



Communicating organic food quality in China: Consumer perceptions of organic products and the effect of environmental value priming



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ABSTRACT

Consumers in emerging countries such as China play a crucial role for up-scaling improvements in the environmental impact of food production. So far little research has explored Chinese consumer reactions to organic food labels and whether Chinese consumer inferences can be favorably influenced by communication efforts. An online experiment studied the influence of the presence of organic labels as well as the influence of priming of environmental values on fruit and vegetable quality inferences. We find that Chinese consumers expect organic food to be more expensive and of a higher general quality compared to conventional food, but we do not find significantly higher health or taste inferences for organic products. When primed with environmental values, consumers with strong environmental values express higher quality and health inferences for organically labeled food. The results indicate that further efforts are needed to strengthen communication of organic food quality, and that focus should be given to the target group with strong environmental values.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Environmental challenges in food production

The world's food and agriculture sector accounts for more than a fifth of greenhouse gas emissions as well as the majority of freshwater withdrawals (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2002; Von Weizsäcker, Hargroves, Smith, Desha, & Stasinopoulos, 2009). Furthermore, the sector contributes to biodiversity loss and imbalances in the nitrogenous and phosphorus cycle, consequently impacting three of the nine earthly systems that have been identified as beyond boundaries (Rockstrom et al., 2009). The production mode of future food supplies will therefore be crucial for determining the extent of environmental impact caused by agriculture and food production. Researchers point to the decisive role that the population in emerging markets plays, given their number and increasing affluence. While greater affordable income induces greater food demands and a shift towards more resource-intensive meat-based proteins (Godfray et al., 2010), it also entails the potential of consumers increasingly being able to express

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environmental values and concerns via food choices regarded as more environmentally friendly. If a larger share of this growing population considers environmental motives in their choices, it would contribute to the 'up-scaling' of environmental protection efforts that have been called for (World Economic Forum, 2012). Probably the most established of such food categories is organic food, and it has been acknowledged by the FAO that the principles of organic production can play a role in shaping a more sustainable agriculture (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1999).

1.2. Growing food consumer concern in China

China is a major emerging market where a small but increasing interest in 'green' as well as for certified organic food has been observed during the past decade. Due to its sheer size, China already has the fourth largest organic agricultural land area, and it added the largest number of hectares to its certified land area in 2011, more than any other country (Willer, Lernoud, & Kilcher, 2013). Although organic produce is mainly exported and, depending on the source, apparently only 0.08% (Lee, 2014) or 1.5% (Landbrug, 2014) of total food consumption in China is organic, organic food consumption has increased in popularity and is said to grow to 5% of the market by 2020 (Landbrug & Fødevarer, 2014; Sirieix, Kledal, & Sulitang, 2011). Food scares such as the detection of melamine in milk powder have heightened consumer

sensibility, and food safety ranks as the third most important concern (Xiu & Klein, 2010). As a consequence, Danish dairies are currently exporting organic milk powder to China (Landbrug & Fødevarer, 2014), making it available to middle and high class consumers whose rising disposable income (Zheng, Li, & Peterson, 2013) allows them to purchase organic.

Our review of the extant literature on consumers' perception of organic food in China reveals significant theoretical and methodological gaps that warrant further research. First, while there are a number of recent survey studies that have examined Chinese consumer behavior towards and inferences about organic food (e.g. Chen & Lobo, 2012; Thøgersen & Zhou, 2012) as well as Chinese knowledge of organic labeling (Chen & Lobo, 2012), no experimental investigation regarding consumers' quality expectation of organically labeled food has been conducted. From a theoretical point of view, the first research question pertains to advancing our understanding of the impact of organic labeling on participants' taste, health, price, and health expectations. Furthermore, researchers have called for empirical studies investigating consumers' perception of food labeled as organic employing a representative sample from the general Chinese population (Thøgersen & Zhou, 2012). For such a purpose, this study used a representative sample of China.

Second, several studies have verified an increase in the Chinese concern about environmental degradation (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Loebnitz & Grunert, 2015; Shen & Saijo, 2008; Zhu, Li, Geng, & Qi, 2013), however, it is yet to be seen whether and how the growing environmental concern will translate into organic food choice. Despite suggesting that emphasizing consumers' environmental values might lead to an increase in green food consumption (Zhu et al., 2013), to our knowledge, no study yet has investigated marketing communication strategies promoting environmental friendly consumer behavior – such as organic food choice – in China. Thus, the second research question relates to whether priming environmental values when values are central to the individual, increases participants' quality expectations of organically labeled food. From a managerial point of view, the findings will be of great practical relevance for marketers when choosing the right communication strategy concerning promotion of organic food in China.

Therefore, the objective of the current experimental study is twofold: (1) to assess Chinese consumers' expectations when presented with organic food; and (2) in line with previous work on non-food products (Verplanken & Holland, 2002, television sets; Biel, Dahlstrand, & Grankvist, 2005), laundry and dishwashing detergents), to explore whether environmental values positively influence organic product expectations when environmental values are central to the individual participant, and when primed on these values.

1.3. Organic label and perception research among Chinese consumers

A number of studies have examined Chinese consumer behavior towards organic food. These first results show that consumers hold positive attitudes towards organic food, are willing to pay a price premium (Liu, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2013; Yu, Gao, & Zeng, 2014), and that Chinese consumers make inferences about organic food that differ from conventional counterparts. For instance, Thøgersen and Zhou (2012) found that Chinese consumers infer better health, taste and environmental benefits with organic foods similar to their western counterparts (Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007; Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013; Sirieix et al., 2011). Chen and Lobo (2012) identified organic labeling as a main determinant of Chinese attitudes and beliefs about organic food which in turn influences consumers' inferences about taste, health, price, and quality expectations. Furthermore, underlying reasons for rejecting organic food in China pertain to higher

prices and limited availability (Yin, Wu, Du, & Chen, 2010). This mirrors the barriers that have been identified as explaining the attitude–behavior gap observed with regard to organic in western countries (Griskevicius, Tyler, & van den Bergh, 2010; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). In line with previous studies (Thøgersen & Zhou, 2012), we expect that participants have higher taste, health, price and quality expectations of organic-labeled food products compared to non-labeled food (regular).

H1. There is a main effect of organic labeling on consumers' taste, health, price, and quality expectations, that is, consumers' taste, health, price, and quality expectations are higher for organic-labeled food products compared to non-labeled (regular).

1.4. Priming in marketing communication

Organic food production per se is a process-related attribute pertaining to credence attributes (Grunert, Bech-Larsen, & Bredahl, 2000). Consumers have no means of verifying the production method of food nor can they search for or experience the benefit; therefore they have to rely on cues such as an organic certification label. When assessing a product cue, consumers must retrieve from their memory what they already know about organic products, among other things, their supposedly beneficial effects. Depending on the context the information is embedded in or the situation that the consumer is in, different types of information will be more or less accessible (Entman, 1993). Priming refers to the activation of mental representations that frame successive information and other associated constructs in memory (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). The activated mental representations in turn serve as interpretive frames for processing subsequent information (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). If the context is purposively designed to 'prime' the consumer to activate certain information, then the assessment result will be different in the light of the 'prime'. By means of in-store advertisement or products, this priming effect can be used in marketing communication, for example, when bringing environmental motives to the forefront of consumers' considerations is desirable (e.g. purchase of green products). For instance, Biel et al. (2005) reveal that priming environmental values affects purchases of eco-labeled products in non-food contexts (e.g. laundry and dishwashing detergents). However, in a series of six studies, Verplanken and Holland (2002) demonstrate the importance of the self in the extent to which the primed mental representations affect buying intentions. That is, priming environmental values leads to value congruent behavior (e.g. making environmental product choices) only for people to whom environmental values are central to the self-concept (e.g. someone who cares for the environment). In a food context, Loebnitz, Loose, and Grunert (2015) successfully demonstrate that priming environmental values in participants who already have a high value centrality to be an effective means to increase the importance of environmental friendly product attributes in consumers' purchase decision. Therefore, in line with previous findings (Biel et al., 2005; Verplanken & Holland, 2002), priming environmental values thus may increase product expectations of organic food only among consumers for whom environmental values are central. We therefore expect a three-way interaction between priming environmental values, value centrality, and organic labeling. That is,

H2. Organic labeling affects consumers' product expectations, such that taste, health, price, and quality expectations increase among consumers primed with values related to the environment and sustainability – if environmental values are central to these consumers.

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