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Analysis

To buy or not to buy: The roles of self-identity, attitudes, perceived behavioral control and norms in organic consumerism

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the role psychological determinants (*self-identity*, *attitudes*, *perceived behavioral control*, and *norms*) play in organic consumerism. Participants ($N = 252$, $mean_{age} = 44.35$, $SD = 15.29$, 97% resided in Australia) were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: (1) organic identity prime, (2) pro-environmental identity prime, and (3) neither pro-environmental nor organic identity primes (control). Analysis of variance revealed that organic identity prime was associated with significant increase in intentions to purchase organic products, relative to both pro-environmental identity and control conditions. Follow-up mediation analysis indicated that organic self-identity increased consumer intentions by influencing their attitudes and group norms. These results demonstrate that organic identity can be primed to create identity-congruent shifts toward organic consumerism. Importantly, these findings have direct application for marketing strategies aiming at promoting and developing an "organic" brand.

1. Introduction

People interested in protecting the environment, improving their lifestyles and living sustainably are potential *consumers* of organic products (Lea and Worsley, 2005; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009). In addition, a growing concern about the use of chemicals in food production has helped drive the development of an organic industry, which is a multi-billion dollar global industry (Hughner et al., 2007). A recent report on organic agriculture estimated the global market for organic products in 2013 to be about 72 billion US dollars (Willer and Lernoud, 2015), with an expansion of the market to 104.5 billion US dollars globally (Global Organic Foods, and Beverages Market Analysis by Products, Geography, Regulations, Pricing Trends,, and Forecasts, 2010-2015).

Demand for organic products is expected to grow with time as evident by the fact that the organic industry is one of the fastest growing food sectors in Australia, with growth rates in the domestic retail market averaging 50% from 2008 to 2012 (Mitchell et al., 2010), and now worth over one billion dollars annually in Australia (Biological Farmers of Australia, 2010). During this period, the Australian organic industry has been able to continue this level of growth despite the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and ongoing drought problems (Mitchell et al., 2010). Research suggests that more than 60% of Australian households now buy organic products on occasions, with an estimated value of organic production in Australia around $300 million per annum (Monk et al., 2012). The use of renewable resources and preservation of the natural environment, emphasized by organic production (Organic Produce Export Committee, 2002) have become important considerations for consumers and marketers alike (Cronin et al., 2011). New marketing opportunities have arisen as consumers become increasingly more inclined to purchase environmentally sustainable and organic products (Bartels and Onwezen, 2014; Gottschalk and Leistner, 2013). This increased market demand has sparked research to identify potential organic consumers and determinants of organic consumerism (Aertsens et al., 2009). In particular, the role of self-identity in organic consumerism has been demonstrated (Bartels and Hoogendam, 2011; Whitmarsh and O'Neil, 2010). In addition, the role of Theory of Planned Behavior-related variables (*attitudes*, *perceived behavioral control* and *subjective norms*; Ajzen, 1985, 2012) and group norms (Fielding et al., 2008a, 2008b) in organic consumerism have become apparent. To provide a thorough understanding of the psychological determinants of consumer choice, the present study explored how identity and individual characteristics of attitudes, perceived behavioral control and norms interact in explaining consumers' intentions to buy organic products.

1.1. Self-Identity and Organic Consumerism

Self-identification has been implicated as an important driver of general consumer behavior. It is well documented that priming via advertising can activate specific consumer identities, thereby influencing preference for identity-relevant products (Mercurio and Forehand, 2011). Stok et al. (2014) found that self-identification, as a person who consumes sufficient vegetables, moderated the relationship between

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social norms and self-reported vegetable intake. This key finding suggests the role of self-identification as a powerful predictor and facilitator of consumer behavior. Thogersen and Olander (2006) found that that 'catalyst behaviors', such as recycling, alternative transport usage and resource reduction were linked to organic consumerism by pro-environmental self-identification. Whitmarsh and O'Neil (2010) also observed *spill-over effects* – the notion that taking-up a catalyst behavior (such as recycling) may encourage people adopt other pro-environmental behaviors – between pro-environmental self-identities, resource conservation, and organic consumer-related intentions. In addition, bi-directional links between organic self-identification and environmentally sustainable consumerism have been demonstrated. For example, environmentally conscious consumers have found to be more likely to identify with organic consumer groups and to purchase organic products (Bartels and Hoogendam, 2011). Conversely, individuals who identify as organic consumers are more willing to purchase environmentally sustainable products (Bartels and Onwezen, 2014). Consistent with these trends, studies have implicated the role of both pro-environmental identity and organic self-identification as predictors of organic consumerism (Bartels and Hoogendam, 2011; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009; Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008).

These results suggest that the 'attitude-intention gap' (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006, 2008) may be explained through the process of self-identification. Integrating the findings of Stok et al. (2014) with the *spill-over* effects observed between pro-environmental self-identification and organic consumerism (Whitmarsh and O'Neil, 2010) suggest that both pro-environmental and organic self-identities are predictive of organic consumerism. Partial support for the link between organic and pro-environmental self-identification, and organic consumerism was found in the indirect relationship observed between environmentally conscious self-identity and organic consumerism (Bartels and Hoogendam, 2011; Bartels and Onwezen, 2014). However, the effects of pro-environmental and organic self-identification in organic consumerism have yet to be directly tested.

1.1.1. Priming Self-Identity

Traditional conceptualizations have viewed identity as stable and resistant to change (Tajfel, 1982; Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). More recently, socially-situated theories of cognition (Schwartz, 2007; Smith and Semin, 2004, 2007) have conceptualized identity as adaptive and embedded within social contexts. Identity Based Motivation (IBM) Theory (Oyserman et al., 2007; Oyserman, 2009) extends the socially-situated cognition framework by focusing on the motivational pull towards identity-congruent action and cognitive procedures. The IBM theory proposes that situational cues prime individuals' towards identity-congruent action and procedural (cognitive) readiness, causing them to identify with in-groups and distance themselves from out-groups (Oyserman, 2009). Regardless of subjective awareness, primes activate mental constructs that influence behavior (Loersch and Payne, 2011) by biasing content relating to an individual's self-concept or identity (Wheeler and DeMarree, 2009). Once successfully primed, an individual may exhibit shifts in variables moderating active self-concepts. An identity-congruent prime should magnify prime-to-behavior effects and lead to identity-congruent behaviors. Findings suggest that if pro-environmental or organic messages are identity-congruent, then priming these identities should activate identity-congruent action and procedural readiness to partake in organic consumerism. The malleable nature of identity (Oyserman et al., 2007) also implies that priming pro-environmental or organic self-identity may produce identity-congruent shifts in behavior toward organic consumerism.

An important factor to consider when designing a priming manipulation is choosing which medium to use. Past research has successfully used audiovisual clips as manipulations to examine the effects of priming on consumer behavior (e.g., Mandel, 2003). Fahmy and Wanta (2005) found that video priming cues were more effective in facilitating attitude change than print media, as video requires less explicit memory processing. Similarly, Nelson (2002) found that the inclusion of advertising in sports games increased explicit memory recall for these advertisements, adding to perceived in-game realism. When advertisements were not contextually appropriate, explicit recall was enhanced, leading to negative player appraisals; because players realized they were being manipulated (Chaney et al., 2004). These results suggest that contextual factors affect which aspects of the advertisement become salient. Product marketing has been successfully using persuasive strategies such as audiovisual advertising and promotion campaigns to engage consumers and influence their choices and behaviors (de Mooij, 2011). The IBM theory suggests that when an advertisement is identity-congruent, the message presented is processed implicitly; it looks and sounds right. However, when a message is identity-incongruent, it is processed at an explicit level and is likely to be scrutinized. Therefore, it suggests that priming congruent organic self-identity should lead to action and procedural readiness to engage in organic consumerism (Oyserman, 2009). Similarly, consistent with the *spill-over* effect (Whitmarsh and O'Neil, 2010), it would be expected that priming pro-environmental self-identity should propel a consumer toward more discrete behavior, such as organic consumerism.

1.2. Theory of Planned Behavior and Organic Consumerism

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 2012) has also been effectively used to conceptualize and measure behavioral intentions in organic consumerism (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Robinson and Smith, 2002; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008) as well as sustainable food consumption (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008). According to TPB, predicting a behavior requires an understanding of how individuals develop intentions, which are conscious decisions, to either engage or not in a specific behavior, with *behavioral intentions* as the direct antecedent of behavior (Ajzen, 2012). The model proposes three psychological antecedents of behavioral intentions: *attitudes*, which refer to the degree a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of a behavior, therefore, it is an evaluative disposition toward a behavior; *perceived behavioral control*, which refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they have control over a behavior, therefore, it is the perceived ease of doing a behavior; and *subjective norms*, refer to the perceived social pressure to undertake or not undertake a behavior. Thus, according to TPB, consumers who hold positive attitudes toward organic products, believe that significant others will support them if they engage in organic consumerism, and believe that they can easily engage in organic consumerism, are more likely to report greater intentions to perform the behavior.

Past research has found attitudes as a consistent predictor of behavioral intention. For example, Glassman et al. (2010) found that attitudes were the strongest predictor of participants' intentions to consume alcohol and subsequent drinking behavior among university students. Research suggests that engaging in attitudinally-consistent behavior is dependent on perceptions of support from significant others. Accordingly, normative pressure was found to be the strongest predictor of intentions to speed (Conner et al., 2003). TPB also suggests that perceived behavioral control is the most powerful factor in influencing behavior change (Armitage and Talibudeen, 2010) and was found to account for significant amount of variance in employee intentions to switch their computer off in a workplace setting and use video-conferencing in place of traveling to meetings (Greaves et al., 2013). Past research has also suggested that perceived behavioral control is a direct predictor of both intentions and behavior as the feelings of control increase the degree to which individuals are willing to apply additional effort to successfully perform a particular behavior (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Therefore, it is not uncommon that perceived behavioral control fails to significantly predict intentions and actual behaviors in some instances (e.g., Glassman et al., 2010). Norman and Conner (2006) found that perceived behavioral control did not predict alcohol use in non-