Does the Organic Label Increase Consumption? How Food Type and Health Locus of Control Turn the Label Into a Double-Edged Sword

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This research examines whether the organic label on a food product always increases consumption of that product. Two moderators are considered: food type and consumer differences in health locus-of-control. Two experiments are conducted and results show that organic labels can be a double-edged sword in regards to food consumption.

[to cite]:
Hsiao-Ching Lee, Zhao-Hong Cheng, Yen-Ting Chen, and Chun-Tuan Chang (2017), "Does the Organic Label Increase Consumption? How Food Type and Health Locus of Control Turn the Label Into a Double-Edged Sword", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 45, eds. Ayelet Gneezy, Vladas Griskevicius, and Patti Williams, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 732-733.

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023786/volumes/v45/NA-45

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Does the Organic Label Increase Consumption? How Food Type and Health Locus of Control Turn the Label Into a Double-Edged Sword

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Organic labels serve as a heuristic cue in food shopping decisions (Vega-Zamora, Torres-Ruiz, Murgado-Armenteros, and Parras-Rosa, 2014). Food companies desiring to encourage consumers to consume their products will be interested in understanding how an organic label can increase consumers’ food consumption. However, overconsumption can lead not only to weight gain but also to rapid satiation and delayed repurchasing (Inman, 2001). Given the susceptibility of consumption to contextual factors, we expect an organic label to affect consumers’ food consumption. Our questions of interest are as follows. Does an organic label always enhance consumers’ food consumption? Under what circumstances does an organic label actually reduce consumers’ food consumption? What is the underlying mechanism involved?

We are interested in boundary conditions that could amplify or dampen the effects of the organic label on food consumption. The extant literature has recognized two types of motivations that induce consumers to purchase organic food: contextual differences (e.g., food type) (van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011) and individual differences (e.g., consumers’ sociodemographics, health consciousness, ideology, and environmental concerns) (Grunert and Juhl, 1995; Hjelmär, 2011; Honkanen, Verplanken, and Ottar, 2006; Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, and Stanton, 2007; McEachern and McClean, 2002; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Padel and Foster, 2005; Schifferstein and Oude Ophuis, 1998; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2009). This article contributes to these evolving research streams by proposing that food type (virtue vs. vice) and individual differences in health locus-of-control (HLOC) simultaneously affect the impact of the organic label on food perceptions and food consumption.

Study 1 examined whether the effects of an organic label on food consumption were moderated by different food types and, if so, whether food consumption is based on the perceived healthiness of the food. We conducted a 2 (organic label: with organic label vs. without organic label) x 2 (food type: vice vs. virtue) between-subjects experiment to test the three hypotheses. However, a major limitation to this study was the self-reported measure for the dependent variable (i.e., intended food consumption). In Study 2, we adopted an objective measurement of the food intake amount to indicate the influence of the food consumption. Besides food type as a moderator, individual differences are recognized as influential in food perceptions. Study 2 examined whether and how the joint effects of organic label and food type on the food consumption may differ for people with an external vs. an internal HLOC. Thus, we conducted Study 2, a 2 (organic label: with organic label vs. without organic label) x 2 (food type: vice vs. virtue) x 2 (HLOC: externals vs. internals) between-subjects design.

Our results suggest that, first, an organic label increases externals’ consumption of vice food. Second, an organic label decreases food consumption in the following two conditions: 1) when externals are exposed to virtue food, and when internals are exposed to vice food. Although an organic label provides a heuristic cue regarding the healthiness of the food, it does not increase the food consumption of health externals. 2) For health internals, vice food with an organic label induces a certain skepticism which leads to reluctance regarding its consumption. These results show different reasons why health externals and internals decrease their consumption of that has an organic label. Third, the presence or absence of an organic label makes no difference to internals facing virtue food. As discussed earlier, an organic label may not have a positive effect on health internals since such people take various factors into consideration in their food choices. Therefore, the organic label may not effectively induce health internals to increase their consumption of virtue food.

This research contributes to the literature streams regarding organic food in marketing, health perceptions, and food consumption. First, we examine how organic labels may serve as a heuristic cue to increase or decrease food consumption, subject to food type and individual differences in HLOC. Previous research has analyzed the meaning and interpretations placed on the term “organic,” and how those interpretations influence consumption behavior (Janssen and Hamm, 2012; van Doom and Verhoef, 2011; Vega-Zamora et al., 2014). Food consumption behavior with individual difference variables remains unexplored. Although perceived healthiness is strongly associated with organic food—and this important feature makes it superior to conventional food (Janssen and Hamm, 2012; Vega-Zamora et al., 2014)—this heuristic cue does not necessarily induce people to increase their consumption of such food. Results of Study 2 show that organic labels can be a double-edged sword on food consumption.

Second, previous research on organic food focused on self-reported data as dependent measures (e.g., WTP, attitudes toward the food, or purchase intentions) (Aschemann-Witzel, Maroscheck, and Hamm, 2013; D’Amato and Falzon, 2015; Janssen and Hamm, 2012; van Doom and Verhoef, 2011). The current research contributes to this evolving research stream by adopting both objective and attitudinal measures in its examination of food consumption behavior.

Third, it is interesting to compare our Study 1 with van Doom and Verhoef (2011), since both studies examined the interaction between organic label and food type. However, the patterns of our results in regards to intended consumption are somewhat in opposition to those found by van Doom and Verhoef (2011) regarding WTP. Van Doom and Verhoef (2011) did not find differences between vice and virtue food in regards to WTP, but they did observe that an organic label negatively affects quality perceptions regarding vice food. In our study, an organic label actually enhances participants’ intended consumption. When interpreting this inconsistency, it is important to recognize that food consumption behavior may not necessarily mean the same thing as quality perception (especially based on perceived monetary value). In our study, participants’ evaluations of their intentions to eat were based entirely on their psychological feelings toward the product, thus making this an affect-driven decision. The cognition-based items used in van Doom and Verhoef (2011) caused their participants to evaluate perceived food healthiness based on cognitive information processing. On the other hand, the affect-based items used in our study might prime participants to perceive food healthiness based on affective information processing. Future validation will be needed.
REFERENCES


