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REGE - Revista de Gestão

REGE  
Revista de Gestão

REGE - Revista de Gestão xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

<http://www.regeusp.com.br>

Sustainability and Management

## The meaning of the organic certification label for the consumer: a cluster analysis

*O significado dos selos de certificação orgânica para o consumidor: uma análise de cluster*

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Received 17 April 2016; accepted 22 August 2016

### Abstract

Academia has been analyzing organic certification labels for at least 10 years, with emphasis on their importance and level of knowledge. However, little has been written about the associations and meanings they have for consumers. This article aims to study this meaning through a quantitative research, *survey* type, with 388 respondents. The data were analyzed through a *cluster analysis* which revealed the existence of three customer groups, according to the meaning assigned to the labels. The three segments were called “Greeners”, “GMO-Freers” and “Don’t Carers”. The first group, the “Greeners”, is the largest (46.6%), and brings greater association with the meanings “sustainable agriculture” and “environmentally friendly” and is associated with older people. The second, the “GMO-Freers”, presents closer association with the meaning “It does not make use of genetically modified/transgenic seeds” and is related to people who have already done post-graduation courses (24.7% of respondents). Finally, the third, “Don’t Carers”, (28.7%), shows lower association to the label’s meanings in general, and is also more concentrated in an elite group of consumers. The research comes to the conclusion that the label’s meanings may change according to different consumer profiles. On theoretical grounds the present study fills a gap in the literature in a way that it deepens a first analysis of the label’s meaning, by reaching a second level of consumer attributions, and revealing the need for understanding this meaning among different groups. Based on the consumer behavior model presented by Kotler and Keller (2012), it is possible to show how consumers’ psychological aspects can be influenced by social characteristics in the way the groups perceive organic labels. The practical contributions to manufacturers and certifying agencies of organic products are also discussed.

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**Keywords:** Consumer behavior; Organic certification; Organic labels; Conscious consumption; Cluster analysis

### Resumo

A academia tem analisado os selos de certificação orgânica nos últimos 10 anos, com ênfase em sua importância e seu nível de conhecimento. No entanto, pouco tem sido escrito sobre as associações e os significados que eles têm para os consumidores. Este artigo tem como objetivo estudar esse significado por meio de uma pesquisa quantitativa, tipo *survey*, com 388 pesquisados. Os dados foram analisados por meio de uma *cluster analysis* que revelou a existência de três grupos de consumidor, de acordo com o significado atribuído aos selos. Os três segmentos foram chamados de “Sustentável/ambiental”, “Sem transgênicos” e “Baixo significado”. O primeiro grupo, “Sustentável/ambiental”, o de maior tamanho na pesquisa (46,6%), traz maior associação com os significados “agricultura sustentável” e “respeita o meio ambiente” e está associado a pessoas mais velhas. O segundo, “Sem transgênicos”, apresenta maior associação com o significado “Não faz uso de sementes geneticamente modificadas/transgênicas” e está relacionado a pessoas de renda mais alta, que já fizeram cursos de pós-graduação *lato sensu* (24,7% dos pesquisados). Por fim, o terceiro, “Baixo significado” (28,7%), mostra menor associação com os significados dos selos, de forma geral, e também está mais concentrado em um

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Peer Review under the responsibility of Departamento de Administração, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade da Universidade de São Paulo – FEA/USP.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rege.2016.08.001>

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grupo elitizado de consumidores. A conclusão da pesquisa é que o significado dos selos pode ser diferente para consumidores de perfis diversos. Em termos teóricos, o presente estudo preenche um *gap* na literatura no sentido de que aprofunda uma primeira análise do significado, atinge um segundo nível de atribuição do consumidor e revela a necessidade do entendimento do significado para diferentes grupos. Com base no modelo de comportamento do consumidor apresentado por Kotler e Keller (2012), é possível mostrar como aspectos psicológicos dos consumidores podem ser influenciados por características sociais no modo como o grupo percebe os selos orgânicos. As contribuições práticas para os produtores e os certificadores de produtos orgânicos também são discutidas.

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*Palavras-chave:* Comportamento do consumidor; Certificação orgânica; Selos orgânicos; Consumo consciente; Cluster analysis

## Introduction

Consumerism is a cultural pattern that causes people to find meaning, satisfaction and acknowledgment mainly through the consumption of goods and services. But its expansion also causes a transformation, by the human activity, of the Earth natural functions in such a way that the ability of the ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted (Worldwatch Institute, 2015). In this context, rapid and profound changes need to be made in order to avoid potential and negative social and environmental consequences. For Instituto Akatu (2013), the logic of the company's relationship with the market depends on the way market players – and most particularly the consumers – will value the companies. Despite all the debate concerning more sustainable products, several studies show that many people are unaware on how their buying attitude impacts the environment and society, but who would be willing to contribute to build a more sustainable society. When it comes to changing the buying habits, these consumers still appear to not realize the influence they have with their choice power (Fontenelle, 2006; Instituto Akatu, 2013).

In view of this debate, how to make the choice for sustainable products become easier? If the consumer has clear information at the point of sale, could they make more conscious choices? What is the role of the products sustainable certifications as an additional source of information which influences the buying decision? Hamza and Dalmarco (2012) found that even among respondents with attitudes more targeted on sustainability, i.e. more conscious consumers (save water and electric power, separate garbage for recycling, use returnable bags in supermarkets etc.), the level of knowledge and the certification labels use, in general, are quite low.

To contribute to the theoretical expansion of this theme, this article intends to make a reflection on sustainable certifications and their relevance for the conscious consumption and for the businesses. For this, the specific theme of organic products was chosen in order to assess the certification issue in a well-defined market and, in some ways, better known by the general public, as pointed out by the research of Hamza and Dalmarco (2011), which showed that 70% of respondents claimed to have already heard about organic products labels, being these, along with the label of the Abrinq Foundation,<sup>1</sup> the certifications that

obtained the highest percentage of knowledge from among all the surveyed certifications.

Thus, the research question-problem was established as “What is the meaning of the organic certification label to the consumer?” with the following specific objectives: (i) define the labels main meanings for consumers; and (ii) segment the consumers according to the meaning of the labels assigned by them.

The three main organic certification labels of Brazil will be used, being two of them (Ecocert and IBD) managed by companies with the same name, which were identified by Voltolini (2010). The “Orgânico Brasil” label, in turn, is an official instrument for identification of organic products, managed by the Brazilian Government (Portal Brasil, 2012).

Finally, in this article, “consumer” will be considered as the agent that besides the act of consuming products and services will make judgments and simple and/or complex choices about these products and services. It will be considered consumer every person who does shopping for the house in person at least once a month, on channels like supermarkets, hypermarkets, grocery stores, street markets, organic products markets and stores that only sell on the wholesale.

## Related theory and literature

### *Sustainable certifications*

Environmental certifications were created as a market self-regulation mechanism, and their expected impact in organizations is to encourage systematic and constant occupation of management with process management systems which are sustainable, of environmental audit and related with the life cycles of their products (Magrini, 1999 as cited in Bufoni, Muniz, & Ferreira, 2009).

The ISO Norm 14024 (“environmental labels and declarations”) was launched in 1999 as a complement to the ISO Norm 14000, aiming at standardizing the principles, practices and the key features related to the environmental labels, according to the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN, 2004). This Norm distinguishes the green labels in three different

<sup>1</sup> Nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the defense of rights and the citizenship exercising of children and teenagers.

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