



Research report

Consumers' purchase of organic food products. A matter of convenience and reflexive practices[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the purchase of organic food products by consumers and to explore the main factors driving this process. This paper uses evidence from 16 in-depth interviews with consumers in Denmark carried out in 2008–2009. On the basis of the analysis two broad concepts are suggested: convenience behaviours and reflexive practices. Convenience behaviours are characteristic of pragmatic organic consumers. This type of shopping behaviour requires organic foods to be available in the local supermarket, they have to be clearly visible (preferably with an eco-label), and the price differential vis-à-vis conventional products have to be minimal. The analysis also showed that politically/ethically minded consumers have reflexive practices when purchasing organic food products: health considerations, ethical considerations (animal welfare), political considerations (environmentalism) and quality considerations (taste) play an important part for these consumers. Reflexive shopping practices can be sparked by life events (e.g. having children), “shocking” news about conventional food products and similar events, and news capable of creating a “cognitive dissonance” among consumers. The Danish case illustrates that the government needs to actively implement reforms and promote activities which make organic products a convenient choice for the pragmatic oriented consumer if their market share is to increase substantially.

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Introduction

This study tries to address the following question: What are the main factors explaining consumers' choice of organic vs. non-organic foodstuffs, and can these factors be categorized into broader concepts? The ambition of this study is thus to enhance our understanding of the factors which influence the purchase of organic food. This complexity is recognized in the field as a problem which blocks the effectiveness of deductive analysis (Midmore et al., 2005).

This paper makes use of an explorative approach and will focus specifically on Denmark where the trend over the last 20 years has been that an increasing number of Danish consumers have become occasional and regular buyers of organic foods resulting in a very high proportion of organic consumers compared to other European countries (Lund & O'Doherty Jensen, 2008; Torjusen et al., 2004). It has been claimed that organic consumption in Denmark has become “normalized” (Kjærnes & Holm, 2007). The purchase of

organic products is normal for Danes; only 8–9% of Danes never buy organic food according to survey data (Kjærnes & Holm, 2007). The growth in the market has in particular been among more pragmatic consumers for whom ethical and political considerations play a lesser role than typically seen in the area (Lund & O'Doherty Jensen, 2008). This makes Denmark an interesting case since it can show us the main factors driving organic food purchase in a very mature market, a type of market which could become more frequent in the future.

The volume of research in recent years directed at trying to understand organic consumers and their behaviour has been immense (Hughner et al., 2007). This can mainly be explained by the fact that organic foods are occupying an ever more central position in the global food market and in global consumption patterns. The global production of organic food is expected to grow substantially, and the organic market is frequently regarded as one of the biggest growth markets in the food industry (Baker, 2004; Gifford & Bernard, 2005; Murphy, 2006).

Much of the recent literature has focused on the question: Who is the organic food consumer? (Chrysosoidis & Krystallis, 2005; Torjusen et al., 2004; Wier et al., 2008). Studies using demographic profiling have found that demographic characteristics are effective in describing the typical organic consumer. Thus, in general, the organic consumer is a mature female with children living at home (Hughner et al., 2007). Many studies have also tried to find the most

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important motivations in purchasing organic products (Baker, 2004; Chinnici et al., 2002; Honkanen et al., 2006; Magnusson et al., 2003). Many studies have found health and nutritional concerns to be the most important factors influencing organic food purchase (Honkanen et al., 2006; Magnusson et al., 2003). Superior taste, environmental concerns, food safety, animal welfare, and supporting the local economy have also been found to be important factors in explaining consumer attitudes towards organic food (Hughner et al., 2007). Other studies have focused on the factors limiting the purchase of organic foods: limited availability, high price, lack of trust in organic labels and authorities, and insufficient knowledge of organic foodstuffs (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002; Honkanen et al., 2006; Hughner et al., 2007).

The existing literature sheds light on a number of key issues and increases our understanding of shopping behaviour regarding organic food. At the same time, it also points to gaps in our understanding. The literature is mainly based on survey methods (Midmore et al., 2005). As a result, much of the literature is not geared to understanding the complexity of organic food purchase (McEachern & McClean, 2002). How can we understand the main motivation of new and more pragmatic consumers of organic food products as opposed to consumers driven by political and ethical motives? Qualitative methods, as applied in this study, provide a potentially deeper insight into shopping behaviour than quantitative studies and could help us in understanding this. However, qualitative studies of organic food shopping are often micro-level studies limited to the private sphere (Kjærnes & Holm, 2007) and do not normally include the contextual factors forming shopping practices. As a result, it is difficult to understand how private shopping practices are affected by changes in markets, politics and culture. The aim of this study is to analyse both the personal and the contextual factors explaining organic consumers' shopping practices in order to get a better picture of the complex factors involved. Shopping practice is understood as both the decision process and the acts of people involved in buying products. The main question of the paper is what characterizes the two main groups of organic minded consumers in Denmark, the politically/ethically minded consumers and the more pragmatic consumers who seem to be growing in numbers? Method section of this paper describes the data underlying the study and the methodological considerations behind the data collection process. Results section presents the empirical results of the study, and Discussion section discusses these results in a broader and more theoretical context. Finally, Concluding remarks section presents the conclusion and sketches avenues for further research.

Method

The data were obtained from 16 in-depth interviews with consumers, as part of a larger research program, "Consumer Demand for Organic Foods. Domestic and Foreign Market Perspectives" (ICROFS, 2008; O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008; Wier et al., 2005, 2008). The overall objective of this research program is to explain the demand for organic food products at the household level, focusing on the extent to which changes in demand for organic food products can be accounted for by numerous factors, including changes in the way customers perceive these products.

In-depth interviews were used to address the following research questions:

- How do consumers form a meaningful shopping practice and what part do the availability, price and quality of organic food products play in this?
 - How do consumers' general views of society affect the way they view organic food products?
 - How is the attitude of the individual consumer to organic food products affected by social interactions within the household, eco-labels, the mass media and life events?
- A total of 16 interviews were conducted in 2008–2009 and form the basis of the analysis. The interviews were conducted with the entire family, wherever practically possible, giving a total of 22 respondents; 20 adults and 2 children. This strategy was chosen because the family dynamic in purchase decisions and practices has been shown to be of central importance and the interview setting ideally should reflect this social embeddedness (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). Social embeddedness refers to the social connectedness of individuals to others in their social environments (Barrera, 1986).
- The interviews focused specifically on recent shopping trips to the supermarket or food stores in order to produce data embracing shopping practices. In the interviews the respondents were specifically asked to describe which types of food product they had bought on their last shopping trip. This ensures that the analysis is based on concrete descriptions of practical events, an important point in the recent literature (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). This methodology helps to ensure that statements from respondents are in accordance with what respondents actually do.
- The interviews were quite open and flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of how the specific interviews developed. This approach is vital to the research project since it focuses on how respondents attach meaning to organic food products and the interviewer should avoid influencing this semantic process too much by structuring the interview in a certain way. Consumers often want to look modern and "reasonable" and may give a socially desirable answer, especially in an area like organic consumption which has a strong element of political correctness (Köster, 2003). In order to try to avoid this, the interviews were general in nature, not focused explicitly on organic foods.
- The interviews were structured around the following themes:
- The last shopping trip – What did you buy?
 - Meanings attached to food products – Why did you buy it?
 - Changes in shopping patterns – What made you change your shopping routines?
 - Organic food labelling – How trustworthy do you find various organic food labels?
- A screening questionnaire administered by telephone interview was developed and employed for the purpose of recruiting respondents who subsequently participated in a personal interview. The recruitment criteria were designed in order to ensure that there was a suitable spread of respondents on the most decisive segmentation variables and all relevant variations in shopping behaviour thus could be included in the study. The segmentation variables used for recruitment were: urbanization, type of household, education, gender, and age. The level of urbanization has been shown to be vital for understanding organic food consumption (O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008), and, in order to ensure that both urban and rural areas were represented in the study, two geographical areas in Denmark were chosen as recruitment areas: Copenhagen and Odsherred (a rural area 100 km from Copenhagen). Type of household is also recognized as a central variable for understanding organic food consumption (Wier et al., 2008), and quotas were designed in order to ensure that families with children (under 15 years and living at home), single households, and couples without children were included in the study. Education has also been shown to be an important element in explaining organic food consumption (Wier et al., 2008; O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008), and, as a result, we designed quotas

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