



## When organic food choices shape subsequent food choices: The interplay of gender and health consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

In response to the increasing demand for organic food, restaurants have begun to add such options to their menus. To illuminate the impact of organic food choices in a restaurant context, this research examines the joint effect of an initial organic food choice, gender and health consciousness on subsequent food choices (healthy vs. unhealthy). The findings suggest that males with low levels of health consciousness are more likely to choose unhealthy options when their initial choice is organic (vs. conventional). Such a tendency is attenuated among males with high levels of health consciousness. Conversely, females with low (vs. high) levels of health consciousness are more likely to choose unhealthy options regardless of their initial choice. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

It is typical lunchtime at a sandwich shop. While waiting in line, you take a glimpse at an advertisement depicting an organic option. It seems worth trying, so you decide to go for the organic choice. Shortly after, your attention is drawn to snacks displayed near the counter. Feeling bored, you decide to pick an afternoon snack and ask yourself: Healthier but less tasty granola bar or less healthy but yummiier candy bar?

Consumers are increasingly faced with organic menu options. Once considered as “a lifestyle choice for a small share of consumers,” organic food is now commonly found in mainstream food markets (USDA Economic Research Service, 2017). In response to the continuous increase in demand for organic food, restaurants have introduced organic ingredients on their menu (Poulston and Yiu, 2011). Even restaurants typically labeled as unhealthy such as Papa John’s have begun to add organic produce to their offerings (Kell, 2017). One of the primary determinants of organic food choices is the belief that such foods are healthy (Chinnici et al., 2002; Makatouni, 2002). In line with previous research, we operationalize healthy (vs. unhealthy) food as less fattening and more nutritious yet less tempting (vs. more tempting yet more fattening and less nutritious) (e.g., Chandon and Wansink, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2009). Consumers tend to perceive organic food as healthier than its conventional counterpart – lower in calorie and fat, and more nutritious (Lee et al., 2013; Schuldt and Schwarz, 2010). Therefore, diners are likely to expect ordering an organic item to

contribute to their healthy eating habits.<sup>a</sup>

However, we propose and find that ordering an organic option can have an unintended adverse effect on healthy dining. Given the interconnected nature of food decisions (Falk et al., 1996; Furst et al., 1996), it is expected that initially selecting an organic item influences subsequent food choices. However, past work has focused on healthiness of organic food itself (see Williams, 2002 for a review), failing to illuminate health effects of organic choices on a dining episode comprising of sequential choices. This omission is surprising given the sequential nature of food decisions in a restaurant setting (e.g., entrée – dessert, meal – grab-and-go snacks; Her and Seo, 2017). To bridge that gap, the current research examines the impact of an initial organic choice on subsequent choices between healthy and unhealthy food options, and tests the moderating role of gender and health consciousness. Previous hospitality research shows that gender and health consciousness are linked to healthy eating (e.g., Her and Seo, 2017; Jeong and Jang, 2015; Lee et al., 2014). We complement this stream of research by examining gender and health consciousness in relation to organic food, which has received scant attention in the hospitality literature (see Hanks and Mattila, 2016; Lu and Gursoy, 2017 for exceptions). Further theoretical implications and managerial implications are discussed.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Food choices as a symbol

Products and brands are chosen not only for functional benefits but also for symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Consumers seek possessions with a symbolic meaning that align with their desired self (Kleine et al., 1993). Items that signal a desired identity are sought after while those communicating an undesired identity are avoided (e.g., Berger and Heath, 2007).

Such a symbolic characteristic of consumption choices applies to food choices. As the widespread “you are what you eat” principle denotes, there is a pervasive belief that food choices reveal information about a person’s characteristics. Such an expressive value of food choices may stem from their influence on group membership. Across social contexts, from a religious feast to a girl’s night out, food often serves as a symbol of group membership (Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 2005). Eating similar items can strengthen group ties (e.g., “we are the real men”) and therefore, set a boundary between in-groups (e.g., males) and out-groups (e.g., females; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002). Therefore, social identities such as ethnicity, nationality and gender tend to share associations with certain foods. For example, Germans are sometimes referred to as “Krauts” and the English “Roastbeefs” (Fischler, 1988). Martini is commonly considered as a males’ drink and cosmopolitan as a typical female choice (Cosme, 2013; Gal and Wilkie, 2010). Drawing on symbolic value of food choices, we next argue that organic food choices are symbolic of femininity.

### 2.2. Organic food choices and femininity

We propose that organic food choices are associated with femininity. This association may originate from two prominent attributes of organic food: healthy and pro-environmental. First, organic food is typically perceived as healthy. Previous research shows that expectations for health benefits are a crucial driver of organic food consumption (Chinnici et al., 2002; Makatouni, 2002). Interestingly, there is a lack of conclusive evidence supporting higher nutritional quality of organic (vs. conventional) products (Williams, 2002). Despite insufficient scientific credibility, however, consumers tend to perceive a food item with (vs. without) an organic label as lower in calories. This tendency holds for both unhealthy (e.g., cookies, chips; Lee et al., 2013; Schuldt and Schwarz, 2010) and healthy items (e.g., yogurt; Lee et al., 2013).

In the food domain, media often portray healthy eating in relation to slim and attractive female bodies. Exposure to such media messages is likely to make feminine associations readily retrievable (Combs and Slovic, 1979). In the 1980s, Silverstein et al. (1986) found that women’s magazines contained substantially more ads for diet foods than men’s magazines. Twenty years later, Gough (2007) reports that newspaper articles tend to describe females as experts in healthy diets and males as ignorant and indifferent about healthy eating. Such messages reflecting gender differences in healthy eating are likely to be a source of the association between healthy eating (e.g., organic food consumption) and femininity.

This association may also stem from personal experiences and self-observation (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). Consumers are often exposed to incidents manifesting females’ inclination for healthy food consumption. Females tend to endorse healthy eating practices more than males (e.g., placing greater importance on dietary recommendations, Fagerli and Wandel, 1999; making food choices more based on healthy food content, Ree et al., 2008). Consumers indeed associate healthy foods (e.g., yogurt, vegetables) with femininity while connecting unhealthy foods (e.g., red meat) with masculinity (Jensen and Holm, 1999; Sobal, 2005). Thus, it is expected that there is a positive relationship between supposedly healthy organic food consumption and femininity.

Environmental benefits are another important driver of organic food consumption (Magnusson et al., 2003; Mondelaers et al., 2009). Eco-

friendly consumers tend to frequently buy organic foods (Magnusson et al., 2003). Environmentalism is becoming an increasingly important driver of organic food purchases (Padel and Foster, 2005). This pro-environmental aspect is another likely source linking organic consumption to femininity (Brough et al., 2016). Environmentalism, the propensity to take pro-environmental actions, by definition reflects interdependent and warm attitudes toward the environment (Stern, 2000). Such attitudes exemplify prototypical feminine traits. Females are often socialized to have communal orientation whereas males are socialized to have agentic goals across cultures (Eagly, 1987; Bakan, 1966). Communal orientation constituting femininity involves interdependent, caring and nurturing attitudes toward others. Conversely, agentic orientation linked to masculinity emphasizes independence, self-assertion and self-efficacy (Bakan, 1966). Accordingly, it can be concluded that pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., organic food purchases) and femininity share common core characteristics.

Moreover, frequently encountering instances manifesting gender differences in pro-environmental choices may also strengthen the association. Recall that personal experiences and self-observation can propagate an association (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). Females tend to exhibit more pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors than males (Zelezny et al., 2000). For example, females are more likely to buy produce grown without pesticides or chemicals (Hunter et al., 2004) and reuse as well as recycle items (Tindall et al., 2003; Zelezny et al., 2000). Repeated exposure to such instances are likely to generate a cognitive association between pro-environmental choices (e.g., organic choices) and femininity. People indeed associate pro-environmental consumer behavior with femininity, regardless of their own gender and gender of a person being evaluated (Brough et al., 2016).

Taken together, we argue that organic food choices are associated with femininity. Findings from our pilot tests support this proposition. First, we tested if choosing organic (vs. conventional) food items increases self-perception of femininity across the two genders. Participants indicated the extent to which a food choice would make them feel prototypically feminine (feminine, gentle, sensitive; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; Brough et al., 2016). Choosing an identical menu item labeled (vs. not labeled) as organic made participants rate themselves as more feminine ( $M_{\text{organic}} = 4.17$  vs.  $M_{\text{conventional}} = 3.78$ ,  $F(1, 160) = 4.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Type of food (i.e., organic vs. conventional) did not interact with gender, suggesting that both males and females feel more feminine as a consequence of choosing an organic product. Second, we tested if people perceive others selecting organic (vs. conventional) food items as more feminine. Findings show that people judge others who choose organic food as more feminine ( $M_{\text{organic}} = 4.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{conventional}} = 3.93$ ,  $F(1, 90) = 4.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Again, food type did not interact with a chooser’s gender, indicating that this judgment holds irrespective of a chooser’s gender. Our discussion now turns to how such femininity associations influence males versus females.

### 2.3. Gender-congruent choices and going organic

Gender is a social and subjective construction (Chodorow, 1995; Martin, 2004). Although social and personal meanings that define gender shift over the time, traditional gender roles (at least partly) remain in our society (Diekmann and Eagly, 2000). There is a consensus on characteristics labeled as feminine or masculine (Eagly and Karau, 2002). People are not only expected to comply with norms governing gender roles, but tend to act in line with gender norms (Eagly, 1983). Gender-based reasoning exerts influence on people’s perceptions and behaviors (Chodorow, 1995; Martin, 2004).

Gender constitutes one’s social identity. Gender identity refers to the degree of identification with either feminine or masculine traits (Fischer and Arnold, 1994) and it is essential to one’s self-concept (Crane and Markus, 1982). Discrepancies between an ideal and actual self prompt compensatory actions (Higgins, 1987). Compensatory

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