

Organic Produce Purchase Behavior in Canada

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in demand for organic farming. In the US alone, the number of organic certified businesses has increased by 12% in one year (OTA, 2016) with organic fruits and vegetables showing the highest rate in the organic food market (USDA, 2017). This in turn has resulted in surge of studies on organic markets and consumers which is beneficial not only to the academic community, but more so to producers, sellers, and the government since the move towards sustainability, health, and wellness leads to economic advantages (Aschemann- Witzel & Zielke, 2015). It has also been noted that consumer attitudes towards organic products may vary across countries (Campbell, Khachatryan, Behe, Dennis, & Hall, 2014; van Huylenbroek et al., 2009; Zanolli, 2004). Subsequently, although numerous studies exist profiling the organic consumers on a country basis (e.g., Bellows, Alcaraz, & Hallman, 2010; Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002; M. K. Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Åberg, & Sjöden, 2001; Onyango, Hallman, & Bellows, 2007; Tsakiridou, Boutsouki, Zotos, & Mattas, 2008), literature focusing on the Canadian market and consumer could benefit from more research (Campbell et al., 2014; Campbell, Lesschaeve, Bowen, Onufrey, & Moskowit, 2010; Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2012).

In Canada, the food sector plays an important economic role with the organic agri-food sector seeing dramatic growth. While the number of total farms in Canada has declined, there has been a growth in the number of organic farms from 2006 to 2011 (Frick, 2012). The increasing demand for organic food options drives the Canadian food producers to showcase their products in grocery stores and farmers' markets (Kendrick, 2009). Despite this increase, the total spending of Canadians on organic products reached only 1% of the total 46.5 billion spent in national grocery sales in 2016, which is in line with the global numbers of organic share of agriculture landing (1.1% globally) (FiBL & IFOAM, 2017). However, according to the Canada Organic Trade Association (COTA), in 2012 the organic retail market saw a three-fold jump from 2006 (2017). According to the 2015 report, Canadian organic market reached \$4billion in 2015 with Ontario leading as the largest consumer market for organic products counting for about \$1billion (GlobeandMail, 2015). Given the steady trend towards increasing demand for organic products, there comes a demand to understand the organic food landscape in Canada.

While the past decade has seen a significant shift in consumer behavior towards organic produce, there is need for more research on consumer attitudes and beliefs to identify the factors influencing consumers' decision-making process. The current research project aims to profile the Canadian organic produce consumers focusing on their purchase and consumption behavior. The current study explores various dimensions of regular organic consumers' purchase intention, actual purchase, and consumption behavior.

Literature Review

While an increasing number of studies have focused on organic produce (e.g., Adams & Salois, 2010; Brown, Dury, & Holdsworth, 2009; Seyfang, 2006; Zepeda & Deal, 2009), more research is required on consumers' motives for the demand of organic produce (Gracia & de Magistris, 2013; Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007; Thøgersen, 2009). To venture into the exploration of consumers' organic produce purchasing behaviour, the current study consults the widely used Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the Health Belief Model (HBM) (Becker, 1974; Maiman & Becker, 1974).

It has been found that organic food consumption is largely believed to be linked to positive beliefs regarding personal health benefits (Lim, Yong, & Suryadi, 2014; Olson, 2017). The Health Belief Model (HBM) reflects of psychological theories of decision-making on an individual's health behaviour. The HBM proposes that an individual's behaviour is strongly affected by such factors like individual's 1) 'readiness to take action' relative to a health conditions determined by perceived *susceptibility* (or vulnerability) to the conditions as well as the perceived *severity* of consequences of contrasting conditions, 2) estimation of the potential *benefits* of weighted against the *barriers* (or costs) a given behaviour, and 3) the stimulus, whether internal (e.g., perception of own health state) or external (e.g., social interaction, mass media communication), that triggers the appropriate health related behaviour ((Becker, 1974; Maiman & Becker, 1974). The number of topics examining consumer behaviour via HBM perspective range from folate-rich food consumption (e.g., LaBrosse & Albrecht, 2013) to consumer eating habits (e.g., Deshpande, Basil, & Basil, 2009) to dietary and body mass perceptions (e.g., Sapp & Weng, 2007). Given the close link in perception of health and organic eating habits, the application of the HBM to the investigation of the organic food consumption will allow for more insightful examination of the food consumer behaviour.

Research suggests that consumers have varying views of organic products. It has been noted that consumers who choose to buy organic products are more likely to buy products in larger quantities (Gracia & de Magistris, 2013). Research also suggest that consumer attitudes towards organic products vary on a product basis (Stolz, Stolze, Janssen, & Hamm, 2011). This highlights the need for research on individual product purchasing habits. As such, only a handful of studies have conducted a product-by-product analysis. It should be noted that most product specific studies on organic fruits and vegetables focus on apples with quite opposite outcomes. For example Costanigro, McFadden, Kroll, and Nurse (2011) found consumers find local apples more desirable than organic apples. Meanwhile, Loureiro, McCluskey, and Mittelhammer (2001), who studies consumer attitudes toward regular, organic and eco labeled apples, found that organic apples were more desirable than eco labeled apples. Other studies on organic apples have focused on consumers' attitudes towards cosmetic damages to organic apples (Yue, Alfnes, & Jensen, 2009) and moral concerns, intention, and willingness to purchase organic apples (Arvola et al., 2008; Cerda, García, Ortega-Farías, & Ubilla, 2012; Dean, Raats, & Shepherd, 2008; Denver & Jensen, 2014; Wang, Sun, & Parsons, 2010). Thøgersen (2009) study focused on consumer decision-making on the basis of organic tomato in the fresh and processed form and revealed the attitude to buy organic depends on consumer's beliefs. It also worth noting that Thøgersen (2009) found that while some

consumers do not see any value in organic products or purchase of organic products, others are not confident in product labels and certifications.

Literature on organic fruits and vegetables would benefit from analysis and comparison of organic purchase behavior towards different types of produce. This is specifically timely since Environmental Working Group (EWG)'s lists of 'Dirty Dozen' (*herein*, D-12) and 'Clean Fifteen' (*herein*, C-15) products that have been circulated and promoted in North America since its inception in 2004. These lists are updated on a yearly basis and list, correspondingly, the twelve fruits and vegetables with most pesticide residue (D-12) and fifteen fruits and vegetables with least traces of pesticide (C-15). EWG develops these lists on the basis of test results conducted by USDA Pesticide Testing Program and the Food and Drug Administration. The D-12 and C-15 lists are promoted through David Suzuki Foundation and articles in the Huffington Post or Globe&Mail in Canada, as well as through various web-sites such as MSN and blogs of organic promoters (e.g., FullyRaw). Research on the differences in consumer consumption of various fruits and vegetables from the D-12 and C-15 lists would draw on the effectiveness of provision of such information to consumers and their willingness to purchase organic produce.

The increase in the organic produce farm and consumer market within Canada highlights the need for more research within this context (Frick, 2012; GlobeandMail, 2015). Accordingly a few studies have focused on Canadian organic market, consumer behavior and decision-making. Hamzaoui Essoussi and Zahaf (2009) noted that the decision to purchase organic is influenced by health, environment and support for local farmers for the Canadian consumers. In addition, consumers showed varying levels of trust for certification and labeling, distribution, and country of origin of organic products. Further to this, Hamzaoui-Essoussi and Zahaf (2012) have identified three types of organic food consumers as True (regular), Sporadic (occasional), and Inexperienced (not an organic consumer). They have also found that willingness to pay for organic produce is influenced by income in comparison to other demographic criteria. Other studies found that Canadians who are concerned with level of pesticide in food products are usually young adults with a high income range, who are also willing to change their grocery store (E. Magnusson & Cranfield, 2005). A multi-country study by Soye, Francis, and Smirnova (2012) in US, Canada, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine found that social norms and personal beliefs impact organic food purchase behavior, while the impact of trust in product label, packaging and availability is country specific. Another study among various communities in Canada identified that different ethnocultural groups have different level of engagement with ethical consumption; more specifically, immigrant communities food purchasing decision-making is mainly based on tradition as opposed to ethical consumption (Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, & Chapman, 2010). A recent study by Persaud and Schillo (2017) suggests that social identity and influence impacts intentions to purchase organic in Canada.

Methods

This research adopts a mixed method approach applied in two stages. The current paper represents stage one of the project comprised of exploratory inductive interviews to develop a better understanding of the phenomena of organic produce purchase and consumption. The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical framework to be tested in stage two—online survey.

This stage of the study has adopted an exploratory inductive qualitative approach. The interview sample includes individuals who self identify as regular organic produce consumers (i.e., those who purchase organic produce at least once a week). The recruitment was done via purposive convenience sampling in large metropolitan area in Southern Ontario and smaller urban community in Northern Ontario through invitation flyers distributed in supermarkets and social media as well as through personal referrals. A compensation of \$30 VISA card was given to each interviewee. The semi-structured interviews comprised of about 15 questions each followed by relevant probing questions and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The participants were prompted, among other things, to share their understanding of the meaning of organic products, patterns of food consumption (e.g., eating out vs. cooking at home), motives to purchase and consume organic produce (e.g., dietary restrictions), produce purchasing behaviours (e.g., where they shop for produce, how often, what type of produce they prefer to buy organic, and their willingness to pay more for organic), as well as their knowledge of D-12 and C-15.

The current paper is developed on the basis of the first 4 out of aimed 10 semi-structured interviews. Given the exploratory nature of this stage of the research, content analysis was undertaken. In total, 106,24 minutes of detailed transcribed interview narratives were analyzed via Bengtsson (2016) four-step procedure to reveal common theme and patterns. Accordingly, the first step of de-contextualization involved researchers emersion into transcribed text to obtain a general sense of the narratives, which then were broken into *meaning units* that were in tern labeled with a code. The list of codes was developed inductively and was revised multiple times during the transcript reading. To insure reliability of the analysis, two researchers were involved in open coding process, the coding lists were compared and any disagreements were resolved via discussion. In the second step of the content analysis—recontextualization—the researchers verified the coverage of all the relevant aspects of the content through reading the original text alongside the final list of meaning units. In categorization step, the *meaning units* were carefully condensed to categories and themes without losing content of the unit (Bengtsson (2016). Finally, in the compilation step detailed analysis of the first 4 interviews were brought together and compared to the existing literature to insure that the results are reasonable and logical.

Analysis and Results

The participants of the study were all residents of Ontario. The first 3 interview participants were females, while the fourth interview was conducted with a couple

(female and male). The participants came from different cultural backgrounds with four participating females being immigrants to Canada. The size of the households varied from 2 people to 5. The household income ranged from 50-80 thousand to 180-200 thousand (with the average of 100 thousand) annually.

The content analysis revealed the following themes and categories pertaining organic produce purchasing and consumption patterns:

Meaning of organic

When asked about *meaning of organic* produce, all respondents linked organic produce to reduced levels of pesticide using terms such as “less pesticide”, “less chemicals”, “no chemicals and hormones”, and “adoption of natural techniques for growing produce instead of spraying pesticide or poison.” One of the respondents pointed out that *organic* means that they “don’t need to peel the fruit and vegetables with their skin, not that much chemicals on the skin”; it is noteworthy that the notion of organic is coupled with consumption of produce. Also, respondents reported on their perceptions that organic means healthier and more natural produce, both in terms of farming (e.g., “growing in the farm...it takes them time to grow as they supposed to grow and the sunlight is not induced to grow...”) and amount of vitamins and minerals (e.g., “it has more vitamins and minerals that it supposed to have”). On this basis the following is proposed:

- Canadian consumers the dominant meaning of organic is chemical or pesticide free.

Identify organic

In terms of how organic produce is identified, all respondents mentioned produce label, certification, and store signage as main identifiers. Further, one interviewee indicated that they identify organic produce by the label and that they trust the produce label, “I always check the label, I trust what is written on the label/package...” However, another respondent noted that they trust the produce label more than grocery store signage. This contradicts Hamzaoui Essoussi and Zahaf (2009) findings that suggest consumers have varying levels of trust for certification and labeling, distribution, and country of origin of organic products. Interestingly, some respondents indicated that there is lack of trust for store signage of budget grocery stores “... when I am in a cheaper store and it says organic, then I look for information on packaging”. On this basis it can be proposed that:

- Canadian consumers trust the organic label on produce.

It should be noted that when respondents were asked about these two concepts (*meaning of organic* and *identification of organic produce*), they also referred to quality aspects of organic produce such as better taste, freshness and more natural look in comparison to nonorganic produce. For example, one interviewee noted that “If it does not have a perfect shape... if it has bruises, then it means it is not artificial”. This leads to the following proposition:

- The Canadian consumers differentiate between organic and non-organic produce by produce’ quality aspects.

Reason to purchase organic

The main reason that drives organic produce purchasing and consumption are perceived health benefits for the respondents themselves or dependents particularly dependent children. For example, one respondent noted "...I have three kids and I want to provide them as much healthy food while they are growing". In addition, respondents also pointed to long-term environmental and economical benefits of purchasing organic produce for example one respondent mentioned that purchasing organic "... means helping Earth, farmers..." . This confirms Hamzaoui Essoussi and Zahaf (2009) research that noted health, environment and support for local farmers are the main motivating factor for purchase of organic produce among Canadian consumers. This leads to the following propositions:

- Canadian consumers identify a) health benefits, b) environmental benefits, and c) economic benefits as the main reasons to purchase and consume organic produce.

Other aspects that influence the organic produce purchasing decision-making are cultural differences. Two of interviewees who moved to Canada a couple of years ago noted that they are motivated to purchase organic produce as in their home countries there are/were no notions organic vs. non organic. For example one stated "I moved here a couple of years ago...when I was there, everything was organic; so there wasn't any organic or non-organic categorization." This suggest that some consumers are motivated to purchase organic to keep with some cultural norms. This confirms Beagan et al. (2010) findings that immigrant communities food decision making is mainly based on tradition as opposed to ethical consumption.

Reason not to purchase organic

Availability, affordability, produce quality, and environmental concerns were noted as the main reasons of why consumers don't purchase organic.

Consumers would not purchase organic produce if it was not available to them. In such cases they would either postpone purchase (e.g., "I don't buy organic when the organic option is not available, I might skip buying it that time with a thought that I will buy organic the next time") or purchase non organic in a lower quantity.

Consumers would not purchase organic produce if they find it too expensive, for example one interviewee noted "it all comes up to money and finances, some organic products are so expensive". It should be noted that one interview noted that if the grocery stores has promotions (special offers) for non organic produce they tend to skip buying organic while the promotion is in effect.

Some interviewees noted quality of produce is one reason not to purchase organic referring to the produce freshness. In this regards, one interviewee noted that organic leafy greens go off quicker that the nonorganic alternatives hence they doesn't buy them in organic form.

Finally, it was noted that environmental concerns when organic produce has too much packaging (plastic) impedes their purchase and consumption of those organic produce e.g., “So much packaging... well it is one of the reasons we don't always get those organic produce”.

To summarize, the followings are proposed:

- Affordability impacts the Canadian consumers decision to purchase organic produce.
- Availability impacts the Canadian consumers decision to purchase organic produce.
- Freshness impacts the Canadian consumers decision to purchase organic produce.
- Produce packaging impacts the Canadian consumers decision to purchase organic produce.

Further, at the macro level, it should also be noted that the decision to purchase organic also depends on the produce consumption patterns. Most interviewees noted that if they are to consume the produce as a whole they tend to purchase organic. However, if they peel the produce prior to consumption or if they can wash the produce in such a way that the chemicals are washed off (e.g., “but they (like kale and spinach) are not priority to me because I wash and soak them”) they will purchase nonorganic. This leads to the next theme which is knowledge of D-12 and C-15. More specifically, two interviewees indicated their unawareness of these lists, the remainder indicated their awareness and full adoption by one while awareness and occasional adoption by the other pair. This leads to the following proposition:

- The way of produce preparation for consumption impacts the Canadian consumers decision to purchase organic produce.

Organic vs Local

As for the organic and local preference, most interviewees mentioned they would opt for local organic produce ideally, otherwise would prefer organic and, lastly, if organic not an option then local. However, one interviewee noted that they prefer local to organic mainly as local produce carry less packaging; hence, they tend to shop from farmers market for as long as its possible seasonally. It should also be noted that one respondent reported that they perceive local produce sold at farmers market as organic stating the following for produce sold that farmers markets “then I assume that they are local and I think they are organic at the same time.”. This prompts the following proposition:

- Regular organic Canadian consumers prefer purchase and consumption of organic produce when compared to local.

Produce Consumption Patterns

When it comes to the lifestyle of Canadian regular organic produce consumers, it should be noted that most interviews noted that they mainly cook at home and they try to stay away from fast food, e.g., “We usually stay away from fast food joints.” This for one was due to lifestyle choices noting “because I am vegan, I make food myself”. Some had a stronger connection between eating out habits and their organic/local preferences noting

that they avoid chain restaurants and prefer spots that promote socially responsible consumption e.g., it was stated “... that we also practically never eat at chain restaurants. We always go with local places... I prefer to eat local eggs. I would usually ask ...if they know where the eggs are coming from...[if not from a local farm] then I would try not to get omelets, or any egg dish.” And finally interviewees noted that purchasing organic produce has positively impacted their eating and cooking habits where they tend to make healthier decisions in terms of what they eat or cooking vs eating out e.g., “I find that it affects my attitude towards cooking at home, you know when you get more healthy products you want to cook at home too’. This leads to the following propositions:

- Canadian consumers who purchase organic produce make an effort to make more healthy eating decisions.

Conclusion

The proposed research profiles the Canadian organic produce consumers by focusing on their intentions and beliefs towards organic products. The results of the initial 4 interviews with regular organic produce consumers were analyzed through content analysis. This indicated that Canadian consumers perceptions of organic produce aligns with use of less pesticide in farming. Also, Canadian consumers mainly consume organic to gain from perceived health benefits. In addition, way of consumption, availability, affordability and quality of produce impacts the decision to purchase organic. Meanwhile, Canadian organic consumers tend to make healthier lifestyle choices in terms of their eating habits.

Finally it should be reiterated that this project is still ongoing, the preliminary findings are reported here. Analysis on another 6 interviews is underway. Once all 10 interviews are fully analyzed, the current findings will be revised and a model will be developed and tested in the Stage 2 of this project which involves a survey questionnaire to test the model.

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