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This study investigates organic consumption as an identity-driven behavior. We find that organic consumer identification is driven by identification with a higher-order consumer identity, environmentally conscious consumer, as well as beliefs related to organic products (i.e., organic product familiarity and organic product trustworthiness) and social norms of organic consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer demand for organic products has been growing dramatically. Organic food sales in the United States generated approximately $31.32 billion USD in 2012, and is predicted to reach $42 billion USD in 2014 (Statista 2014). Furthermore, purchase of organic products now occurs among a wider range of demographics, with 81% of U.S. families reporting that they purchase organic products at least sometimes (Organic Trade Association 2013).

Prior research has examined consumer motives in organic consumption, such as the environmental and animal welfare concern, and the safety and health concern that motivate consumers to choose organic products over conventional ones (e.g., Hughner et al. 2007; Shafie and Rennie 2012); however, our understanding of organic consumption still remains limited. In particular, little has been known about the higher-level, consumer value or identity-related drivers of organic consumption. Drawing upon the literature on social identity and identification (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley 2008; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), this study explores the extent to which organic consumption is driven by consumer social identity. We proffer the notion of “organic consumer identification” as the primary psychological substrate for the increasing consumer enthusiasm with, and consumer loyalty to, organic products. To the extent that individuals categorize themselves as organic consumers, organic consumption becomes a significant means to express their social identity.

This study provides several key contributions. First, our findings advance current understanding of organic consumption and elucidate an important psychological mechanism, organic consumer identification, which drives consumer organic product purchase. Second, this study examines various key determinants of organic consumer identification. We not only explore the relationship between superordinate consumer identity (i.e., being an environmentally conscious consumer) and subordinate identity (i.e., being an organic consumer), but also the effects of organic product-related beliefs on identification with organic consumers. Third, we examine the multifaceted roles of descriptive norms in driving identification with organic consumers. Last but not least, we empirically test our conceptual framework in six different countries, spanning Europe, North America, and Australia.

Conceptual Framework

Organic Consumption as an Identity-Driven Behavior

Identity is a self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” (Ashforth et al. 2008). The concept of identity helps capture the essence of who people are and why they do what they do. Consumption is often an identity-based behavior through which consumers fulfill their self-definition needs, including self-enhancement and self-consistency (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Laverie et al. 2002; Reed et al. 2012). For example, consumers become loyal to brands or products with which they perceive a sense of belonging or oneness, and in turn, consumption of these brands/products become important means to express their social identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

In the context of organic product consumption, prior research shows that fundamental values of consumers drive their organic product purchase. In particular, research shows that transcendental values such as universalism and benevolence are very important for regular organic food consumers (Krystallis et al. 2012). For regular organic consumers, “organic consumption results from an ideology, connected to a particular value system that affects personality measures, attitudes, and consumption behavior” (Schifferstein and Ophuis, 1998; p.119). Certain core values have been found to be strongly associated with organic consumers, including universalism, benevolence, spirituality, and self-direction (Grunert and Juhl 1995; Fotopoulos, et al. 2003; Hughner et al. 2007). Organic consumers, due to their distinctive and central features (i.e., environmental friendly, health-conscious), are valid and desirable target for identification.

The increasing popularity of organic consumption further enhances the attractiveness and salience of this consumer group’s identity (Bartels and Reinders 2010). Central to this study is the notion that individuals who hold positive beliefs about organic consumption will identify with a group of like-minded organic consumers. Such identification helps consumers to convey their social identity as a consumer—who they are and why they buy organic products.

Antecedents of Organic Consumer Identification

Environmental Consumer Identification. We first examine the role of a related, yet higher-order identification, identification with environmental consumers, in driving organic consumer identification. Organic farming has a positive impact on environment, such as reduction of water contamination, enhanced biodiversity and overall better ecological well-being. Thus organic products constitute a subcategory of environmentally friendly products. As such, organic consumers share some of the positive connotations of environmental consumers, such as being ethical, environmental friendly and sustainable (e.g., Gil, Gracia, and Sanchez 2000).

In the broad context of environmental protection and sustainable development, there is a rapidly growing number of green, environmentally conscious consumers (Lin and Chang 2012; Straughan and Roberts 1999). Environmentally conscious consumers share several key characteristics, such as a strong concern for environmental welfare (Pagiaslis and Krontalis 2014) and greater environmental knowledge (Kang et al. 2013). Since identification can occur on multiple levels, and environmental consumers are a broader, higher-order consumer group than organic consumers, it is reasonable to expect that environmental consumer identification will be positively linked to organic consumer identification (Bartels and Hoogendam 2011). Due to the possible overlap and the connections between the identities of environmentally conscious consumers and organic consumers, we expect that,

Hypothesis 1: Environmental consumer identification is positively linked to organic consumer identification.

Organic Product Familiarity. Individuals’ perceptions and beliefs about organic products are likely to influence their identification with organic consumers. Drawing upon prior research on information processing (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) and identity-based con-
sumption (Du et al. 2007; Reed et al. 2012; Sen and Bhattacharya 2003), we examine organic product familiarity and organic product trustworthiness as potential antecedents to organic consumer identification.

Identification research points to the critical role of familiarity in building identification. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2007) find that consumer awareness and familiarity of a brand’s social initiative is a key antecedent of their identification with the brand. Organic product familiarity leads to favorable attitudes toward organic products and organic consumers. Individuals thus are more likely to be attracted to the social identity of organic consumers, as such identity will serve their self-definitional needs including self-containment and self-enhancement (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Relatedly, organic product familiarity also raises the identity salience of organic consumers by making positive, desirable traits of organic consumers (e.g., environmentally conscious) easily accessible in individuals’ memory structures. Such identity salience increases the likelihood of individuals’ identification with organic consumers (Reed et al. 2012). In sum, we expect,

**Hypothesis 2:** Organic product familiarity is positively linked to organic consumer identification.

**Organic Product Trustworthiness.** Positive associations of organic products will spill over to enhance the social identity of organic consumers. Accordingly, we expect that perceived trustworthiness of organic products enhance the trustworthiness perceptions of organic consumers, raising the identity attractiveness of organic consumers. Trustworthiness is the single most important characteristic of ideal members of interdependent groups or relationships (Cottrell, Neuberg, and Li 2007). Perceived trustworthiness of organic products and relatedly, of organic consumers, reflects the fundamental and enduring aspects of the social identity of organic consumers, and as such will stimulate identification with this consumer group.

There has been some empirical evidence that indirectly supports the positive relationship between perceived trustworthiness and identification. George and Chattopadhyay (2005) find that workers’ trust in the management of an organization leads to greater identification with the organization. Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen (2012) show that perceived brand warmth, (i.e., beliefs that a brand is caring, trustworthy, and has the public’s best interest in heart), a notion similar to trustworthiness, positively predicts consumer-brand identification. In sum, the perceived trustworthiness of organic products carry relevant meanings for the identity of organic consumers that pertain to these consumers’ values and ethics, making organic consumers a more attractive and meaningful target for identification. Thus,

**Hypothesis 3:** Organic product trustworthiness is positively linked to organic consumer identification.

**Descriptive Norms of Organic Consumption.** Descriptive norms of organic consumption is relevant because they capture the social environment regarding organic consumption. High descriptive norms of organic consumption in one’s social environment increase the visibility and salience of organic consumer identity. Individuals often focus on their immediate surroundings and social groups, contemplating the values and implications of salient and relevant social identities in their environment (Reed et al. 2012; Laverie, Kleine and Kleine 2002). Individuals will have greater breadth and depth of exposure to organic consumers if the descriptive norms of organic consumption in their social environment are high, making organic consumer identity and its attributes more accessible in their memo-

**Moderating Role of Descriptive Norms of Organic Consumption.** In addition to having a main effect on organic consumer identification, descriptive norms are also likely to enhance the link from organic product familiarity and organic product trustworthiness to organic consumer identification. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argue that embedded relationships with a target for identification (e.g., a company or a brand, a consumer group) strengthen the link between identity attractiveness and identification. Relative to individuals in a social environment with low descriptive norms of organic consumption, those in an environment with high descriptive norms are more likely to be embedded in a social network consisting of organic consumers. For these individuals, through personal or symbolic interactions with organic consumers in their reference groups, positive beliefs of organic products (e.g., familiarity and trustworthiness) are more prominent and carry more weight in the identification process. In other words, given the same attractiveness of the social identity of organic consumers, high descriptive norms of organic consumption makes it easier and more important for individuals to categorize themselves socially in terms of organic consumers. Thus,

**Hypothesis 5:** Social norms of organic consumption strengthen the link from (a) organic product familiarity and (b) organic product trustworthiness to organic consumer identification.

**Outcomes of Organic Consumer Identification**

Organic consumer identification will engender a variety of favorable downstream outcomes such as consumer loyalty and organic product purchase. We expect that identification with organic consumers will trigger psychological loyalty to organic products. Organic consumers are, at least in part, defined by their actions of purchasing organic products; accordingly, individuals’ organic consumer identification will cause them to express their commitment to the social group by a sustained, long-term preference for organic products over conventional products. Loyalty to and repeat purchase of organic products constitute the primary means for identified consumers to support the social group of organic consumers. As such, identification with organic consumers will drive not only psychological loyalty to organic products, but will induce individuals to repeatedly purchase organic products in spite of situational obstacles, such as higher prices and lack of insufficient marketing (Aertsen et al. 2009). Further, in line with the large body of research on intention – behavior link (e.g., Ajzen 1991; Oliver 1999), we expect psychological loyalty to mediate the link between organic consumer identification and organic product purchase.

**Hypothesis 6:** Organic consumer identification is positively associated with psychological loyalty to organic products.
Hypothesis 7: Psychological loyalty to organic products mediates the link between organic consumer identification and organic product purchase.

Method

Sample, Procedures, and Measures

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a longitudinal online panel study among consumers in the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and Australia. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire on organic product purchase and its antecedents. The data were collected in December 2010 (T1) and March 2011 (T2) by a professional market research company. In total, 3,083 participants completed the questionnaire at T1 and 1,939 at T2. In all countries, we instructed the market research company that our study samples should be representative of the specific country in terms of age and gender distributions.

We drive our measures for key constructs from relevant prior research. The measure for organic consumer identification is based on the multi-item scale of identification used in the prior literature (e.g., Mael and Ashforth 1992). Sample scales include, “when someone criticizes organic consumers, it feels like a personal insult.” “I experience a strong sense of belonging to organic consumers.” And “When I talk about organic consumers, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’” Environmental consumer identification is measured using Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) visual scale of identity overlap. Sample items for organic product familiarity include, “I can recognize organic products among other regular brands.” And “some characteristics of organic products come to my mind quickly.” Sample item for organic product trustworthiness include “the likely quality of organic products is very high.” And “organic products are trustworthy.” Based on the research on descriptive norms (e.g., Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991), we have three items that measure individuals’ perceptions about how often their relatives/friends/colleagues buy organic. More detailed information about the measures are available upon request.

Hypotheses Tests

We tested our hypotheses using multiple regressions with relevant interaction terms. To enhance the interpretation of the regression coefficients in moderated regression models, we mean-centered all continuous independent variables (Aiken and West, 1991).

H1 predicts that the superordinate level of identification, environmental consumer identification, will be positively associated with organic consumer identification. As expected, the coefficient of environmental consumer identification is significant and positive (b=.15, p<.01). H2 predicts that organic product familiarity will be positively associated with organic consumer identification. As we expect, the coefficient of organic product familiarity is positive and significant (b=.23, p<.01). Similarly, organic product trustworthiness is a positive predictor of organic consumer identification (b=.33, p<.01), providing support for H3. H4 predicts that descriptive norms of organic consumption will be positively associated with organic consumer identification. In line with H4, the coefficient of descriptive norms is significant and positive (b=.30, p<.01).

According to H5(a), descriptive norms also positively moderate the relationship between organic product familiarity and organic consumer identification. We find that the coefficient for organic product familiarity X descriptive norms is positive (b=.05, p<.05). The positive coefficient for the interaction term indicates that the relationship between organic product familiarity and organic consumer identification becomes stronger when descriptive norms of organic consumption are high and becomes weaker when the descriptive norms are low. Therefore, H5(a) is supported. In H5(b), we expect that descriptive norms will play a similar moderating role in the organic product trustworthiness and organic consumer identification. In line with H5(b), the coefficient for organic product trustworthiness X descriptive norms of organic consumption is positive (b=.07, p<.01), suggesting that the organic product trustworthiness – organic consumer identification link becomes stronger as descriptive norms of organic consumption go up, providing support for H5(b).

To test H6, we regress psychological loyalty to organic products on identification with organic consumer, as well as relevant consumer-specific perceptions and beliefs. As expected, the coefficient of organic consumer identification is positive and significant in predicting psychological loyalty to organic products (b=.61, p<.01), therefore supporting H6. To assess the mediating role of psychological loyalty to organic products in the organic consumer identification – organic product purchase link, we first regress organic product purchase on organic consumer identification as well consumer-specific perceptions and beliefs about organic products. We then run another model with one additional independent variable, psychological loyalty to organic products. As we can see, in model 3, organic consumer identification is significant in predicting organic product purchase (b=.40, p<.01). However, when loyalty to organic products is included in the regression model, the coefficient of organic consumer identification decreases significantly (from b=.40, p<.01 in model 3 to b=.18, p<.01 in model 4), while the coefficient of loyalty to organic products is highly significant (b=.37, p<.01). These results are indicative of the mediating role of psychological loyalty to organic products in the relationship between organic consumer identification and organic product purchase, providing support for H7.

Discussion

This study investigates consumer organic consumption. We find that organic consumer identification is driven by identification with a higher-order consumer identity, environmentally conscious consumer, as well as beliefs related to organic products (i.e., organic product familiarity and organic product trustworthiness) and social norms of organic consumption. This study contributes to the growing body of research on organic consumption in several key ways. Prior literature on organic consumption has predominantly focused on general consumer motives in organic consumption as well as on socio-demographic profiles of organic consumers. In contrast, our study reveals that organic consumption is driven by consumers’ social identity. More specifically, our study complements prior research by providing a theoretical account of identification-driven organic consumption behavior. Organic consumer identification occurs when a consumer’s self-concept contains that same attributes as those in the perceived identity of regular organic consumers, or when the identity of organic consumers becomes self-referential or self-defining. Our conceptual model is supported by survey results based on longitudinal responses from consumers in six different countries. Findings of this research provide important insights into antecedents and outcomes of organic consumer identification.

REFERENCES


