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Analysis

Good Taste Tastes Good. Cultural Capital as a Determinant of Organic Food Purchase by Italian Consumers: Evidence and Policy Implications

Massimiliano Agovino [a], Alessandro Crociata [b], Davide Quaglione [b,*], Pierluigi Sacco [c,d], Alessandro Sarra [b]

[a] Parthenope University, Naples, Italy
[b] University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy
[c] IULM University, Milan, Italy
[d] metaLAB (at) Harvard and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

Policy actions in support of organic food chain productions have so far focused on the supply side, whereas poor attention has been paid to the demand side, despite the growing interest in consumers' attitudes toward organic food. With the prospect of a future slowing down of the demand for organic products, specific demand-side policy measures are called for. Building on interdisciplinary research on the determinants of organic food purchases, we argue that cultural capital is a relevant, so far overlooked driver of organic food purchase. We apply a Heckman two-step selection strategy approach to microdata from the latest sample annual survey by the Italian National Institute of Statistics. We find that participation in cultural activities has a positive impact on the inclination to purchase organic products, to an extent that depends on the social orientation of each cultural activity. Some policy implications are derived.

1. Introduction

The increasing attention paid by civil society to issues of environmental sustainability, healthiness and safety of food production and consumption (Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Arvola et al., 2008; Barlagne et al., 2015; Chen, 2007; Hsu and Chen, 2014; Laureati et al., 2013; Schifferstein and Oude Ophuis, 1998; Van Loo et al., 2013; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008; Williams and Hammitt, 2001) has prompted governments to intensify their efforts in supporting organic agriculture. Policy measures include regulatory promotion of environmentally sustainable and low-toxicity farming techniques, certification of processes and products complying with organic standards, preservation of biodiversity, improved land protection, and control and reduction of environmental pollutants. A consequent effort to improve the awareness of consumers on all of the above issues has been made in most if not all socio-economically developed countries.

As a result, organic food market figures have been steadily growing worldwide. As of the end of 2014 (FIBL and IFOAM, 2016), the global sales of organic food and drinks have reached 80 billion USD. Organic food production takes place in 172 countries, where almost 2.3 million producers cultivate 43.7 million hectares of land (including in-conversion areas). Europe, and Italy in particular, are not exceptions. With its 23.9 billion Euro worth (approximately 38% of the global market), Europe represents the second largest organic market in the world (with the USA accounting for about 43% of the global market), extending over 11.6 million hectares of organic agricultural land, managed by almost 340,000 producers. Within Europe, Italy has the second largest organically cultivated agricultural areas in Europe (1.4 million ha, following Spain with 1.7), and the fourth biggest domestic market (2850 million USD, 8.2% of the European market) after Germany (10,501 million USD, 30.2%), France (6298 million USD, 18.1%), and the United Kingdom (2891 million USD, 8.3%). Moreover, Italy is the first exporter of organic produce in the world (1.42 billion Euros), with exports increasing by a 9.5% average annual growth rate in 2007–2013 (Mipaaf, 2016). However, according to Marketline Industry (2015), the momentum of the Italian domestic organic market is forecast to tone down. The anticipated compound annual growth rate (CAGR) for the five-years period 2014–2019 is 5.8%, compared to 6.8% for 2010–2014, and to anticipated 2014–2019 figures of 6.7% and 6.6% for France and Germany, respectively.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Economics, viale Pindaro 42, 65127 Pescara, Italy.
E-mail address: d.quaglione@unich.it (D. Quaglione).

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Such an outlook, if confirmed, may cause possible excess supply, also considering that in the national rural development 2014–2020 programming, a specific measure to support the development of organic agriculture is contemplated, with substantial financial resources (1.69 billion Euros, compared to 1.59 billion Euros for 2007–2013). In turn, the export channel may not be able to absorb the possible excess production capacity, as competition in the sector at the global level is expected to sharpen in the coming years.

A point of special concern is that the consequences of a slowdown in the national market growth rate would penalize the less developed Italian regions (the ones with a per capita GDP below the EU average), where the largest number of organic farmers and the most relevant extensions of organically cultivated land are localized: Sicily (9660 firms, 303,066 ha), Calabria (8787 firms, 160,164 ha), and Apulia (6599 firms, 176,998 ha). Organically cultivated agricultural land in the former three regions accounts for the 46% of the national total. Organic farming, therefore, has a major impact on the economic performance of such regions (Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016).

To address this problem, the identification of the determinants of consumers' choice to purchase organic products is of key importance, in order to design effective policies targeting the demand side. Several studies have been focusing on the topic. An important common finding is the acknowledgment of consumers' growing environmental awareness and increasing concern for food safety (Çabuk et al., 2014; Gracia and De Magistris, 2007; Kareklas et al., 2014; Lee, 2016; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Shafie and Rennie, 2012; Thorsøe, 2015; Torgler and García-Valiñas, 2007). A variety of approaches has been adopted in the literature to gain further insight on such attitudes, to shed light upon the connection between consumers' values, attitudes and intentions, as well as social and personal norms, and organic food purchasing behaviour. Results, however, are somewhat mixed and fragmented (for an early review, see Aertsens et al., 2009).

In particular, there is still a lack of understanding of the fine-grained mechanisms that play a crucial role in turning pro-environmental orientations into actual behaviours (Hynes and Wilson, 2016). For instance, Aschemann-Witzel and Niebuhr Aagaard (2014) report perceived affordability and a too weak perceived differentiation from non-organic food as major barriers for a small sample of young Danish consumers, suggesting policies to reduce the expensiveness stigma of organic products, as well as to make their distinctive characteristics more salient. In this context, Shashi et al. (2015) provide a large meta-review of the literature on organic food supply chains, and propose a conceptual model that singles out five main macro-factors influencing consumers' attitudes toward organic food: sustainability, market deterrents, personal values, demographics, and the socioeconomic environment. As far as demographic and socioeconomic factors are concerned, in particular, education and income emerge as major predictors of organic product purchases. Moreover, building on the concept of "group norms" (Fielding et al., 2008a, 2008b), recent contributions have emphasized social identity attributes of consumers as key enhancers of the predictive capability of more traditional approaches to the issue (Johe and Bhullar, 2016).

Our paper moves in a somewhat complementary and original direction, investigating the role of another generally neglected dimension. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to consider whether consumers' participation in cultural activities affects their propensity to purchase organic food. Our research question finds strong support in terms of plausibility in the significant, interdisciplinary stream of literature that highlights how cultural participation, in view of its significant cognitive, emotional and relational implications, substantially influences many different aspects of human choices, such as environmental responsibility, healthy conduct, elimination of prejudice, and so on (Sacco et al., 2012). As organic food consumption decisions are so subtly intertwined with social values, norms, and attitudes, it is legitimate to ask whether the effects of cultural participation that are found in other affine spheres of norms- and value-driven behaviours similarly occur in this domain as well.

2. Conceptual Framework

Personal determinants of organic food (purchase and) consumption have been extensively discussed in the literature. Most of the contributions take the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) as the reference framework (e.g. Chen, 2007; Dean et al., 2008; Thøgersen, 2007), highlighting the role of the intention to perform the behaviour, and of levels of perceived behavioural control. Few others rely on the Norm Activation Model (NAM) (Schwartz, 1977) approach (for instance Honkanen et al., 2006; Klöckner and Ohms, 2009), that stresses the role of personal norms.

We see two major problems with applying either of these models of consumer behaviour to organic food consumption (Hynes and Wilson, 2016). The first is that both models assume that consumers act in a rational, fully informed manner, keeping relevant norms and value orientations into account, and accurately evaluating their implications for the final choice. In the case of organic food, however, consumers often have to rely upon limited information as to the impacts of their decisions on several dimensions, including environmental consequences, their own health, and even the actual process of production and distribution of the goods. The second problem is that, as already emphasized, there still is a limited understanding of how particular values, norms and attitudes might affect the relationship between stated intentions and actual behaviours. These limitations of the available theoretical backgrounds for the explanation of organic food consumption, together with the increased interest catered by the expanding market demand for such goods, paved the way to novel theoretical approaches, such as the Identity Based Motivation (IBM) Theory (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2007), that stresses the role of self-identity in organic consumerism (Johe and Bhullar, 2016). This recent stream of research aims at making sense, through the process of self-identification, of the "attitude-intention gap" by focusing on the role of pro-environmental identity as a predictor of organic consumerism (Bartels and Hoogendam, 2011; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Sparks and Shepherd, 1992). In this paper, we single out two different, complementary channels for identity-based organic consumerism that are mediated by cultural capital: a cognitive one, and a social one, whose corresponding approaches to cultural capital have drawn significant attention in the literature.

Recent literature has analysed the impact of cultural participation on several dimensions of human behaviour (Crociata et al., 2014, 2015; Grossi et al., 2011, 2012; Sacco et al., 2012). Sustained access to cultural activities causes the accumulation of cultural capital under the form of a stock of cultural capabilities shaped by the cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions of cultural experience. This notion of cultural capital presents significant differences with respect to sociologically inspired approaches, such as Pierre Bourdieu's (1980, 1986) characterization of cultural capital as an asset that certifies social status. In Bourdieu's perspective, which has become the pillar of a large stream of sociologically motivated research in the field, cultural capital can assume one of three different states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, and is mainly characterized by its role as a socio-cognitive marker of social stratification. However, cultural capital may also become a key enabler of individual and social empowerment, and especially so when access to cultural experiences aims at social inclusion rather than discrimination, such as, for example, in cases like *El Sistema*, the massive program of socialization of youth at risk through classical music training (Cuesta, 2011). Throsby (1999, 2005) provides a more economically focused classification of cultural capital, moving from the distinction between tangible (heritage, museums, artistic artefacts, books, etc.) and intangible (oral traditions, customs, performances, rituals, etc.) forms of cultural capital.

The empirically motivated literature focuses on the effects of attendance or participation in cultural activities such as visiting museums, exhibits, or historic sites, as well as attending live music or theatre performances, cinema shows, etcetera (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Lizardo, 2006; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro, 2005). Even if cultural capital, like social or human capital,