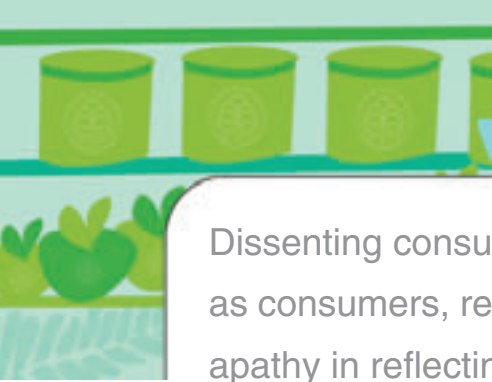




Organic food and the activist mother

by Jenny Wong

The proliferation of organic foodstuffs within the food industry has received worldwide attention. However, detailed research that explores why consumers purchase organic food is still lacking. According to BioGro (the most well-known organic trademark and certification agent in New Zealand), organic produce “is food that has been grown without the routine use of agricultural chemicals such as fungicides, herbicides, insecticides, growth regulators, or colour/flavour enhancers”. Also, it is food produced “without synthetic additives like stabilisers, emulsifiers, antioxidants, preservatives, colourants, etc” (BioGro, 2002).



Dissenting consumers, who refuse to be labelled as consumers, react actively toward marketing's apathy in reflecting their values and concerns

Both domestic and international organic industries are experiencing rapid growth. Globally, sales for organic products are worth more than \$US15 billion, accounting for two per cent of the total food market (BioGro, 2002). The most current reported figure for the local market is worth approximately \$38 million, with an annual growth rate of 50 per cent (*Grocers' Review*, May 2002). Between 1997 and 1998, organic food made up 35 per cent of the national retail food category (Ritchie, Campbell and Sivak, 2000). Although the organic food industry in New Zealand is based on small niche markets (Lyons, 2000), BioGro forecasts that the exportation of New Zealand's organic products would increase eight times to \$500 million by the year 2005 (BioGro, 2002). Public unease about genetically engineered (GE) products and food scares such as BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or "mad cow" disease) have also accelerated this growth trend.

The key feature in the growth of organic markets is that growth has been continually fuelled by niche consumer demands (Lyons et al., 2001; Lyons, 2000). Yet most studies are more production- and marketing-focused and tend to overlook consumer demand issues (e.g. Roddy et al., 1994; Sloan, 2002). Women (especially mothers) have a higher inclination than men to purchase and consume organic produce (Hutchins and Greenhalgh, 1997). Dobscha and Ozanne (2001) suggest that women manage household consumption patterns and find satisfaction in making organic purchases as a form of GE resistance. In other words, these are consumers who try to achieve their political goals via personal consumption patterns.

The linkage between organic food purchase decisions and GE resistance forms a key focus of this study. Specifically, this paper examines organic food purchase decisions, activism and family socialisation behaviours. A qualitative research project was designed to investigate the meaning of organic food purchase attitudes and behaviours.

The literature and theoretical perspectives that inform this research are outlined, followed by the results of interviews with and diary recordings by

members of MAdGE (Mothers Against Genetic Engineering). A conceptual model is then developed to illustrate how GE resistance outweighs the positive attributes organic food could offer in driving consumer behaviour. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study, both academic and managerial.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activism

Numerous researchers (Dobscha, 1998; Herrmann, 1993; Penaloza and Price, 1993) have pointed out that a rebellion is growing against marketing discourses and practices. Shoppers are increasingly using their power to make manufacturers and retailers respond to shoppers' concerns. The emergence of this new type of consumerism has affected various industry contexts including the food industry (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001). Consumers are demanding products that are processed without environmental and human exploitation (Pedersen, 2000; Scherdorn, 1993). Hence, these days, individuals require not only environmentally sustainable, but socially and ethically produced food products as well.

Dissenting consumers, who refuse to be labelled as consumers, react actively toward marketing's apathy in reflecting their values and concerns. Their reactions range from individual (complaints) to collective resistance (boycotts), with a commonly shared goal to resist the dominant market structure (Herrmann, 1993; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Penaloza and Price; 1993).

While this is true, overall, women are reported to be more likely to engage in pro-environmental purchase behaviour (Dobscha, 1993). Some researchers suggest that women's engagement in activism is partially linked to their ecological consciousness and that they are more aware of ecological issues that directly link to their children's health (Dobscha, 1998; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). Contemporary consumers are seen to be looking beyond their current material needs, to social values that encompass community, family and personal health.

Consumers are emphasising not just environmentalism, but also calling for quality consumption that takes into account limited global resources. Activism and gender effect are positively correlated in consumer resistance movements.

Identity

A review of the literature suggests that identity also plays an important part in influencing food choice decision-making processes. Consumption of particular goods and services differentiates consumers and thus reflects the norms and values of individuals (Scholliers, 2001, p.5). Consumer researcher Belk (1988) suggests that “consumers are what they consume and conversely consumers consume what they are” (p.160). This means that identity translates directly into consumption and consumption reveals identity. Not surprisingly, food can represent a self-referring part of the catalogue from which personal identity is forged. A redefinition of self could thus be obtained just by changing one’s diet. For example, the adoption of an organic diet may be related to the sense of self in terms of a commitment to anti-GE attitudes, concern for animals’ quality of life or food safety issues. Food choice, therefore, crafts important representations about individuals’ political, moral beliefs and the life themes of trustworthiness and goodness (Keane and Willets, 1994; Scholliers, 2001).

Values

Values can be outlined as beliefs that guide the selection or evaluation of desirable behaviour or end states (Schultz and Zelenzy, 1999). Sheth et al. (1991) propose a theory of consumption values that directly explains why consumers choose to buy or avoid particular products. The five values that influence consumers’ purchase choices are identified as functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional. Sheth et al. (1991) explain that functional value is derived from characteristics or

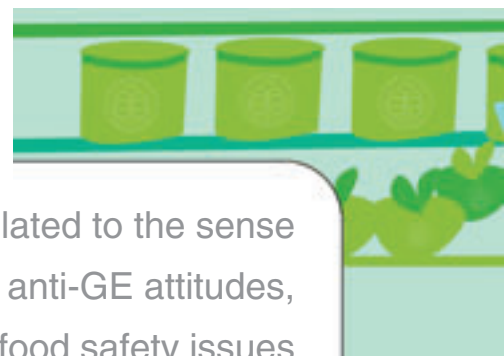
attributes such as reliability, durability and price. Social value refers to the perceived utility individuals acquire by consuming products or services recognised within their own social group(s). Emotional value is acquired when individuals’ feelings or affective states are aroused. Epistemic value is associated with the capacity to fulfil curiosity, novelty and knowledge-seeking behaviour. Conditional value is associated with the specific situation, or set of circumstances that individuals face and is linked to choice contingencies (Sheth et al., 1991).

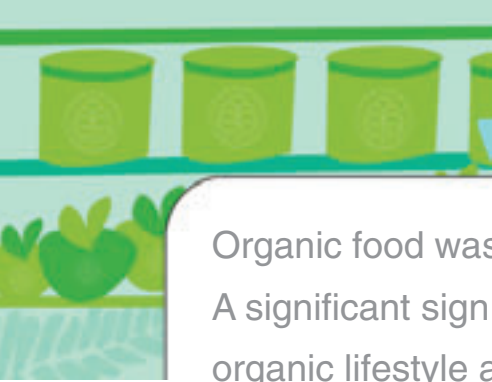
Although these values operate independently, they can interact with each other and influence singular purchase situations. Organic consumption may reflect functional, social, conditional and emotional values. Functional values that influence organic purchases include perceived health and ecology aspects of organic produce, whereas consumers’ beliefs that organic farming enhances the social well-being of people and communities, reveal social values. The adoption of organic diets can also be related to individuals’ anti-GE attitudes and to attitudes about animals’ quality of life, signifying emotional values.

Many consumers would rather pay a high price for food not just for its intellectual value, but for its emotional value as well (Beharrell and MacFie, 1991). As an illustration, cases of battery hens and factory-farmed sows have generated highly negative emotional value among various consumer groups. People showed concern when they discovered that animals are subjected to conditions seen as barbaric. Thus, individual values and belief systems reflect not only internal and cognitive concerns, but also wider societal and environmental issues, including that of animal welfare (Goldsmith et al., 1999). In summary, activism, gender effect, identity and value systems outline the research background and formulate research objective for this paper.



The adoption of an organic diet may be related to the sense of self in terms of a commitment to anti-GE attitudes, concern for animals’ quality of life or food safety issues





Organic food was considered a metaphor for valuing health. A significant sign of valuing health was the adoption of an organic lifestyle and the rejection of GE products

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research that emphasises a naturalistic approach, subjectivism, multi-methods and taking things into account simultaneously is the chosen methodology for this research project (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Essentially, qualitative research methods were employed because of the exploratory nature of this study in researching the subjective views of activist women in regard to organic consumption. Three research questions guided the study:

- What influences organic food purchase decisions?
- How does GE activism influence organic food purchase decisions?
- How do mothers influence children’s perceptions of organic food?

FIGURE 1

List of informants			
Respondent	Age	Occupation	Family structure
A	36	Registered nurse	Married, two children
B	36	Accountant	Married, three children
C	45	Homoeopath	Married, two children
D	34	Researcher	Married, three children
H	33	Full-time mother	Married, two children
J	38	Full-time mother	Married, two children
R	33	Full-time mother	Married, one child
S	33	Journalist	Married, two children
Y	31	Nanny	Separated, one child

Nine women who belong to MAdGE were recruited to take part in this study (Figure 1). MAdGE is a national network of women who actively resist the introduction of GE organisms in New Zealand. MAdGE was founded in early 2002 by Alannah Currie, a former pop star, whose sister died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD). Initially, MAdGE had 10 women members and now, in early 2003, has 1500 members.

A snowball technique, which is referral by participants, was employed in conjunction with criteria sampling. The snowball technique was used mainly to recruit a sufficient number of respondents in a shorter period of time. Participants were selected based on two simple criteria: they were activist mothers who also purchase organic products.

In-depth interviews (one hour) were conducted with participants. Interview questions investigated what influenced the purchase of organic food for activist women, the meaning of organic food, barriers to consumption of organic food, the connection between activism and organic consumption, and the messages activist women communicate to their children about organic food. Participants also kept a diary for a week to substantiate phase-one interview findings. The deployment of two methods ensured that any possible limitations of each method were restricted. For instance, diary recordings highlight day-to-day use of organic food and provide further information that might not be covered in a single interview. Data collected using different modes was analysed thematically and coded using the NUD*IST 4 (Non-numerical Unstructured Data * Indexing Searching and Theorising) software package (Richards, 1998).

RESULTS

The result section discusses the key ideas emerging from both interview and diary data. Data analysis reveals that some of these key constructs should be developed into sub-themes and not just main themes. Models are used

to illustrate the relationship between key constructs and main/sub-themes.

The meaning of organic food

Participants were asked what the term “organic” meant in order to determine their understanding of organic consumption. Three denotative understandings emerged: food that is grown without any chemical substances; food that has gone through certification requirements; and food that is cultivated from “cleansed” farmland or soil. The certification issue was outweighed, however, by the support of local production and an absence of chemicals.

In general (Figure 2), organic food was considered a metaphor for valuing health. A significant sign of

valuing health was the adoption of an organic lifestyle and the rejection of GE products. Organic and GE-free were considered to be interchangeable terms and organic consumption functioned as a form of consumer resistance to genetically modified food. Organic food consumption was also perceived to be both alternative and fashionable, or an “in thing” (Participant A). An additional perception of organic food purchase was that it was perceived as a social act rather than an impersonal transaction. Participant S explained: “To me, organic shopping is not just about going into the supermarket and picking up the vegetables. You know [the staff] at the food co-op and they know your name and share stories and recipes.” Organic shopping is a way of forming a community identity and recreates shopping as a communal leisure activity.

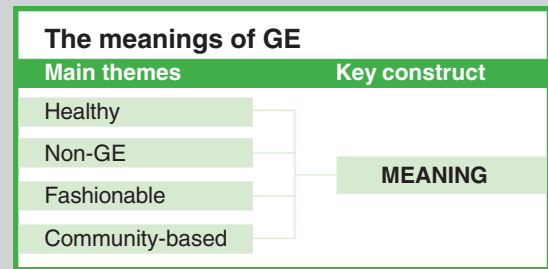
Factors influencing organic food consumption

The key factors that influence organic purchase decisions for the participants were identity issues such as personal attitudes and values, sensory and marketing influences (Figure 3).

Personal attitudes and values were identified as the primary factors that influenced the purchase decision of organic food. A number of sub-themes were evident in the interview data: health concerns, ecological issues, social, family and political values. Organic food was perceived as healthy, natural, more nutritious and sustainable. Participants explained that they did not want to eat food that had chemical residues or additives.

Organic farming was perceived as the compassionate and sustainable way of treating the environment, soil, animals, pests and weeds. The participants explained that they had first developed an

FIGURE 2

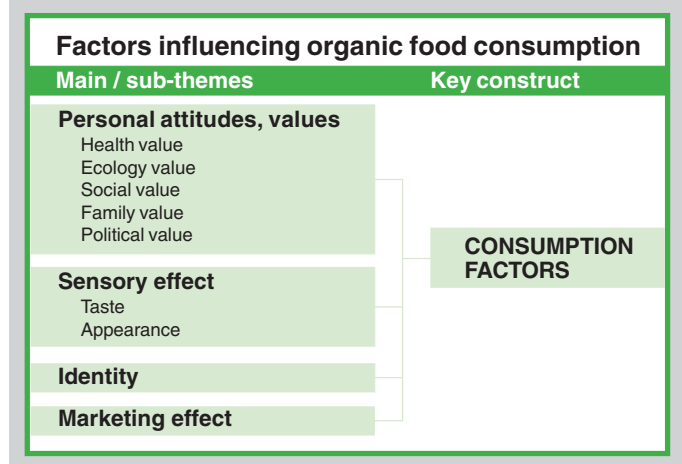


interest in vegetarianism and then in organic food. So, vegetarianism signified an awakening in terms of socially accountable behaviour, consumer resistance and the formation of political attitudes. Vegetarianism was also adopted because it was an economical option.

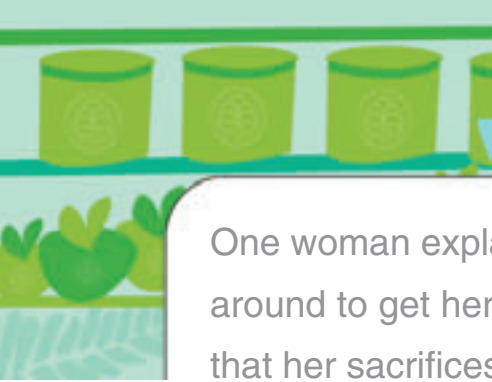
Identity

Consumers made references to how organic food choice contributed positively to their identity. At an individual level, organic food choice signals a commitment to an alternative lifestyle and/or a representation of good parenting. One participant mentioned that she chose to forge an “organic self” by eating only organic foods. Two of the participants

FIGURE 3



Vegetarianism signified an awakening in terms of socially accountable behaviour, consumer resistance and the formation of political attitudes



One woman explained that she was more than happy travelling around to get her organic shopping lists done because she thought that her sacrifices helped to express her “good mother” identity

revealed that organic users tended to live differently from others, choosing to consume less. For instance, one participant adopted a strict organic diet for her family, down to her pet cat’s diet. Another participant was willing to trade away her economic resources in order to maintain her organic commitment. Thus, food consumption tapped into intangible attributes such as self-representation and personal life themes.

Motherhood, however, was the most influential factor in adopting an organic food lifestyle. The women reported that either during pregnancy or when their child began to eat solids, they became committed to organic food purchase.

For example, Participant S said: “When he came to eat solid food, I was really paranoid. I used to give him organic food, right down to organic bananas ... I used to go out of my way and drive around to get organic food.” Participant A confirmed that she first chose to eat organic food when she was pregnant. She said: “Our first son wasn’t vaccinated so it was important for me to make sure he was eating extremely healthily.” For Participant A, the decision not to vaccinate a child also signified a resistance to mainstream medical advice and an “alternative” or natural approach to healthcare. Choosing organic food was considered to be symbolic of being a good mother. One woman explained that she was more than happy travelling around to get her organic shopping lists done because she thought that her sacrifices helped to express her “good mother” identity. Providing organic food for Participant R’s family was a way of expressing her love for them. Another mother explained that providing organic food was “a great gift” she offered her family. Organic consumption was considered to symbolise both caring for people and the planet (Participant D).

At a collective level, an organic lifestyle symbolised a commitment to community values. One participant treasured living in a peaceful community with her circle of friends. She thought that “organic” became the password, linking community members together, as they all shared the same social language. It was considered that “organic people” did not like power or authority structures

in their lives. Organic consumption served to symbolise the act of excluding themselves from mainstream politics. As Keane and Willets (1994) suggest, food choice crafts an important statement about individuals’ political beliefs. Interview references revealed that the ideas of “group identity” and a “sense of moral responsibility” were apparent within the organic consumption activities. Our study has identified a positive relationship between organic food consumption and concern for community welfare. The organic self is an identity that unites a group of consumers who seek communal-based lifestyles and consumption patterns. The adoption of an “organic lifestyle”, therefore, helps consumers to enhance and preserve their individual and collective group identities.

Sensory effect

A further attribute of organic consumption concerned the sensory quality associated with the taste and appearance of the food. Participants considered that organic food tasted “different”, “better” and had a superior flavour compared to traditional food. It was also noted, however, that organic food was not always aesthetically pleasing because it had a shorter shelf life.

Marketing influence

Participants stated that the media had increased awareness about the dangers of consuming chemically contaminated foods and, consequently, had increased their positive views toward organic food. Some participants chose organic food based upon the brand strength or the business reputation established by the retailers, whereas other participants tended to rely on word of mouth or relationships established with the food co-ops. Participants were prepared to travel to obtain the produce they wanted and to shop at a number of retail outlets to get organic food. Social networks (family and friends) also had a strong influence on consumers’ organic product knowledge. Participants reported that their mothers had influenced their food choices and values. They recalled experiences such as gardening with their mothers that had influenced preferences for natural, homegrown food.

Barriers to purchase of organic food

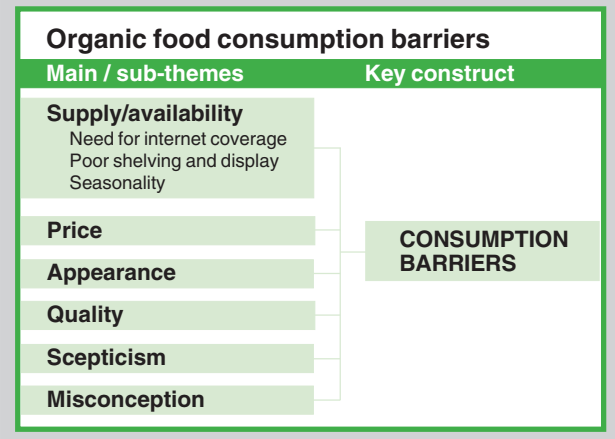
Product supply and availability were significant barriers to organic food consumption (Figure 4). Participants cited lack of internet retailers, poor shelving and display, oversupply with seasonal products and erratic supply as deterrents to organic shopping. Price was expressed as a concern, because organic food was perceived as an expensive luxury and prevented some participants from purchasing only organic produce. Another barrier was the appearance of organic food, which sometimes appeared quite wilted and, therefore, of lower quality. Although the participants were convinced of the health value of organic food, they considered that there was a level of public scepticism or lack of knowledge about the health claims of organic food.

Activism

The women spoke of organic consumption as an act of resisting marketing and societal pressure to conform (Figure 5). They had joined MAdGE for a number of reasons. MAdGE was perceived as more personal, close to home and more likely to make a difference in comparison with Greenpeace. Participant C said: “If you want to say something, you’re more likely to be heard in a group like MAdGE who are local and small ... fighting for this country.” Another reason for membership of MAdGE was that it was perceived as focused on a single issue and not politically aligned.

Participants explained that they had joined MAdGE because they were suspicious about the potential impact of GE on human health and did not want to risk their children’s health with new technology that was still uncertain and untested. Participant A said: “GE is not a natural thing. It’s a moneymaking venture without safety checks.” Participant C said: “Don’t force it [GE] on us when we don’t know and you

FIGURE 4

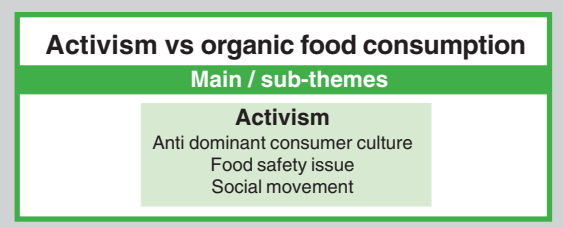


don’t know what the outcome might be. We mothers are very protective of our children. We don’t raise them to have them die of some bizarre thing.” Such comments are based upon emotional reactions to GE technology and serve to highlight the knowledge gap between safety and risks.

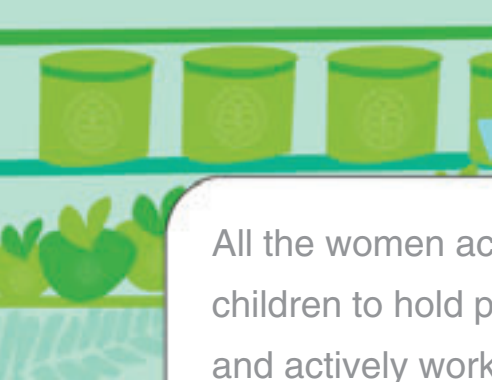
The interview data confirmed Gabriel and Lang’s (1995) suggestion that consumers try to boycott GE products through subtle political actions. They protest the introduction of new technologies at societal level through single-issue campaigns – using media to mobilise public sentiment without obvious political alignment.

Participants rejected the view that GE and organic food industries could co-exist. GE food production ▶

FIGURE 5



Although participants were convinced of the health value of organic food, they considered that there was a level of public scepticism or lack of knowledge about the health claims of organic food



All the women acknowledged that they wanted their children to hold positive views about organic food and actively worked to influence their attitudes

was perceived as a threat to the organics industries in New Zealand and, therefore, jeopardised participants' free will to purchase and eat organic products. Anti-GE activism was connected to the worldwide anti-globalisation movement, in terms of a refusal to consume any goods that were manufactured at the expense of other nations' resources or development opportunities.

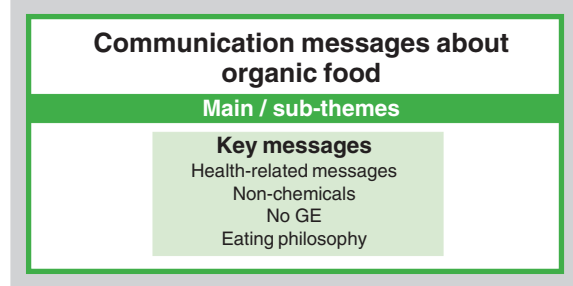
Role of mothers in influencing their children's perceptions of organic food

The women outlined a numbers of different strategies they used to influence their children's perceptions of organic food (Figure 6). Positive and negative message tactics were combined with anti-GE activist information. Participants A, B and R used positive messages that emphasised the health attributes of organic food. In contrast, other participants used fear appeals. Participants D, J, S and Y informed their children about the negative impacts of sprays and chemicals. Participants D and B emphasised the importance of being GE free. Participant S concluded: "I don't want them to be too hung up on food ... I just want them to enjoy it." All the women acknowledged that they wanted their children to hold positive views about organic food and actively worked to influence their attitudes.

DISCUSSION

A hypothetical model (Figure 7) is constructed to demonstrate and predict how these key constructs could interact with each other in influencing consumers' purchase decisions.

FIGURE 6

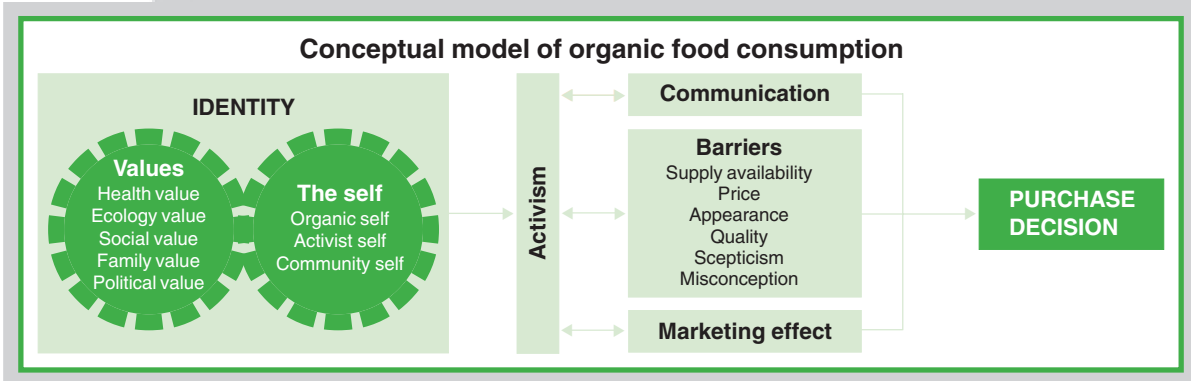


Values and concepts of the self interact to form a consumer identity that resists the dominant consumption discourse and moderates purchase decisions. Activism is positively influenced by the intervening variables of communication and marketing influences, such as positive word of mouth, but is negatively influenced by barriers to purchase intentions such as price and selection. Consumers gain desired identity meanings through organic consumption.

Values

The values that the women espoused combined to influence and provide meaning to their organic food purchase behaviours. This research supported previous findings (e.g. Hutchins and Greenhalgh, 1997; Sloan, 2002) that health values are the major factor that motivates the purchase of organic food. A commitment to nature and ecological values such as sustainable farming and animal welfare also influenced purchase behaviour. Organic food consumption signalled consumers' eagerness to

FIGURE 7



construct a stress-free and peaceful community environment. Commitment to community values and family values were inextricably linked to the women's identity as mothers and activists. This commitment provided the women with positive reinforcement for the sacrifices that were made to maintain an organic lifestyle, to the extent that many women prioritised organic food for their children before their own needs. These values served as a platform for activist behaviour and explained why they chose to belong to a single-issue activist group that united women as mothers in protesting what they perceived as dangerous for their children.

The self

The women presented multiple representations of self. The life-transition phases that influenced the "organic consumer self" were adolescence and early adulthood then parenting. The women were introduced to vegetarianism when they left home. This signalled a separation from their early consumption patterns, that had been controlled by others, and a progression in their identity development. Pregnancy or the commencement of feeding children solids were critical incidents that led to a much stronger commitment to organic food purchases. Motherhood, then, was the core of the activist self, symbolised by membership of MAdGE. Consumer resistance was both private and public: organic consumption was a private form of resistance, whereas membership of MAdGE was a public form. The activist self was based on a resistance to what was perceived as an unnatural science, or on a commitment to natural ecological principles.

The attachment to organic food principles helped these consumers in the transition from a child-free lifestyle to motherhood by reinforcing their vegetarianism, which had been self-developed as teenagers. During this major life-transition period, organic consumption and participation in MAdGE

decreased consumers' anxiety about the possible effects of GE technology on their children's health. A number of challenges to the maintenance of the organic self were caused by product constraints, including utility, price, aesthetics and misinformation. Positive messages and social reinforcement from their communities served to overcome concerns about organic food.

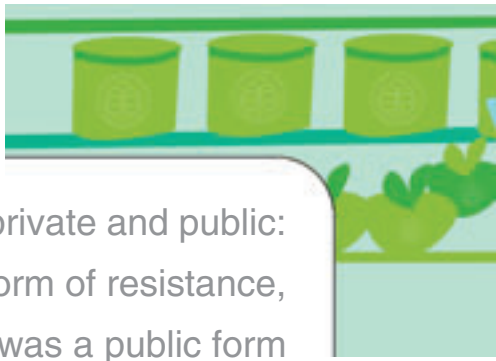
Implications: academic and management

This research makes several academic contributions. It examines the definition of organic food from the perspective of activist mothers. The current study shows that general motivators of organic food purchase are health, ecological responsibility, family, and social welfare. The paper identifies the inter-relationship between self, activism and parenting and, therefore, provides a fuller understanding of what drives the growth in organic food consumption.

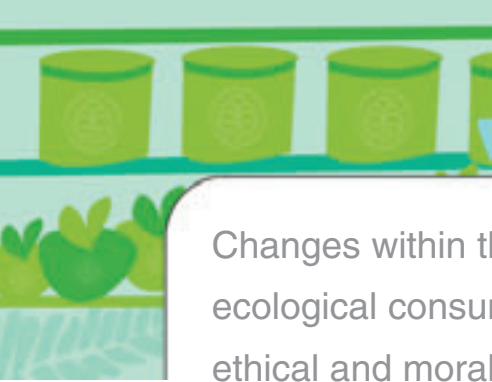
The study also provides several managerial implications. Individuals' organic food choice is closely linked with their identity and value systems. Managers need, therefore, to look at the connection between product attributes and the meanings and values people attach to organic products in order to understand purchase motivations. Thus, the selection of advertising messages, media usage (magazines, printed ads, word of mouth), social interaction or distribution channels (relational marketing, informal networks) and so forth should revolve around the meaning and value issues.

Limitation of this study

This study is not without limitations. Because all participants are politically active mothers with vegetarian backgrounds, their opinions might not be representative of general New Zealand mothers in terms of organic consumption. Therefore, future research might consider using a control group to compare the views between activist and mainstream



Consumer resistance was both private and public: organic consumption was a private form of resistance, whereas membership of MAdGE was a public form



Changes within the food industry should respond to ecological consumerism that demands green, ethical and moral production systems worldwide

mothers. While this is true, marketers should acknowledge that consumer activism has become a significant social movement. This study provides data that consumers, especially mothers, are generally cautious about what they choose to purchase for themselves and for their families. They do not trust marketing approaches as readily as they used to. Indeed, smart consumers pay close attention to how products are processed, communicated and distributed. Food that is cultivated or reared in ecological and sustainable ways is becoming mainstream rather than niche market-oriented.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper also supports the notion that identity and value systems influence consumers' food purchase and consumption practices. Organic food fulfils contemporary consumers' demand for products that align with personal, family, communal and environmental needs. Changes within the food industry should respond to ecological consumerism that demands green, ethical and moral production systems worldwide. Food marketers should treat this as an alternative-eating trend that reflects consumers' calling for sustainable consumption culture. Successful marketing, from manufacturing to delivery, needs to take into account consumer resistance to GE and the increasing desire for organic products.



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