



Eat organic – Feel good? The relationship between organic food consumption, health concern and subjective wellbeing



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ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that people associate happiness and pleasure with the consumption of organic food. So far wellbeing has been studied mainly as a motivational antecedent of organic food consumption, not as a consequence. This study analyzes the relationship between organic food consumption, health concern, health beliefs and subjective wellbeing with a nationally representative online survey and an experimental study. Findings supported the hypothesized influence of organic food consumption on subjective wellbeing and revealed an underlying label effect. The observed partial mediation of the organic food effect by health beliefs indicates that the organic-wellbeing link can be explained in part by cognitive processes and elaboration of consumer's health beliefs, but that also automatic, emotional processes are involved. Effects were moderated by the individual's health concern, with stronger influences for the more health concerned consumers. Findings have significant implications for food-wellbeing theory development, as well as practical implications for organic food producers and consumers.

1. Introduction

Responding to societal concerns, researchers are increasingly interested in how food decision making influences health and wellbeing (Block et al., 2011; Bubltz et al., 2013). When prompted to think about foods and wellbeing, many consumers mention organic food (Ares et al., 2015). Consumers seem to associate happiness and pleasure with the consumption of organic food products (Vega-Zamora, Torres-Ruiz, Murgado-Armenteros, & Parras-Rosa, 2014). Research on the hedonic effects of organic food consumption is yet scarce, however. Does consuming organic enhance subjective wellbeing? Compelling empirical evidence of a causal influence of organic food consumption on subsequent perceived wellbeing has been lacking. The present study addresses this gap in the literature analyzing whether consuming organic leads to consumers feeling better. As yet, wellbeing has been studied mainly as a motivational antecedent of organic food consumption, not as a consequence. Hedonism and pleasure seeking have indeed been identified as important drivers of consumer's adoption of organic food (Bauer, Heinrich, & Schäfer, 2013; Lee & Yun, 2015; Zanolini & Naspetti, 2002). Establishing that consuming organic enhances perceived wellbeing would have significant theoretical implications related to the

explanation of variables and processes underlying consumer's wellbeing. In addition, there would be important practical implications for consumer policy aimed at enhancing consumer wellness and promoting organic food adoption, as well as for marketers of organic food products.

If such a relationship was established, a number of further questions remain. Which process mechanisms are involved? Can the organic-wellbeing link be explained by a labeling effect based on expectancy belief influences (Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2015)? Do consumer's health beliefs and concerns intervene in this relationship? This research aims to provide answers also to these questions by analyzing the relationship between the frequency of organic food consumption, individual health concern, health beliefs, and subjective wellbeing. In particular, we also address the question whether the alleged influence of an organic diet on emotional wellbeing is the consequence of deliberate cognitive processing of health beliefs—that is, because consumers of organic perceive that their diet is healthier—or if this effect is an intuitive emotional reaction in absence of significant mental elaboration. Findings and contributions of this research are based on two studies, one nationally representative online survey and one experimental study.

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2. Organic food consumption and subjective wellbeing

An increasing stream of research examines how food decision making influences health and wellbeing (Bublitz et al., 2013). Block et al. (2011) referred with the term “Food well-being (FWB)” to the positive physical, psychological, emotional and social outcome individuals can experience as a consequence of adequate food consumption. Wellbeing is a broad concept lacking a unique definition. Assessing how consumers perceive wellbeing in a food-related context, Ares, de Saldamando, Giménez, and Deliza’s (2014), Ares et al.’s (2015) qualitative five country study showed that wellbeing is mainly associated with calmness, health, happiness, positive emotions and satisfaction with specific aspects of life, and that food consumption can improve perceived wellbeing. The effects of foods on wellbeing were strongly related to perceived physical health, pleasure and emotional aspects. Ares et al.’s findings are in line with a number of studies showing that food does not affect consumer’s wellbeing only in nutritional terms, but that it is also a source of pleasure-related emotions (Guillemin et al., 2016; Rozin, 2005; Rozin, Bauer, & Catanese, 2003) which affect individuals’ wellbeing (Schnettler et al., 2015).

Evidence on a causal influence of organic food consumption on consumer wellbeing has been scarce so far. In Ares et al.’s (2015) study, organic was among the salient food characteristics mentioned in some countries when prompted to think about foods and wellbeing, together with such further attributes as flavor, quality, naturalness, and freshness. Vega-Zamora et al.’s (2014) qualitative study showed that consumers associate pleasure and happiness with the act of consuming organic food. Furthermore there are a number of studies pointing to a possible relationship, addressing however the opposite directional effect, that is, analyzing wellbeing as a motivational antecedent of organic food consumption. Zanolli and Naspetti (2002) showed that consumer’s mental association of organic food with health, pleasure and wellbeing constitutes an important motive for organic food consumption. Similarly, Bauer et al. (2013) showed that health orientation and hedonism were two of the four main purchasing motives for organic food. However, there is still a significant gap in the literature with respect to a quantitative analysis of the possible influence of organic food consumption on consumer’s perceived wellbeing. As the reviewed evidence points to such a relationship, we propose that the frequency of consuming organic food has a positive influence on the individual’s experience of wellbeing.

H1. Organic food consumption leads to an increase in subjective wellbeing.

If such a relationship was confirmed, the question remains whether the effect is consequence of physiological or psychological processes. For instance, organic food may enhance overall health, and health improvement in turn may lead to individuals feeling well. On the other hand, the related process may be purely perceptual, consequence of attribute beliefs and expectations consumers associate with organic food. There is incidental evidence pointing to a psychological effect of organic food consumption. Vega-Zamora et al.’s (2014) qualitative research revealed that consuming organic comprises the consumption of experiences and sensations, in which the individual’s feelings and emotions are more salient than the elaboration of product related information. The organic label may act as a heuristic cue that leads consumers to infer that the product has superior qualities which will benefit their wellbeing. It has been shown, for instance, that expectation about its likely product attributes created by linguistic and/or pictorial information provided before a food product is tasted will affect the sensory perception of the consumption experience. An organic label can alter consumer’s beliefs about the product and expectations (Laureati, Jabes, Russo, & Pagliarini, 2013). Consumer expectations in turn can affect the sensory experience of consuming the product (Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2015). Organic labeled products are, for instance, perceived as being lower in calories (Schuldt & Schwarz,

2010) and healthier than their non-organic counterparts (Ellison, Duff, Wang, & White, 2016; Sörqvist et al., 2015). Organic labeled food has been found to be more liked and rated as more flavorful and appetizing than an identical unlabeled product (Apaolaza, Hartmann, Echebarria, & Barrutia, 2017; Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013). Organic labeling can increase overall quality perception and liking, as well as willingness to pay a price premium (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Behrens, & Klarmann, 2014). The influence of organic food consumption on experienced wellbeing may be the consequence of a label effect, rather than of a physiological health benefit accompanied by an improved feelings state.

H2. The influence of organic food consumption on subjective wellbeing can be the result of a label effect.

3. Deliberate cognitive processing of health beliefs vs. automatic emotional effects

Subjective knowledge has been shown to constitute an important factor in explaining organic food consumption (Pieniak, Aertsens, & Verbeke, 2010). Bublitz et al. (2013) argue that deliberative cognitive and automatic emotional processes compete to influence food choices. They suggest that feelings of satisfaction and goal achievement derived from making healthy food choices may contribute to experiencing emotional wellbeing. Can the alleged influence of consuming organic food be explained by a cognitive process of product belief elaboration? Or is this effect the consequence of automatic emotional processing? There is indeed significant evidence that, on the one hand consumers relate organic food with a healthy diet, and, on the other hand, as reviewed previously, a healthy diet increases subjective wellbeing. Such a pattern can explain an effect of organic consumption on wellbeing via cognitive processing and inferential attribute belief elaboration. In line with Bublitz et al.’s (2013) theoretical proposition, organic consumers may infer that their nutrition is healthy and, in turn, the feeling of satisfaction derived from making healthy food choices may induce the experience of emotional wellbeing. In addition, the belief that their nutrition benefits their health may lead consumers to feel healthier and consequently improve their overall wellbeing. In Ares et al.’s (2014, 2015) studies, physical health, food with a healthy nutritional composition, and organic food featured among the main concepts associated with food related wellbeing. Perceived healthiness of a product has been defined as the influence consumers believe consuming this product has on their health (Howlett, Burton, Bates, & Huggins, 2009).

Prior research has provided a stream of evidence on the perceived healthiness of organic food. In a number of experimental studies, organic labeled foods have been shown to be perceived as healthier and more nutritious than identical foods lacking the label (Ellison et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2013). Healthiness is a product attribute belief consistently associated with organic produce (Magnusson, Arvola, Hursti, Åberg, & Sjöden, 2003; Mondelaers, Verbeke, & van Huylenbroeck, 2009; Schuldt & Schwarz, 2010). Further evidence stems from research showing that healthiness constitutes one of the principal purchasing motives for organic food (Bauer et al., 2013; Magnusson et al., 2003; Vega-Zamora et al., 2014; Zanolli & Naspetti, 2002), particularly because of its wholesomeness and absence of chemicals (Schifferstein & Ophuis, 1998). Health conscious consumers are also more likely to consume organic food (Chen, 2007; De Magistris & Gracia, 2008; Goetzke, Nitzko, & Spiller, 2014; Torjusen, Lieblein, Wandel, & Francis, 2001).

Overall, there are significant arguments justifying a cognitive process based on deliberate belief elaboration explaining the effect of organic food consumption on wellbeing. Consumers of organic produce may believe that such food was healthy and that consequently their nutrition was healthy. The belief of having a healthier nutrition, in turn, may enhance their feelings of wellbeing. The influence of organic on

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