



Organic consumption behavior: A social identification perspective



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ABSTRACT

Consumer demand for organic food and non-food products has been growing dramatically. This study examines organic consumption behavior from a social identification perspective. Focusing on the central role of organic consumer identification (OCI), or the extent to which individuals categorize themselves as organic consumers, this study theorizes and empirically establishes environmental consumer identification, organic product-related cognitions (i.e., organic product familiarity and trustworthiness), and their interactions as key antecedents of OCI. As importantly, we show that the positive effect of OCI on consumer loyalty to organic products is contingent upon both prevailing social norms of organic consumption and the perceived price of organic products. In establishing these relationships, this study paints a more nuanced, comprehensive and generalizable picture of what drives consumer social identification and what are its consequences in the domain of organic consumption. It offers several important implications for theory and practice.

1. Introduction

Consumer demand for organic products has been growing dramatically, worldwide (European Parliament Think Tank, 2015; Organic Trade Association, 2015); the global organic food market is projected to have an annual growth rate of over 16% during 2015–2020 (PRnewswire, 2015). Interestingly, due to the unique and distinctive values, beliefs and behaviors associated with the consumption of organic products, such as being environmental friendly (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007), consumers are increasingly using organic consumption to not just meet their functional needs (e.g., health, nutrition) but to actually enact their identities and express their core values. As Schifferstein and Ophuis (1998, p. 119) insightfully comment, organic consumption is “part of a way of life. It results from an ideology, connected to a particular value system that affects personality measures, attitudes, and consumption behavior.” Not surprisingly, then, some research has started to link organic consumption to consumers’ higher-level personal and social identity-related needs (Bartels & Reinders, 2010; Dean, Raats, & Shepherd, 2012; Krystallis, Vassallo, & Chrysosoidis, 2012). Little is known, however, about how these social identity-related processes might interact, as they must undoubtedly do, with, and even be determined by, both consumers’ organic product-related cognitions (Bauer, Heinrich, & Schäfer, 2013; Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007) and the social

pressures they feel to engage in organic consumption (Dean et al., 2012).

This paper draws upon both research on social identity and identification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Bartels & Hoogendam, 2011; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) along with that on organic consumption (Bauer et al., 2013; Hughner et al., 2007) to locate the social identity processes guiding organic consumption in the broader product- and socially-defined context of such behavior, articulating more precisely, thus, the role of these social identity processes in organic consumption. Specifically, we focus on the central role of organic consumer identification (OCI) (Bartels & Reinders, 2010, 2016), or the extent to which individuals categorize themselves as organic consumers (i.e., a group of consumers who hold similar consumption-related beliefs and values, and demonstrate a preference for organic products), theorizing environmental consumer identification, organic product-related cognitions (i.e., organic product familiarity and trustworthiness), and their interactions as key antecedents of OCI. As importantly, we examine the moderating roles of both prevailing social norms of organic consumption and the perceived price of organic products in the relationship between OCI and consumer loyalty to organic products.

In examining these relationships, our research paints a precise, nuanced, comprehensive and generalizable picture of what drives consumer social identification and what are its consequences in the domain of organic consumption. In particular, our paper contributes to

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the extant literature in two key ways. First, it advances our incipient understanding of what drives OCI (Bartels & Hoogendam, 2011) by implicating organic product-related cognitions as not only a direct antecedent of OCI but also a positive moderator of the link between multiple levels of social identification, namely, that between the broader, higher level environmental consumer identification and the more specific OCI. Aside from establishing the interactive roles of a consumer's higher-level social identity and their more specific product-related cognitions in driving organic consumption, our study sheds light on a key process – OCI – underlying the previously documented positive effects of organic product beliefs on organic purchase behavior (Hughner et al., 2007; McEachern & McClean, 2002). More generally, by explicating the interactive effect of both motivational (i.e., environmental consumer identification) and cognitive factors (i.e., organic product related cognitions) on OCI, this paper underscores the contingent and dynamic nature of this construct.

Second, this paper advances our extant sense for the consequences of OCI by establishing two key moderating factors. Building on the few studies that have documented a positive relationship between OCI, on the one hand, and organic product purchase, on the other (Bartels & Reinders, 2010, 2016), our research implicates both aspects of the social environment (i.e., social norms) and the product (i.e., the perceived price of organic products) as moderators of this positive relationship. Specifically, our finding points to social norms and OCI as substitutive mechanisms influencing organic product loyalty, with OCI having a smaller effect when social norms of organic consumption are high. The result on the moderating role of perceived price suggests, quite interestingly, that higher prices of organic products might reinforce the identity-expressive function of organic consumption, thus increasing the effect of social identification on organic product loyalty. Taken together, these findings paint, again, a more contingent picture of the OCI – organic consumption link.

Next, we draw on the literature streams at the intersection of social identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Kang, Alejandro, & Groza, 2015) and organic consumption behavior (Bauer et al., 2013; Hughner et al., 2007; Padel & Foster, 2005) to theorize about the role of OCI in organic consumption, deriving predictions about its key antecedents and outcomes. We then present the multi-country field study that tests these predictions. We end with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings, as well as limitations of our study and avenues for further research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

OCI enables individuals to express their social identities, and specifically, their consumption-related ideals and values (e.g., environmental preservation, protecting animal welfare, supporting natural, chemical-free products; Bartels & Reinders, 2010; Krystallis et al., 2012; Padel & Foster, 2005). In this section, we develop a conceptual framework delineating the antecedents and outcomes of OCI (see Fig. 1). Two categories of antecedents are identified: organic product-related cognitions (i.e., organic product familiarity and trustworthiness) and a relevant, higher-order identification (i.e., environmental consumer identification). We expect these to influence OCI both directly as well as

synergistically. On the outcomes side, we go beyond the positive main effect of OCI on consumer loyalty and purchase behavior to theorize about the distinct moderating roles of (a) social norms of organic consumption and (b) perceived price of organic products.

2.1. Antecedents of OCI

2.1.1. Organic product-related cognitions

Organic product-related cognitions, such as consumer knowledge and beliefs about the quality and environmental benefits of organic products, are significant determinants of organic consumption (Bauer et al., 2013; Hughner et al., 2007; McEachern & McClean, 2002). We expect OCI to be one unexamined, yet potent, mechanism underlying the effect of organic product cognitions on organic purchase behavior. Product-specific cognitions will influence OCI because features of organic products carry over and influence the characteristics and identity of the organic consumer group (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Park & John, 2010). In particular, research on social identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) suggests that two domain-specific cognitions, namely, organic product familiarity and organic product trustworthiness, will generate and strengthen OCI.

Organic product familiarity is defined as “the number of organic product-related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer” (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987, p. 411). Product-related experiences such as purchasing/consuming organic products and accumulating information about organic products either actively (e.g., researching or reading about organic products) or passively (e.g., being exposed to organic product display or advertisements) all lead to organic product familiarity. Organic product familiarity influences OCI because identification is an evolving process. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989), social identification develops through a wide range of symbolic interactions, through which individuals gradually construct meanings and resolve ambiguities relating to a target of identification. Socialization experiences such as interpersonal or impersonal interaction, repeated exposure, and proximity, as well as the length and intensity of such experiences, all contribute to social identification with the target entity (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). In our context, as individuals accumulate direct or indirect experiences about organic products, they will acquire a deeper understanding of the central, distinctive, and enduring features of organic products and as a result, develop a desirable schema of the organic consumer group and its identity characteristics. Therefore, organic product familiarity will increase the identity attractiveness of organic consumers, and cultivate and reinforce OCI (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In sum:

H1: Organic product familiarity has a positive effect on OCI.

Organic product trustworthiness will affect social identification because central features of products reveal identity-related characteristics of the consumers (Kleine et al., 1993; Park & John, 2010). In particular, organic product trustworthiness is inextricably linked to the perceived trustworthiness of organic consumers (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Park & John, 2010), signaling a fundamental and enduring aspect of this group's social identity, and enhancing social identification with organic consumers.

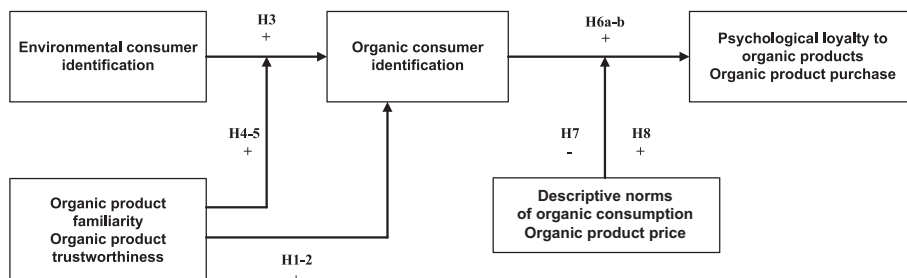


Fig. 1. Identification-Based Organic Consumption Behavior.

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