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Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jretconser

Organic food as self-presentation: The role of psychological motivation in older consumers' purchase intention of organic food

Jiyoung Hwang

Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Hospitality and Tourism, Bryan School of Business & Economics, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, 350 Bryan Building, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Older consumers
Organic food
Self-presentation
Food safety concern

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify key motives behind organic food purchase intention of older consumers. We incorporated an under researched motive, self-presentation, a psychological motivation, with food safety concerns, environmental concerns, and ethical consumer-identity, in order to investigate its relative importance in older consumers' behavioral intentions. The results showed that self-presentation and food safety concerns are meaningful motives for older consumers' purchase intentions, while environmental concerns and ethical self-identity do not improve their buying intention. In addition, a comparison with younger consumers revealed additional insights into the role of ethical consumer-identity.

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1. Introduction

The market share of organic products has been growing rapidly. For example, the organic food market has become a \$26.7 billion business in the United States, with 7.7% growth in 2009, despite the struggling economy (Organic Trade Association, 2011). Many retailers have identified this market as a key growth opportunity, which can explain why they offer organic products, and even develop private brands in organic product categories.

Despite retailers' desire and increasing offerings of organic products, there have been several obstacles to consumers' organic product purchase. The most common barriers are premium price, limited availability (e.g., Jolly, 1991; Lea and Worsley, 2005; Magnusson et al., 2001) and consumers' skepticism with regard to organic products being of higher quality (Vindigni et al., 2002). These obstacles are recognized as reasons for the so-called attitude-behavior gap concerning ethical consumption of such as organic product purchases, that is, consumers' positive attitude toward ethical consumption is not always translated into their purchase decisions. However, the introduction of increasing numbers of private label organic products into the market resolves the issue of their higher price and limited availability. Thus, a positive projection is expected for organic market growth and therefore, an understanding of the needs and the contributing factors of consumer purchase of those products is imperative.

The foci of prior research into organic product consumption

included identifying motivations behind their purchase to understand the "whys" of consumers' choices. The key drivers previously identified include health benefits and environmental concerns (e.g., Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Tsakiridou et al., 2008; Wandel and Bugge, 1997), as well as safety concerns regarding conventional foods (e.g., Baker et al., 2004; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008). However, despite the valuable insights provided by previous studies, at least two research gaps exist, which must be addressed. That is, previous studies have neglected psychological motives and an important consumer group of organic products, older consumers. In particular, initial psychological motives, such as self-presentation, deserve attention given their impact on consumers' product choices. Product choices reflect the image of the self, thereby products can be used as a tool for presenting the self (Belk, 1988; Goffman, 1959). This possibility that psychological motives can play an important role in organic product consumption has not been researched in this context.

Second, the characteristics of older consumers (e.g., a greater disposable income and less time constraints than younger consumers) foster their emergence as a growing population of ethical consumers who attempt to purchase ethical products, such as organic foods. Attracting and increasing the share of older consumers can produce greater profitability for retailers, given that organic buyers are "a small core of big spenders" (Cottingham and Winkler, 2007 as cited in van Herpen et al., 2012, p. 294). Although older consumers may have specific needs for ethical products, including organic foods, this important consumer group has been neglected in previous research (Carrigan et al., 2004; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2000). A few studies have noted the importance of older

E-mail address: j_hwang3@uncg.edu

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2015.01.007>
0969-6989/© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

consumers, or age differences in the consumption of organic and fair-trade products, but the use of the qualitative research approach has resulted in a dearth of quantitative studies (e.g., Bäckström et al., 2003; van Herpen et al., 2012). To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has comprehensively examined psychological and other motives in the context of older consumers' intention to buy organic foods.

Therefore, this study examines the role of a psychological motive (i.e., self-presentation), along with other motives (food safety concerns, environmental concerns, and ethical self-identity) that have been identified in previous organic food studies. The current research demonstrates the relative importance of these variables in stimulating older consumers' consumption of organic foods. Although the focus of this research is older consumers, we collected data from younger consumers additionally, in order to validate and to test the model. To our knowledge, this is the first study to clarify the importance of psychological motives in predicting older consumers (vs. younger consumers') intention to purchase organic foods. Therefore, the results enrich our understanding of key drivers of older consumers' organic food purchase and the efficacy of an approach tailored to target consumer groups. In the following section, we first present a discussion on the importance of older consumers in ethical consumption.

2. The importance of older consumers in ethical consumption

Ethical consumption is "the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs" (Carrigan et al., 2004, p. 401). It can be reflected in consumers' product choices of environmentally-friendly or organic products (Carrigan et al., 2004). Previous research has shown that socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, and income, affect consumers' perceptions and responses to organic food consumption (Magnusson et al., 2001; Wandel and Bugge, 1997). For instance, higher income, higher level of education, and middle or older age have a positive impact on consumers' purchasing behavior (e.g., Magnusson et al. 2001; Ngobo 2011). Using French retail data, Ngobo (2011) reported that high-level occupation, higher income, greater level of education, and older age encourage consumers' organic product purchase, while the working female variable has a negative impact. Magnusson et al. (2001) showed demographic differences in Swedish consumers' perceptions and responses to organic foods purchase. That is, women and young consumers (18–25 years) had positive attitudes, although their purchase frequency was low. However, women and older consumers exhibited stronger beliefs with regard to the healthiness of organic foods than men and younger consumers. Tsakiridou et al. (2008) found that consumers who are over the age of 51 years exhibit a more positive attitude toward organic foods than younger consumers.

Overall, these studies suggest that older consumers are an important group, with regard to organic product consumption. These individuals, with more disposable income and less time constraints than younger consumers, are more likely to be involved in ethical consumption (Carrigan et al., 2004; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2000). In addition, health concerns are more important to older than younger consumers, so they are more likely to be interested in organic food consumption (Wandel and Bugge, 1997). Sociologically, consumers feel greater involvement and responsibility as they get older (Roberts, 1996). Thus, older consumers form a stronger ethical citizenship and may have specific needs for ethical products (Carrigan et al., 2004).

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that younger consumers, characterized as having lower disposable income, a lower level of education, and lower social status, appear to have a great

interest in ethical consumption, including the purchasing of organic products (Horovitz, 2006; Oblea, 2009). However, other studies have found that although younger consumers are more environmentally conscious, this does not always promote purchase, due to their lower purchasing power (Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002; Wandel and Bugge, 1997). In summary, the findings of previous studies are inconsistent, so an in-depth understanding of older consumers (vs. younger consumers) is required, and was the focus of the present study.

3. The proposed model and hypotheses

3.1. Self-presentation

Self-presentation is a component of self-identity, the goal of which is impression management of the self in social settings. Thus, self-presentation often encompasses manipulation of signs or representation of the self, depending on social environment, which often makes self-presentation contextual (Goffman, 1959; Wiley, 1994). Notably, in a similar manner to luxury products or expressing the self on a personal web page, food can be used as a tool for self-presentation in different social settings where the meaning of products are understood by members of society (e.g., Bäckström et al., 2003; Belk, 1988; Mori et al., 1987; Schau and Gilly, 2003). For example, in the early 2000s, organic foods were perceived as "new", so their adoption aligned with the image of innovation adoption (Bäckström et al., 2003). Organic food purchase can deliver a self-image that is in accordance with the general attributes of organic foods, such as being healthier, having a better taste, being more expensive, being more ethical, and being better for the environment than conventional foods (e.g., Bäckström et al., 2003; Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002; Makatouni, 2002). Such images of organic foods are used to portray the self-image, regarding the way of defining the self and the way of connecting the self with other members of society (Kleine et al., 1995). In these respects, older consumers' choices of organic foods can be a positive signal of the self, either in private or in public settings.

Moreover, when a behavior (i.e., organic food-buying) is perceived as socially desirable, that is, contributing to societal well-being, individuals' motivations to present the self-image in such way can be increased. In the context of the present study, it means that the impact of self-presentation motive on purchase intention would be greater. More specifically, the perception of social desirability of organic consumption can accentuate the desire to present the self through practicing socially desirable consumption. These discussions led to the hypotheses that the self-presentation motive can be an important driver of older consumers' organic food purchase intention, and the proposed effect would be greater for those who perceive organic food-buying as more socially desirable. Therefore, we propose

Hypothesis 1. Self-presentation will have a positive impact on older consumers' purchase intent, with regard to organic foods.

Hypothesis 2. The impact of the self-presentation motive on purchase intention will be greater for those who perceive organic food-buying as more socially desirable.

3.2. Food safety concerns

Food safety concerns have arisen around the issues of residues in food from pesticides, fertilizers, or any types of artificial additives (Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008). Previous research has consistently found that consumers who are concerned with the

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