

THE INTERDEPENDENCY OF ECOLOGICAL AND HEALTH ISSUES IN THE CHOICE OF ORGANIC FOODS

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In the last two decades the number of the studies on actual and potential consumer's behavior toward the organic foods has been increased considerably. The main issues investigated by these studies are concentrated among themes like motivation, purchasing intention, barriers of the adoption, and their impact on the marketing strategy and operational tasks in an organization. Most of the studies in this field appeal to the one of the most influential behavioral intention model, namely to the theory of planned behavior. In an organic food context the researchers try to adopt this model including some specific aspects. In this paper, based on a brief literature review, we propose a conceptual model for the organic food buying intention. In our structure the two key purchasing drivers, the health and environmental concerns are interrelated, and the last one exert their impact on the buying decision through the health attitude. This paper presents the argument for this proposed model. The proposed model, after testing it, could serve as a way of harmonizing the different attribute and benefit-related messages to the consumers' motivations.

Keywords consumer behavior, theory of planned behavior, organic food

JEL classification D12, M31

Introduction

In the last two decades the number of the studies on actual and potential consumer's behavior toward the organic foods has been increased considerably. A wide range of the specialists are interested on this topic, from the marketers to the regional and rural development specialist, from the governmental organisms to the profit oriented sector. The main issues investigated by these studies are concentrated among themes like motivation, purchasing intention, barriers of the adoption, and their impact on the marketing strategy and operational tasks in an organization.

According to the EC council regulation No. 834/2007 organic products are those which coming from organic production. This regulation presents requirements for the production systems. In the agricultural production and in the processing phase the usage of pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers, genetically modified organisms, antibiotics, hormones, artificial additives, components, colorants or even conservants are minimized or forbidden. The processing phase should be mild to preserve all naturally beneficial components, such as vitamins, minerals or other useful enzymes and organisms. The definitions given by the authorities, such as EC or WHO, are focused on the production process, phase which could not be observed by the consumers. They should have trust in the certification bodies and in their signals to buy organic food products.

Regarding the consumers studies, the ecological and health concerns are the most mentioned factors motivating consumers to choose an organic product. In some studies or in case of certain segments the ecological features has higher impact, while the others indicate the prominence of the health concerns.

The environmental friendly (consumer) behavior is often characterized as ethical or moral behavior, driven by the social norms and the moral considerations. In these days many of the human's activities of their way of the life are connected to a consumption context. Taking a lunch, wearing, spending their free time, working at the workplace or simply living in a house, all of these activities have an impact on the environment. In the same time, the health issue is one of

the timeliest topics covered by the society, economy and governmental sector. The healthy living and avoiding health risks are endless source for inspiration for product innovation and advertising message design (Luomala, Paasovaara and Lehtola 2006). Both of them have gained the interest of the consumers, the policy makers and the actors of economy as well. In this paper we propose a modified planned behavior model for a further research, which includes the ecological and health concerns and the interrelation between them. There is a connection between these two aspects. Ecology means the health of the living area, which indirectly has an impact on the humans' health. Protecting the environment, indirectly we protect ourselves and our family's health. Even so, due to their longer time perspective of the positive effects, the environmental concern's influence on organic food choice is tempered comparing to the health issues.

1. Main concepts

1.1. Healthy and ecological attributes of the organic food

Previous researches identifies the health and ecological issues as key motivating factors of the organic food choice (Cicia, Del Giudice and Ramunno 2009; Essoussi and Zahaf 2008). In this chapter we underline the nature and the similarities of these factors in order to found a possible interdependency of them. These factors have dominance among the motivation factors. Organic consumers view the chemicals and pesticides used in conventional food products as being environmentally harmful, while organic foods are perceived as being environmentally friendly.

As we pointed above, the definitions given by the authorities for the organic products are concentrated on the producing procedure. From the consumers' viewpoint, the organic food product has a range of observable and unobservable attributes. The literature call the observable attributes either search attributes, if they can be tested before the acquisition, or experience attributes, if they can be evaluated only after the purchasing, during consumption or use. Search attributes are the package's design, the price, experience attributes could be the taste, freshness, and short-term health effects. However, the key attributes of the organic products are of the credence nature, which means that they could be evaluated in a short run neither after nor before their consumption. To this category belong the health and the ecological features near the animal welfare issue and the local origin (Bonti-Ankomah and Yiridoe, 2006). The consumers can't verify easily if these attributes are true or fake, they are dependent on the third party certifications (Cole and Harris 2010). So, as the nature of the attributes the healthy and ecologically friendly attributes belongs to the credence category, and therefore they need trust from the consumer in order to become motivating factors.

The literature of the organic food consumer behavior indentifies two types of motivational factors: egoistic and altruistic drivers. The egoistic motivations refer to the personal benefits conferred by the use or consumption of the products, while the altruistic motivations refer to the considerations which influence the decision by their effect on a larger community. The first category cover the health concerns, the effect of the fashion, the better taste and higher nutritional value. Altruistic motivating factors are the environmental sensitivity, animal welfare and local farmers' support. The majority of the studies underline the health issues as primary motivating factors of the organic food choice (Chinnici, D'Amico and Pecorino 2002; Ureña, Bernabéu and Olmeda 2008; Tsakiridou, et al. 2008). The main reason within this perception is the avoidance of the artificial additives, stabilizers, colorants and sweeteners in the conventional prepared foods, the pesticides and insecticides, genetically modified component in the conventional agriculture.

Let's see the most common motivational framework elaborated by Maslow. From a motivational viewpoint these two can be positioned on different levels. While the health issues represent somehow a form of physiological and safety motivational level, the pure ecological concerns could be included on a higher level in the Maslow-s piramyd. As we see this distance between the

two motivational factors it seems to be unusual the researchers' result according to them these two motivational areas has a similar impact on the organic food choice.

As the readiness to react to these two attributes the literature define and study two type of consumer habit: health and ecological consciousness. These motivational, more complex behaviors are used often as determinants of the organic buying behavior. Michaelidou and Hassan (2008) define health-conscious consumers as those who "are aware and concerned about their state of well-being and are motivated to improve and/or maintain their health and quality of life, as well as preventing ill health by engaging in healthy behaviours and being self-conscious regarding health". They tend to be aware of, and involved with, nutrition and physical fitness. An ethical or green consumer is ecologically conscious and tends to buy products that are environmentally friendly and not harmful to the environment or society

1.2. The Theory of Planned Behavior

The TPB is one of the most utilized, discussed and influential conceptual frameworks designed to describe human action. An overall support of this theory is offered by Armitage and Conner (2001) in a meta-analysis of the 161 researches. The central dependent variable is consumer intention, which is an indication of a person's readiness to behave in a certain way (Ajzen, 1985), for instance, the intention to buy organic products. The TPB identifies three antecedents of intention: the attitude toward behavior (Ab), subjective norm (Sn) and the perceived behavioral control (Pbc). It has been used successfully in many studies regarding the organic food purchasing behavior as well, including the buying intentions and its antecedent.

The predictor power of the attitude toward an organic context action has been underline by many studies (Magnusson et al. 2001; Chen 2007; Arvola et al. 2008; Gianluigi, et al. 2010; Aertsens et al. 2011). The innovativeness for most of these studies based on TPB has been represented by various forms of the antecedents and factors which influence or shape the attitudes, the buying intention or the correlation between these two. Tarkiainen and Sundqvist (2005) tested the TPB in an organic purchase context, and the emphasis was placed on the role of the subjective norms. Practically they defined the subjective norm as an antecedent of the attitude toward behavior. The result was significant. Arvola et al. (2008) included to the TPB the affective and moral attitude as drivers for organic purchase. Michaelidou et al. (2008) used a simplified TPB without Sn and Pbc. As antecedents of the attitude toward behavior, were proposed the health consciousness, ethical self identity (including ecological consciousness) and the food safety. He found that all of these factors affect positively the attitude toward behavior, but only the ecological consciousness influence directly the purchasing intention. Aertsens et al. (2011) included in their TPB model the influence of the objective and subjective product knowledge.

2. The proposed model

Based on TPB model and its derived version for the organic food choice we propose a model which includes the attitudes toward the health and the environmental concerns. Our hypothesis is the ecologic attitude exerts his impact trough the health one.

We examined papers about consumers' behavior toward organic food. We considered both the quantitative and the qualitative data based studies. Studies based on quantitative data did not analyze the correlation or the interdependence of these two issues. Generally, they set up a top list of the purchasing motives, or they handle them as two of the components of the general attitude. Usually the health concern is more important than the environment (Chinnici, D'Amico and Pecorino 2002; Ureña, Bernabéu and Olmeda 2008; Tsakiridou, et al. 2008; Cicia, Del Giudice and Ramunno 2009), which is understandable regarding the dominance of the egoistic motivating factors. The ecological concern is present mainly in social norm, and a part of the attitudes. The animal welfare is often included in ecological concerns (Honkanen, Verplanken and Olsen 2006).

In case of the organic foods there are some studies based on the qualitative data, however most of the researches apply quantitative methods. In our case, the qualitative studies could help us to base hypothesis and make clear how the people are thinking on the universe of the organic food attributes. For these the laddering interviews and means-and chains can offer a clear draw.

In Makatouni's (2002) research this dependence of the human's health on the environment's health is shown through the animal welfare concern. The environmental value chain does not, but the animal welfare value chain shows a health-related end (healthier animals → responsibility for family's and own well-being and health). Generally the laddering interviews discovered independent chains in which the environmental and/or animal and health issues appear as terminal values, in distinct value-chains.

Zanoli and Naspetti (2002) in case of the regular consumers found a between the two concepts (ecology and harmony, sustainable future → healthy and long life → well-being). In case of the occasional consumers the environmental concern does not appeared. Research made by Baker et al. (2004) does show any connection of the health concern neither with ecological nor with animal welfare issues. The same result has been found by Padel and Foster (2005). The researcher appealed on the in-depth interviews to investigate attitudinal concerns of the organic foods. Most of these studies do not investigate a possible interconnection between these two motives; they just marked a frequency of the statements regarding this topic. They identify the presence but do not underline any interdependence (Hill and Lynchehaun 2002; Essoussi and Zahaf 2009).

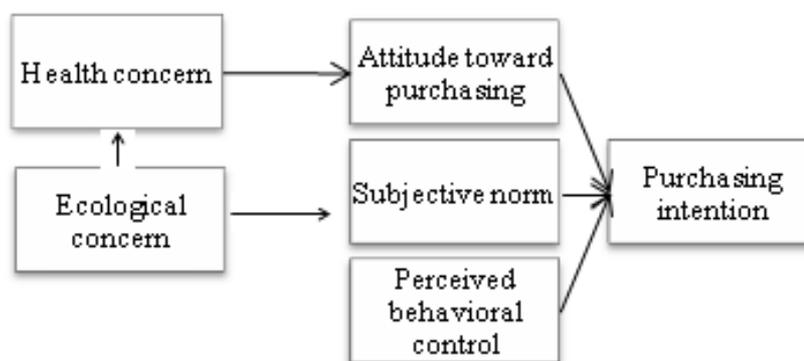


Fig. 1. The proposed model for TPB toward organic foods
Source: own construction based on Ajzen (1985)

However, the most promising result for our hypothesis is carried out by Chen (2009) after a research in Taiwan. He investigated the relationship between the two key factors motivating organic food choice. They used a more specific factor for attitude's antecedent, namely the healthy lifestyle. They suggested and then proved that the health attitude and the environmental attitude influence the attitude toward the consumption by this healthy lifestyle issue. We suggest a direct influence of the health attitude on overall organic food purchasing attitude and an indirect influence of the ecological attitude through health attitude (Fig. nr. 1.). In our model we keep all three antecedents of the classical TPB model and complete them with the health and ecological attitudes.

3. Implications

In a year the number of certified organic producers in Romania has been tripled (www.madr.ro), and the distribution channels expand visibly. The results from such studies could base a communication strategy. Based on motivational power of the two key factors we can conclude that there can be a conflict between these two factors. That is why we propose for examination

the possible interconnection between these two aspects. The results can be useful for marketing communication. In present the marketing communication efforts are relatively spread. There is not a consistent universe of the information regarding the benefits of the organic foods. The information regarding the health benefits of the organically grown product are complex (Vindigni, Janssen and Jager 2002).

This proposed model should be tested, and then could serve as a way of harmonizing the different attribute and benefit-related messages to the consumers' motivations.

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