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Signaling status through sustainable consumption: Are organic food favorers perceived and treated more positively by others?

Presentation at the *Scientific seminar on Organic food 2014* in Mikkeli on November 7th 2014, Petteri Puska

Background: signaling status through sustainable consumption choices

- One might think that sustainable consumption choices and status signaling are poorly compatible with each other:
 - luxury brands and visible consumer durables are traditional vehicles of signaling
 - the materialistic values are believed to motivate status signaling
- In the light of recent research, this is not the case:
 - e.g. top reasons for buying a hybrid Prius
 - → conspicuous conservation
 - → going green to be seen
 - → willingness to pay for a “green signal”
- But why this happens?
 - it creates a prosocial reputation for the signaler
- Interesting question is, can this happen in the organic food context too?
 - it may be unconscious
 - → people have a deeply rooted desire to achieve respect from others
- In the present study, this question is approached through the perspective of the receiver of the signal
 - it is investigated how a person how seem to be a favorer of organic foods is perceived and treated by others

Methodology: participants and design

- 336 shoppers were approached with a questionnaire in a mall in Helsinki
 - they were asked to participate in a non-commercial study on "food consumer impression formation"
 - → Mean age = 28 years, 50% of both sexes, 46,5 % highly educated
- The participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions
 - they had to form an impression of a male or female person wearing either organic-labeled or non-labeled white t-shirt
 - → a ladybug logo with text "organic" served as our manipulation instrument



Methodology: measuring perceptions and treatment

- To test how the organic food favorers are perceived, the participants were asked to rate this person on a 7-point Likert scale in terms of status, wealth, altruism, attractiveness, kindness and trustworthiness

“I think the person in the picture is respected, wealthy, unselfish, helpful, good looking, honest etc.”

- To test how the organic food favorers are treated by others a hypothetical charity donation question was included in the questionnaire

“how much money would you give to this person, if s/he was collecting donations for the catastrophe work of the Finnish Red Cross? _____€”



Results: perceptions and treatment

Perception	Organic label condition (n=168)		Non-label condition (n=168)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Status	4.79 (*)	0.92	4.51	1.22
Wealth	4.36	1.02	4.23	1.12
Attractiveness	4.21	1.31	4.04	1.53
Kindness	5.40	0.88	5.24	1.05
Trustworthiness	5.06 (*)	0.92	4.83	1.02
Altruism	4.56 (*)	0.87	4.31	0.89

Scale 1-7: 1=completely disagree, 7 = completely agree

- In terms of the perceptions:

- The person who signals about his/her habit of favoring organic foods, indeed, received higher **status** ratings and was perceived as more **altruistic** and more **trustworthy** than the non-signaler.

- In terms of perceived **wealth**, **attractiveness** and **kindness**, no statistical differences were found.

- In terms of the treatment:

- Indeed, the signalers were more positively treated: they received 57,5% from the donated money
 - the average donations were 10,70€ for the signalers and 7,90€ for the non-signalers.
 - → this difference is statistically significant (U=11834,5 p=.009)

- Another data was collected from a socio-culturally distinct context

- → the signalers were less favorably perceived and treated in a rural area

Conclusions: contributions and implications

- What was new?
 - Social status value of favoring organic foods
 - → socio-cultural context moderates this value
 - Also mundanely consumed goods, such as food products, can act as status signals
- What kind of questions arose?
 - What are the real organic food choice motives?
 - What kind of positive behavior implications a tendency to favour organic foods can create?
- What's next?
 - Investigating the phenomenon in a real retail environment
 - More controlled laboratory experiments

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