aspects such as sex, age, civil status, education, current

job, number of children. Among the consumers in the control group, there could be organic consumers, but that was not known beforehand. For more details, see Zanolli & Naspetti (2002).

Consumers were split in two groups according to their frequency of purchase; those (35) who declared to purchase organic products more than once per week were coded as frequent or regular users. All others (18) consumers were labelled as occasional, with the exception of 6 non responding/not knowing.

At the aggregate level, by comparing the HVMs of consumers with different level of experience (frequency of purchase), it is possible to observe similarity and divergences between the cognitive structures of the two groups.

In particular, both maps obviously suggest that aspects linked to health and well-being occupy a central position. That is, these values are the most important motivation for the purchase of organic products, as appear at all levels – attributes, consequences and values – of their cognitive structures. With respect to all other motivations, health is definitely of preponderant personal relevance. Anyway, the results show that the health factor is not discriminating among the choices of the two groups of respondent; by comparing consumers with different experience with the product, the perception of which other attributes are linked to an “healthy” product are not much dissimilar. The same applies to the benefit consisting in “eating healthy”.

On the contrary, other attributes and their respective chains (ladders) are perceived in a different way by the two groups of consumers. Occasional consumers are particularly attracted by personal satisfaction: they want the product to be tasty and good-looking as well, for one of their important value is accomplishment and pleasure, to get most from life. However, they perceive organic products to be indeed tasty but their appearance is generally perceived as negative, as a deterrent from the purchase.

The occasional consumers’ map (Figure 1) is lacking transcendental values (belonging to the motivational domains of UNIVersalism and BENevolence as defined by Schwartz, 1992), which can be found in the regular consumers’ one: “altruism/relationship with others” and “ecology, harmony

with the universe and sustainable future". Frequent users seem to have a more idealistic cognitive structure than occasional consumers, and this may be considered a symptom of an higher involvement.

At the individual level, results of the individual laddering interviews were quantified and some statistical analysis was performed.

No significant correlation was found between the average length of the ladders and the frequency of purchase nor between the latter and the number of ladders provided by each respondent. Indeed, the expectation is that the number of ladders produced as well as the average length of the ladders will be a non-linear (inverse U-shaped) function of the level of experience: the more experience the consumer has with a given product, the more information is likely to be retrieved from memory, but this is true only up to a moderate level of experience, then the absolute amount of information retrieved decreases with increasing levels of experience (Sørensen et al., 1996). However, in general, occasional consumers' ladders are shorter, on average, than those of the regular consumers' group: 3 categories vs. 3.34 ($t=2,199$) and this is a proof of higher involvement of the latter group (Celsi and Olson, 1988).

Product experience is positively correlated ($r = 0.282$) with the number of values relative to the total number of concepts in the ladder; and is inversely correlated ($r = - 0.3587$) with the proportion of consequences over the total number of concepts in the ladder. Both correlations met the theoretical expectations (Sørensen et al., 1996), since more experience will allow consumers to better detect which values can be attained by organic products, while more experienced consumers tend to leave out intermediate links (especially at the consequence level) in means-end chains (Grunert and Grunert, 1993).

The results of this qualitative study were tested on a larger population by a Computer Aided Telephone Interview (CATI) survey on a stratified sample of 800 consumers representative of the population of individuals responsible for their household food purchases. The survey was conducted in December 2000.

Consumers were asked to report the importance of 12 motivational statements (see Table I) to be rated on three-point scales, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 3 = totally agree; these statements on individual motivations for the purchase of organic food were derived from the consequences and values elicited in the qualitative phase of the study (laddering interviews).

These motivations were cross-tabulated against the self-reported buying frequency of organic food (only of those respondents which were able to correctly define organic farming), in order to reveal the relationship between frequency of purchase (product experience) and motivations. Chi-square tests and ordinal symmetric measures of correlation (such as the Spearman R and Kendall's Tau) were performed. The importance of all motivations showed positive correlation with the frequency of purchase, in the sense that the more motivated (involved) the consumer is, the more likely s/he is to buy organic food. The only motivation which did not show any relevant variation on the basis of the frequency of purchase was "I purchase them for my children", but this depended on the fact that we did not distinguish – in our data – among parents and non-parents. These results are further analysed by using a non-metric multidimensional scaling, to explore the similarities of motivations among the respondents, so that similar motivations are grouped together on the basis of the level of importance expressed by the consumers.

Statements (3, 5 & 9) appeared to have received similar rating by most consumers, as well as statements (2 & 4) and statements (6 & 10). Health issues are obviously connected with non-toxicity of the products, while consumers seem to associate the concepts of "good" and "nourishing". A better life is achieved by food security and certification.

These results substantially confirm the results of the qualitative (laddering) study and provide more insights in the consumer values and motivations.

DISCUSSION

In Europe, few studies exist which have explored the relevance of values and ethical stands in motivating consumer behaviour in the buying of organic food.

Grunert and Juhl (1995), analyse the relationships of values, environmental attitudes and the consumption of organic food in Denmark. The study analyses values from the cognitive perspective, and try to assess the explanatory power of values for consumer attitudes and buying behaviour. The main hypothesis is that altruism and other values belonging to the Schwartz motivational domains of Universalism, Benevolence Spirituality, and Self-Direction are positively associated with environmental attitudes, while values belonging to other domains will be either negatively correlated with environmental attitudes or independent to these. Besides, positive attitudes towards environmental issues will be related positively to the buying of organic food and the frequency of this behaviour. By analysing data on a sample of 174 teachers, Grunert and Juhl conclude that - in that particular sub-population - “the more environmentally concerned an individual (read: Danish teacher) is, the more likely s/he is to buy organic foods”.

Makatouni (2002), by a laddering study on 40 UK parents with children aged 4-12 years old, explored their decisions with respect to buying organic food, and revealed values in three broad categories, such as responsibility of humans for family and self-health, animal well-being and respect for the environment. Consumers’ human, animal and environment centred values form the key motivating factors for organic food purchase. These consumers perceive organic food as a means of achieving individual and social values, of which the most important is centred around the health factor for either themselves or their families. Values centred around the environment and animal welfare are also considered to be important, although their impact on the health factor seems to be the most significant motive for choosing organic food.

Krystallis (2001), by a laddering study of Greek consumers, explores the relevance of values in the buying of organic extra-virgin olive oil. The HVM shows that these consumers perceive as self-relevant values only those belonging to the Spirituality and Self-Direction motivational domain, such as inner calm, quality of life, happiness, and personal success. Similarly to the other studies, the health factor is seen as a mean to reach a good and happy life.

Overall, some value differences can be hypothesised among consumers in various parts of Europe, though all studies report health and well-being as the central motivational stance.

Animal-welfare is a value that is almost unknown to Italian and Greek consumers, while it plays a significant role in both UK and Denmark. Similarly, environmental concerns and altruistic values seem to play a higher role in motivating the Northern European consumers than the Mediterranean ones. More research is needed to confirm these findings.

The results from our Italian study seem to validate the hypothesis that consumer involvement as well as higher-order motivations increase with frequency of purchase (product experience). Similarly, the Danish study indicates that regular consumers of organic food are also more environmentally concerned.

Though these are very preliminary results, it appears that the hypothesis that organic buyers are more ethically concerned – at least in the limited sense of our value definition – than non-organic buyers.

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Table I. Statements on consumer motivations

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|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. For they look better | 7. For they are more environmentally-safe |
| 2. For they taste better | 8. For a more concerned and aware consumption |
| 3. For they are healthier | 9. For my and my family's health |
| 4. For they are more nourishing | |

- 5. For they do not contain toxic residues
- 6. For they are guaranteed and certified
- 10. For I want to live better
- 11. For my children
- 12. For I want to feel good with other people

Figure 1. Hierarchical Value Map of positive ladders of the occasional

