



# Will an organic label always increase food consumption? It depends on food type and consumer differences in health locus of control



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## ABSTRACT

Food companies that choose to differentiate themselves by marketing their products as organic assume that the organic label tells consumers that the food is healthy. This research examines whether the organic label on a food product always increases consumer consumption of that product. Two moderators are considered: food type (virtue vs. vice) and consumer differences in health locus-of-control (HLOC) (externals vs. internals). Study 1 indicates that an organic label enhances consumers' intention to consume vice food, but eliminates their intention to consume virtue food. Study 2 suggests that the joint effect of the organic label and food type differs for externals and internals. The results for externals are consistent with those in Study 1: an organic label increases vice food intake but reduces virtue food intake. Different results are observed for the food intake of people with an internal HLOC: an organic label actually eliminates vice food intake but has no effect on the intake of virtue food. These results show that an organic label can either increase or decrease food consumption depending on food type and HLOC, simultaneously. The findings provide managerial implications for food companies and public policy makers.

## 1. Introduction

Organic food sales increase by double digits annually, far outstripping the growth rate for the overall food market (Organic Market Analysis., 2016; Orrigo, 2016). The most widely adopted definition of “organic” was developed and promoted by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). The term “organic” refers to the particular farming system described in IFOAM's basic standards for organic agriculture. Consumers who are concerned with issues regarding health, the environment, and animal welfare prefer organically produced food. Consumer research across countries has shown that health and nutritional concerns are the most important driver behind organic food consumption (e.g., Aschemann-Witzel, Maroscheck, & Hamm, 2013; Honkanen, Verplanken, & Olsen, 2006; Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Åberg, & Sjöden, 2003).

To be considered organic, the food must be produced without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, generic engineering, growth hormones, irradiation or antibiotics. Consumers thus perceive foods labeled as organic to be healthier than conventional foods (Grankvist & Biel, 2001). Since organic food must be produced in compliance with organic principles, such food is believed to cause less

harm to the environment (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008; Gore, 2006). Thus, the topic of organic food has attracted considerable public, commercial and research interest (Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011).

Prior literature has examined who buys organic food (Grunert & Juhl, 1995; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998), why they buy it (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2013; D'Amato & Falzon, 2015; Loureiro, McCluskey, & Mittelhammer, 2001; McEachern & McClean, 2002; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998), and how much they are willing to spend on organic food (Krystallis & Chrysosoidis, 2005; Loureiro & Hine, 2002; Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). Food consumption has been found to be highly associated with such things as dieting habits (Naughton, McCarthy, & McCarthy, 2015), health problems (Kratz, Baars, & Guyenet, 2013), and a healthy lifespan (Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998). Exploring how quality cues such as organic labels influence a person's consumption becomes critical in food research.

Researchers have indicated that food consumption is easily influenced by environmental cues such as advertising (Wansink & Ray, 1996), packaging (Argo & White, 2012; Deng & Srinivasan, 2013; Wansink, 1996; Wansink, Van Ittersum, & Painter, 2004), and

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stockpiling-inducing promotions (Ailawadi & Neslin, 1998). Similar to the above environmental cues, the organic label itself is observed directly and serves as a heuristic cue in food consumption. Organic certification has a long tradition in many developed countries, and product labeling with organic certification logos is used at the point of sale as a signal to consumers that a product is, in fact, organic (Janssen & Hamm, 2012). Those organic certification logos target the final consumers (Jahn, Schramm, & Spiller, 2005). Food companies desiring to encourage consumers to consume their products will be interested in understanding how an organic label can increase such behavior. Given that consumption is susceptible to contextual factors, we expect an organic label to affect consumers' food consumption, much like the various environmental elements noted above.

This current study is interested in boundary conditions that could amplify or dampen the effects of the organic label on food consumption. We propose food type (virtue vs. vice) as one moderator associated with contextual differences. Researchers have suggested that people tend to determine food options based on a good/bad dichotomy, in which foods are either good for one's health (virtue food or "shoulds") or bad for it (vice food or "wants") (e.g., Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Rozin, Ashmore, & Markwith, 1996; Wertenbroch, 1998). Although virtue foods are good for one's health and provide utilitarian benefits to consumers, they may not possess the hedonic allure of vice foods. Since virtues and vices are defined relative to one another, virtue/vice classification exists not only in different food types (raisins vs. chocolate) but also within the same product category (drinks: orange juice vs. orange soda). Van Doorn and Verhoef (2011) examined the differences between how virtue and vice foods affect consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for organic products. They suggested that an organic claim would decrease WTP for vice food because the "wholesomeness" signaled by such a claim might spoil the pleasure and enjoyment associated with vice food consumption. On the other hand, an organic claim can positively affect consumer perceptions of the quality of virtue products. In this research, we examine the interactive effect between food type and the organic label from a different perspective: consumer food consumption.

In addition to contextual differences, the impact of individual differences is also examined. To be specific, we propose that individual differences in health locus-of-control (HLOC) moderate the impact of an organic label on consumers' perceptions and consumption of food. Drawing from social learning theory, HLOC is defined as the degree to which a person believes his/her health is controlled by internal or external factors (Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2005; Wallston & Wallston, 1982; Wallston, Wallston, & DeVellis, 1978). Individuals with an internal HLOC ("health internals") tend to believe that their health is related to their own behaviors, while those with an external HLOC ("health externals") believe that their health is controlled not by themselves but by external factors (e.g., fate, chance, luck, or powerful others). HLOC affects positive health behaviors such that health internals' belief in their control over their own health is associated with more healthy behaviors (e.g., healthy eating: Bennett, Moore, Smith, Murphy, & Smith, 1994; Helmer, Krämer, & Mikolajczyk, 2012; Psouni, Chasandra, & Theodorakis, 2016; physical exercise, fiber intake, fat avoidance, and limitation on salt intake: Ozcakir, Dogan, Bayram, & Bilgel, 2014). Health individuals are also more willing to utilize a form of technology (e.g., health apps and online trackers) to monitor or change health behaviors (Bennett, Goldstein, Gathright, Hughes, & Latner, 2017). Since consumers desire to avoid the chemicals used in conventional food production, the perceived health benefits provide the strongest motivation to purchase organic foods (McEachern & McClean, 2002; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998). Since internals believe they are responsible for their own health, they are likely to consider organic food consumption as an active form of preventative health care. Organic food is thus expected to be more attractive to health internals than to health externals.

This article contributes to the evolving stream of organic research

by pursuing answers to the following questions: Does an organic label always increase consumers' food consumption? Is it possible that the perceived healthiness of organic food will make consumers consume less when the food is considered as virtue? Will the above effects be similar regardless of a person's health locus of control (i.e., internal vs. external HLOC)? This research is conducted in a Taiwanese context, which fills a gap in the current literature and provides additional lessons regarding organic food research in non-Western settings. As it does in Western countries, a healthy lifestyle plays an important role in forming Taiwanese people's attitudes toward organic foods (Chen, 2009).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Study 1, we propose and test hypotheses regarding how food type (vice vs. virtue) moderates how an organic label affects food consumption. We also test whether the perceived healthiness of the food functions as the underlying mechanism behind perceptions regarding the organic food. In Study 2, we consider individual differences in HLOC in addition to the moderating role of food type. Different from Study 1, food intake is used as an objective measure of food consumption. Furthermore, using different samples and test products in two studies increases confidence in the generalizability of the results. The paper concludes with the major findings, contributions and limitations, along with recommendations regarding avenues of future research.

## 2. Study 1: Moderating effect of food type on food consumption

Compared with virtue foods, vice foods are typically more difficult to justify because the pleasure and enjoyment they provide (for example, the good taste of ice cream) come at the expense of long-term health (e.g., future weight gain and related health problems) (Okada, 2005; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Consumers actually overestimate the calories in "unhealthy" foods (Carels, Harper, & Konrad, 2006; Carels, Konrad, & Harper, 2007). In contrast, virtue foods are considered as more prudent since they are less gratifying and appealing in the short term but have fewer negative long-term consequences in comparison to vice foods (Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2008; Okada, 2005; Wertenbroch, 1998). Along the same lines, consumers actually underestimate the calories in "healthy" foods (Carels et al., 2006, 2007).

Since the organic label acts as an indicator of healthfulness, a vice food with an organic label tends to be perceived as more healthful than the same food without such a label (Hutchins & Greenhalgh, 1997; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998). Perceptions of healthiness tend to lower consumers' estimates of the caloric content (Provencher, Polivy, & Herman, 2009). A vice food with an organic label is expected to lead to a lower estimate of the caloric content (when compared with the same food without an organic label) because the organic label may dilute the health-harmful image of vice food. Food consumption will increase. Thus, we hypothesize as follows.

**H1.** When consumers face a vice food, an organic label will result in increased consumption of that food.

We expect the opposite for virtue food. Virtue food is perceived as not tasty (Huang & Wub, 2016; Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006), and consumption of virtue food mainly relies on the rational benefits of such food (e.g., health) (Werle, Trendel, & Ardito, 2013). Although people acknowledge the benefits of virtue products, frequent consumption of such foods can be difficult because the benefits are not experienced immediately but in the distant future (Ein-Gar, Goldenberg, & Sagiv, 2012). Since the healthy image associated with the organic label matches the healthy image of virtue food, the signal the label sends to consumers is consistent with the food's virtuous reputation. For consumers, a small serving of a virtue food with an organic label is sufficient to maintain one's health. If people tend to believe that they can eat a smaller serving of an organic virtue food and still receive the same health benefits (compared with the same food without an organic label), their food consumption will, logically,

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