



Research report

Consumers' perception of organic product characteristics. A review

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ABSTRACT

Consumer interest in organic products is growing alongside a diversification of the supply. In order to serve consumers actual needs and wants regarding organic products, those involved in the market need to be informed about consumers' perception of organic products. Therefore, the state of research as regards consumers' perception of organic product characteristics, including basic and additional characteristics, product labelling, product innovations and the range of products on the market is displayed in this contribution. A comprehensive literature analysis was performed uncovering not only the state of the art in the field including employed methodology, but also research needs. Most studies are published on consumers' perception of organic products' design and labelling. A trend towards the so called 'organic-plus' positioning can be perceived, with many consumers expecting an extensive orientation towards sustainability. The diversity of product labels features prominently in related studies. The demand for reliable information, as well as the low degree of awareness of many labels amongst consumers becomes clear in these studies. To date, few results are available on consumers' perception of packaging and design of organic products, and even fewer for consumers' perception of range design. Both consumers' perception of organic product innovation and valued added services are untouched so far.

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Introduction

The upward trend in the consumption of organic foods continued throughout 2011, despite the international economic crisis. Organic consumption is greatest in the USA and Europe, but there is also a developing trend in many other countries of the world (Willer & Kilcher, 2012). Nowadays, organic products, which are here understood as organic foods which are certified as organic according to EU Regulation 834/2007 can be found in most food shops in Western European countries and the USA. In conventional supermarkets and discount stores, organic products need to compete with conventional products and their quality attributes. Conventional retail products are jumping onto the bandwagon of sustainable consumption in the broadest sense, recognizing a broad range of issues, such as animal welfare, freedom from genetically modified organisms (GMOs), rejection of additives and reduction of carbon footprint (see Warschun et al., 2009). Hand in hand with these market developments, organic products are becoming more diversified and there is growing consumer interest in more than just the 'organic quality' attribute. Ethical considerations are increasingly significant, but animal welfare, local origin and genetic modifications also play a role in the organic product

decision, on top of the core organic product attributes (see Honkanen, Verplanken, & Olsen, 2006; Zander & Hamm, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to gather the present state of knowledge on the subject of consumers' perception of organic product characteristics. In order to serve consumers' needs and wants, it is crucial that those involved in the market are informed in as much detail as possible about the perception of organic foods, especially since organic products have left their market niche (see Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007). Over the past few years, various studies focusing on individual aspects of organic consumption have been published. Currently, the only comprehensive literature review on organic consumption deals with personal determinants of organic food consumption (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & van Huylenbroeck, 2009). A comprehensive overview over consumers' perception of organic product characteristics does not exist to date. The present contribution, therefore, gives an overview of the state of research on the topic, including basic and additional characteristics, product labelling, product innovations and the range of products on the market.

The paper is structured as follows. First of all, an overview is given of the number of studies according to 'topic', the purpose of each investigation and the country of origin. Next, the current state of research is presented by topic. Each section describes the following: methodology and sample design are presented in order to be able to contextualize the studies empirically; next, results are presented and, finally, the current state of research is discussed

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and research gaps are identified. The last part of the paper puts forward conclusions and suggestions for further areas of research.

Theoretical background

In current marketing literature, a product is defined as a bundle of characteristics of benefit to the consumer (Pickton & Masterson, 2010). In order to encompass the complexity of characteristics offered by the product as a whole, it can be subdivided into three different dimensions, relating to the core value of the product, the actual product and the augmented product, see Fig. 1.

The core product includes the basic product value, which is understood to represent the main characteristics of a product (Pickton & Masterson, 2010; Strydom, 2007). However, product characteristics go far beyond the basic value only, and the core benefits of a product need to be turned into an actual product. Product quality, packaging and design of the product (including labelling) and the brand identity are all attributes that account for the actual product (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009). The augmented product is built around the actual product values. Product support services (such as warranty, after sales service and product support) are also addressed here (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009).

The product quality – referred to as product design in the following illustration – of organic food products can be subdivided into the categories of nutrition, health, sensory properties and organic properties,¹ according to Beck et al. (2012). In the following, organic properties are referred to as 'ethical properties'. Although this term includes the organic attributes of a product, it also includes further ethical attributes, such as Fair Trade or animal welfare.

The basic value of the product quality consists of nutrition and health attributes. Sensory properties and ethical properties can be referred to as the added value (see Beck et al., 2012; Böckenhoff & Hamm, 1983), as shown in Fig. 2.

The sensory properties describe important quality criteria in organic foods (Beck et al., 2012) and comprise shape, colour, taste, smell and texture. Sensory characteristics can be classified as hedonic characteristics, alongside aspects of nutrition and health (Brunso, Fjord, & Grunert, 2002). Ethical properties are also referred to as the intangible value of an organic product (Böckenhoff & Hamm, 1983), and can be understood as the 'image impact' of the product on consumers. Attributes of product quality can be assigned to both the basic and the added product value.

Products are further characterized by the distinction between search, experience and credence characteristics. The latter is especially important for organic products since the ethical property characteristic of 'production method' is also a credence characteristic, in the sense that the final consumer is unable to verify whether the product is produced organically or not. The same holds for health characteristics. Experience characteristics are product attributes, such as taste, which can only be ascertained after experiencing the product. Search characteristics, for example the appearance of a food product, can be experienced prior to purchase (Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunso, 2004).

Methodology and overview of the studies

A comprehensive literature search was performed in order to identify the current state of the art as regards consumer purchasing behaviour in general (see Hamm et al., 2011). The literature which serves as a basis for this paper aims at reflecting the cur-

¹ Beck, Kahl, and Liebl (2012) also included authenticity/traceability in their definition, neither of which is exactly related to product quality. Therefore, these properties are excluded from the theoretical background which serves as a basis for this current analysis. Rather, the subject is treated in the chapter on labelling.

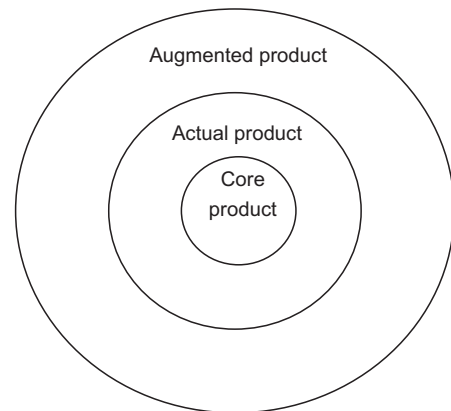


Fig. 1. Product values. Source: Armstrong & Kotler, 2009

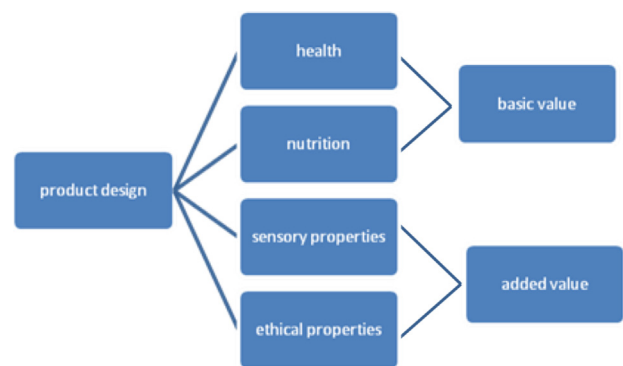


Fig. 2. Product design and values. Source: Own illustration based on Armstrong & Kotler, 2009; Böckenhoff & Hamm, 1983; Beck et al., 2012

rent state of research into product policy – to the extent relevant to the examination of consumers' purchasing and consumption behaviour, and was published in the English or German language. Studies that deal with business management perspectives were not included. German and English publications dated between 2000 and June 2011, and focusing on empirical studies with consumers, were selected as a first step. So as to ensure timeliness, the search period was extended to July 2012 in a second step. Grey literature (presentations, scientific reports, etc.) was also included, where such publications met the necessary data source requirements. The following databases were chosen: AgEcon, Cab Abstracts, EBSCO, EconPapers, Emerald Insights, NAL Catalogue, Science Direct, Web of Science, Organic Eprints, BÖLN, Ecnis and Greenpilot.

In order to structure the literature overview, product policy 'subtopics' were chosen on the basis of the appropriate marketing literature (see Methodology and overview of the studies on the theoretical background). These subtopics cover the fields of product policy which are most relevant, and important in recording consumer behaviour. Table 1 gives an overview of these subtopics and an explanation of the areas covered. The subtopic 'product design' is structured further according to the characteristics of organic products described in Methodology and overview of the studies. Search terms for the single subtopics were selected using prevalent marketing literature and these are also shown in 2; equivalent German search terms were also applied.

Only a fraction of the studies identified was not available at all and had to be excluded from the examination. Others were not used in the analysis because they did not fulfil the methodological

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